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Cathexis...or is it something else?

A full-length play

by

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Cast Breakdown

Melissa, 45-50: the Director
Gabriel, 40-ish: her Assistant
Brett, 40-ish: the Playwright
Lloyd, late 40s/early 50s: an actor
Lenore, late 40s/early 50s: an actor
Sara, mid-20s: an actor

CATHEXIS**ACT I Scene 1**

Morning. A scruffy rehearsal room/lounge at the Square Peg Theater.

Chairs around a conference table. Along one wall are a couple of metal storage cabinets. On the other side is a small kitchen area with a sink and coffee maker. Everything looks like it has a lot of mileage on it.

Gabriel is on his phone, pacing, annoyed. Melissa watching, also annoyed. The others are in various states of impatience and/or indifference. Lloyd is trying to make coffee.

GABRIEL

What do you mean you can't find him? (beat) Well, look again, Sandy! I mean, come on!

LENORE

It's a little early to start yelling at the intern, isn't it, Gabriel?

GABRIEL

Not when the playwright is already two hours late on the first day, it isn't.

LLOYD

He probably can't find the place.

LENORE

There's this thing called Google.

GABRIEL

He grew up here, for god's sake!

LLOYD

A map wouldn't help anyway. We're in that part that just says Terra Incognita.

LENORE

Ever read any of those house rental things? They always describe it as "out-of-the-way charm." My favorite was, "off the beaten path, but well worth the trek."

LLOYD

Yeah, kind of like Brigadoon.

Sara looks intently at the cover of her script, then pulls out her phone (if it isn't already) and begins to scroll.

SARA

So I just looked up Cathexis, and it's derived from a Greek word meaning something like 'obsessive emotional investment.'

LENORE

Yes, we know that, dear.

Sara continues reading out loud, although nobody seems to be paying much attention.

SARA

"The concentration of mental energy on one particular person, idea, or object (especially to an unhealthy degree)."

Gabriel ends the call.

LLOYD

Quite similar to the writer's relationship to this play, wouldn't you say?

LENORE

Once again, life imitates art.

MELISSA

Shush, you two! (to Gabriel) Well?

Gabriel throws up his hands in frustration.

GABRIEL

Sandy went to the Suites R Us over by the Interstate where we booked him, but they're all morons over there. They were no help. He went and knocked on the door. He called the room. He called his cell. Nothing.

LENORE

What about our usual rental that we get? At least that's right in town and he'd have a much harder time getting lost.

GABRIEL

They sold it and the new owner gave us a big "nuh uh."

MELISSA

It's okay, I got a great replacement. Ginny, who works at the yarn shop, you know her?

LENORE

I'm not really a knitter.

MELISSA

Well, anyway, she's going away for the summer to some writers' retreat somewhere. But she's not leaving till next week. So we just put Brett temporarily at the hotel.

GABRIEL

Where they seem to have misplaced him.

SARA

For all we know he could be dead in a ditch somewhere.

ALL

What??

SARA

That's what my Aunt Valerie always liked to say when someone was unaccountably late.

LENORE

That almost happened to me last year, you know. Out on Long Pond Road.

SARA

You almost died?

LENORE

Well, no. But I skidded off the road. Got a flat tire and a dent in the bumper. I know it doesn't sound like much but it was harrowing. And it took an hour for the tow truck to show up. That road is a disaster waiting to happen.

SARA

Funnily enough, Aunt Valerie herself actually ended up dead in a bathtub. Not her own. Long story.

LENORE

I'd love to hear it sometime.

Sara takes a breath as if to start the story. Lenore cuts her off.

LENORE

I didn't mean right now.

LLOYD

Imagine working all these years on this damn play and finally getting it right, just to die in a ditch. What a monumental waste of time and effort that will have been.

LENORE

Yeah, but you'd be dead and you wouldn't care.

MELISSA

Maybe he had car trouble or something.

LLOYD

Or he's hopelessly lost.

LENORE

Or he decided to bail at the last minute.

LLOYD

Any one of those could be possible.

GABRIEL

I spoke to his agent and as far as he knows, Brett hasn't bailed.

LLOYD

So he's lost.

SARA

Or dead.

LENORE

And the Square Peg Theater continues its grand tradition. But this time, it's not his career that comes here to an inglorious end, it's the actual playwright.

MELISSA

Let's assume he's not dead, okay? And nobody's career has died here. In fact a few have been resuscitated. Yours, for instance, hmm?

Lenore shrugs.

SARA

Boy, this studio could use a little resuscitation. It looks like the kind of place where you'd have a 12-step support group meeting.

LLOYD

In a way, it kind of is, I think.

GABRIEL

Yes, we're here to share our stories of addiction to the bright lights of theatre, the heartless mistress that keeps seducing us and breaking our hearts. Playing with us, taking us back and then kicking us to the curb yet again. And yet we keep coming back for more.

LENORE

Speak for yourself, darling. I for one am very happy to have given up the bright lights for good. My ears have gone deaf to the siren song of the big city.

LLOYD

That's not what I hear from you at home every night.

LENORE

No matter what choices we make in life, there are going to be times when we feel we made the wrong one.

SARA

I'm still trying to get there the first time yet.

LLOYD

You've just started, kiddo. Give it time.

LENORE

Like a few decades. You can expect to play a lot more Square Pegs on your way to stardom.

MELISSA

Which is not such a bad thing, I might add.

SARA

I'm just getting started and you're already throwing cold water on my whole career.

MELISSA

I agree with Lenore. I personally prefer an intimate house like Square Peg. It's got so much more character. I am very happy here.

GABRIEL

It may also have to do with your getting fired everywhere else you've worked.

MELISSA

You can be so cruel sometimes, Sancho. At least we're getting paid to do what we love. There's thousands of actors who can't even say that.

GABRIEL

If you call this pay. I'm barely able to keep up on my student loan payments.

LENORE

Oh my god! You still paying those off?

Gabriel gives a tragic shrug.

SARA

Ugh! Don't even mention that. I've just started and it looks like I'll be paying for the rest of my life. It's really hard just getting auditions these day!

LLOYD

Yeah, you're going to have periods like that. It really is feast or famine.

SARA

It was beginning to feel like never-ending famine there for a while.

LENORE

We get a lot of ones like you, blacklisted, blah blah. You'll be a perfect fit for the place where everyone is a misfit.

MELISSA

I think Square Peg suits everyone who has worked here. Why do you think it has this name? We are the destination of choice for the "formidable but forgotten talent" of the theatre world. We attract

MELISSA

We're who they turn to see great work by Those supremely gifted artists who don't fit the cookie-cutter big-city mold.

Lenore leans in to Sara.

LENORE

In other words, those who are too old.

MELISSA

Those adventurous actors and writers who care less for the glitz and glam, and more for the pure craft of theater. Who want to re-charge their creative engines.

LLOYD

Code for nobody wants to work with them any more.

GABRIEL

And then there's the rest of us who just got stuck here.

SARA

You act like such a cynic, Lenore!

LENORE

I'm not cynical at all! For better or worse, Square Peg is where I belong. We suit each other very well. And this is my happy face, by the way.

MELISSA

You could do a lot worse. And Gabriel didn't get stuck here. He chose to return.

GABRIEL

A decision I may regret till the end of my days.

LENORE

Now that's what a cynic sounds like, Sara dear.

LLOYD

I think if we hadn't come to Square Peg, we'd probably be divorced by now.

LENORE

Sometimes I wonder if maybe I wouldn't like you better as an ex. We'd be able to snipe at each other and argue and behave badly with absolutely no risk. And have fun doing it, too.

LLOYD

We do that anyway. So now you get to have your cake and eat it, too.

GABRIEL

Or in Lenore's case, have her Stoli and drink it too.

Lenore pointedly ignores Gabriel.

MELISSA

And as long as you two keep your sniping off-stage, I'll be a happy camper.

GABRIEL

Everybody's making such a big deal over Brett coming here. It really pisses me off, you know? "Home town boy comes back to his roots"...blah blah blah. They never said that about me.

LENORE

Oh, get over it, would you.

LLOYD

And we might even get a couple of actual theatre critics to show up.

GABRIEL

If only to gloat over his ongoing disaster. One can only hope.

MELISSA

A disaster for him can also mean a disaster for us. Keep that in mind. We've got a reputation to uphold, too. Our audiences deserve high-quality professional theatre as much as anybody else. And we're in a very precarious place financially, need I remind you.

LENORE

I have to admit, though I wouldn't mind seeing my name in an actual review, I mean something other than the Pleasant Valley Weekly Courier Review or whatever. Just to remind people I'm still alive. But at this point I wouldn't want to get back. I have come to thrive in the weirdness of this place.

SARA

Is Square Peg really that special a place?

MELISSA

To us, anyway. And to our very loyal audience.

SARA

You guys can't be the whole company. Where is everybody else?

MELISSA

A couple of the others will be showing up in a few weeks. But we are running on a shoestring budget this year.

LLOYD

How is that different from any other year?

MELISSA

We're lucky we got a season at all.

Lloyd is still fighting with the coffee maker.

LLOYD

What the hell is wrong with this thing? Does anybody...?

Gabriel is still pacing.

GABRIEL

Maybe he was busy polishing his Tony and ran off the road.

Several snickers in response to the double entendre.

LLOYD

Wasn't that Tony several lifetimes ago at this point?

GABRIEL

Feels like it.

SARA

I think I was still in drama school then.

LENORE

Brett Bradley, the one-hit wonder.

LLOYD

There was that other thing he wrote, didn't do too badly. A couple of years ago, you know, with the ballerina? That was pretty interesting.

LENORE

Oh that's right! He left his wife and danced off with her, if I remember.

LLOYD

I'm talking about the play, not the affair.

LENORE

They both sort of run together in my mind. Oh no, wait! His wife left *him* for the dancer!

MELISSA

You're thinking of Brad Bentley, not Brett Bradley.

LENORE

You sure?

MELISSA

It was Brad who did the ballerina play.

LLOYD

What was that called again? "Bunions?" Something like that. "Bone Spurs?"

MELISSA

"Stress Fractures."

LLOYD

Oh yeah. I dated a ballerina once, in college. I'll tell you, they have the ugliest feet you've ever seen.

SARA

It's true. My college roommate was a dance major. Every so often I'd find an abandoned toenail on the floor.

Sara gives a little shiver.

SARA

Gabriel, I thought you went to school with him, Brett I mean, right? Aren't you looking forward to seeing him again?

GABRIEL

Not! He's been making my life miserable ever since high school. Dominated Drama Club. He won some stupid student play competition and never let any of us forget.

SARA

High school was a long time ago.

GABRIEL

Some scars never heal, Sara. Some scars never heal.

LLOYD

I'd say we're all shipwreck survivors here. Except you, Sara. You're just putting out to sea.

LENORE

Remember all the hoo-hah when Cathexis first opened? A new play by the Tony-winning whiz-kid!

LLOYD

The speed with which it crashed and burned was head-spinning.

LENORE

A good case for not counting your chickens.

Sara listens interestedly at first, but soon her attention wanders. She begins to stretch and move her neck and shoulders, then gets up from the table, walks to an empty space and begins to stretch or do yoga.

MELISSA

Some of you may consider him damaged goods, but getting Brett as our Playwright in Residence this summer was still a huge coup.

LENORE

My guess is it's because nobody else wanted him. From everything I've read and heard, he's absolutely impossible to work with.

MELISSA

You know me, I love a challenge.

LLOYD

Know what else is a challenge? This freaking coffee maker. Could somebody give me a hand here?

GABRIEL

You have to admit, though, this play is a mess.

Gabriel goes to help Lloyd.

SARA

(while continuing to stretch
and flex, maybe talking
while in some yoga pose)

Regardless, I'm just thrilled to be working on *anything*. It's been months since I even got an audition. One little disagreement, well several disagreements, with one pompous, self-important director and suddenly nobody wants me to read for anything.

LENORE

For how long?

SARA

Six months, maybe.

LENORE

Well! Now we know why *you're* here.

SARA

Just a few helpful suggestions about blocking and direction and he got so pissed! It was like I had trod on his sacred manhood or something.

LENORE

You did, dear. A novice ingenue daring to one-up an established director? He probably wouldn't shut up about it. Told everyone he knew.

SARA

I was right, though.

LLOYD

Doesn't matter. That is a no-no.

Lenore idly picks up the script
and leafs through it.

LENORE

You know what would be fun? Maybe we can get him to have someone die in this version. It's been a while since we've done that.

Lloyd puts his hands together in
mock prayer.

LENORE

I don't mean *actually* die, you doofus! You'd be useless without me anyway.

LLOYD

It's true, there haven't been any deaths in a while. But we have had a string of, what would you call them, Len? Near misses, I guess.

LENORE

I was going to say catastrophes. But again, that's one of the things that makes this place so quirky and wonderful.

SARA

Catastrophe, that's a Greek word, too, isn't it? Something to do with the stars, I think.

GABRIEL

You seem to know a lot of Greek words.

SARA

I had a Greek boyfriend for a while.

LLOYD

Remember when we did that period piece? Oh, who was it by? Anyway, Joe What's-His-Name who played the father, had an allergic reaction to the soap in the bathroom and his hands swelled up like balloons.

MELISSA

My god, I forgot all about that!

LLOYD

The understudy took over while Joe's hands un-swelled, but he was so traumatized from it that he said he couldn't continue. He quit the show.

LENORE

And Gabriel, remember that weird intern stagehand who was practically stalking you all summer?

GABRIEL

That was pretty terrifying, actually. You know the guy was certifiably nuts! He ended up getting institutionalized a few months later.

LENORE

I did not know that.

LLOYD

I wonder what happened to him.

GABRIEL

I don't want to know.

MELISSA

Me neither. Oh, and then there was the time everybody got food poisoning from the sushi at the opening night party afterwards. Remember?

LENORE

That's what you get for using an out-of-town caterer.

GABRIEL

They were supposed to be really good!

LLOYD

Then the reviews came out and we were sick all over again.

LENORE

Pardon me for the awkward segue, but it's nearly lunchtime. Is anybody else hungry?

A chorus of "yes" from the others.

MELISSA

What the hell. Nothing's getting done here. Might as well take early lunch. (beat) I'll leave Brett a note just in case.

GABRIEL

How about Tina's Tacos? I love that place!

LLOYD

Great! Now that I finally got the coffee done!

Melissa pulls a piece of paper from her pad and scribbles a note, which she leaves on the table.

GABRIEL

Let's take the stairs, though. The elevator was acting janky again this morning.

MELISSA

That's all we need, to have everyone get stuck in the elevator.

LLOYD

I'm taking bets -- who thinks Brett'll get stuck in the elevator?

They all grab their coats and bags and head out the door, still talking and laughing. A few moments later, Brett enters, out of breath.

BRETT

Finally! Would you believe I just got stuck in the elevator...

His voice fades as he realizes the room is empty.

End of Scene

SCENE 2

Rehearsal room, after lunch.
Brett is missing again. Lloyd
heads to the coffee maker and
prepares to pour himself a cup.
He sniffs tentatively first, then
makes a face and pours it down
the drain. He begins the process
of making another pot and
searches for coffee filters.

LLOYD

Great! Now we're out of coffee filters.

GABRIEL

Try that next cabinet. We keep a lot of the supplies in it.

SARA

You could've just stopped at Java Hut on the way back, you
know.

Grumbling, Lloyd opens a storage
cabinet. No coffee supplies but
he does find a couple of cartons
filled with Nerf bats and similar
inflatable toys.

LLOYD

What's all this?

GABRIEL

Oh, It's for the Saturday kids' classes. We do some stage
combat, let them expend all their energy before they go home.
The moms love me for that.

SARA

You teach the kids' classes?

GABRIEL

We all wear a lot of hats around here. Melissa does an
adults' Script Analysis" series for the theatre junkies in
the area.

MELISSA

We have the participants read a play and then we get together
and discuss it. Over wine and cheese. That helps keep the
interest up and brings in a few bucks.

Lloyd rifles through the box and
pulls out a couple of items.

He brandishes a soft plastic squeaky hammer.

MELISSA

Ooh! When did you get these, Sancho? I haven't seen them before.

Melissa grabs the hammer from Lloyd's hand. She hits the table with it a couple of times and smiles.

MELISSA

I'm keeping this one.

SARA

Why do you call him Sancho?

MELISSA

From Don Quixote, you know?

SARA

Gabriel doesn't find this demeaning?

GABRIEL

Well, considering that Sancho was the clever sidekick who constantly saved his lunatic master's ass, I take it as a compliment.

Brett enters, breathless. He is a combination of deflated, angry, resigned, resentful and confused. Can't believe he's really sunk to this. Like he's been thrown into a parallel universe.

The others all look at him and assess him.

MELISSA

Welcome! We were beginning to wonder what had become of you. I hope you didn't get stuck in the elevator?

BRETT

No, no. I did that this morning. I think I missed you all by about five minutes. So annoying!

(giving the room a once-over)

This is very atmospheric, isn't it?

Gabriel has already had enough. The others acknowledge his arrival with a combination of curiosity and skepticism. Only Sara looks at all excited.

MELISSA

What happened this morning?

BRETT

It's a long story.

MELISSA

Can you give us an abbreviated version?

BRETT

Well, I was in the car, on the phone with my agent. Wanted to let him know I'd gotten here, and so on, and I ended up driving past my exit. Then when I tried to get off and come back around I got stuck in a massive construction thing.

LLOYD

Oh yeah, they're widening the overpass.

BRETT

I didn't think it would take me so long to get here.

Brett, leans on the table and looks at everyone. He stops at Gabriel.

BRETT

I know you, don't I?

GABRIEL

From high school. We were in drama club together.

BRETT

Gabriel, right? What d'ya know! So you're still here, huh? Never left hometown?

Gabriel bristles, Brett continues.

BRETT

Listen guys, before we get started, I just want to say a couple of things. First let me say that I'm very happy to be here. This is very different from the way I usually work, but my agent convinced me it will be a really valuable experience. Frankly, I hadn't really heard of Square Peg -- no offense intended.

MELISSA

None taken.

GABRIEL

(under his breath) Speak for yourself.

BRETT

Apparently you guys have a reputation for risk taking, out-of-the-box thinking and so on. So I am going to embrace this opportunity to really pull the play apart and see what's going on.

Polite but non-committal looks from the others, except for Sara, who looks genuinely intrigued.

BRETT

Also, just because I've got a Tony under my belt,
(he does air quotes)
...I don't expect any special treatment.

GABRIEL

Oh, I don't think there's any danger of that.

MELISSA

You'll find we're a pretty jaded bunch here. Among us all we've got more than a couple of years' experience. Very little impresses us here. We've seen just about everybody come and go.

GABRIEL

And screw up.

LENORE

And puke in the bathroom.

MELISSA

So you can be sure that whatever you're anticipating is going to happen, isn't.

BRETT

I come with no expectations.

MELISSA

Well, let's see what we can get done in the next couple months.

BRETT

Speaking of which...

Brett pulls a stack of scripts from his backpack and passes them around.

MELISSA

That was very thoughtful, Brett, but we've all got copies already. Your agent sent them a couple weeks ago.

BRETT

I've made changes since then.

LENORE

(to herself) Good thing I didn't bother to read it.

She tosses her script to the floor with a flourish.

GABRIEL

You made copies? Yourself?

MELISSA

Why didn't you just come to the office and do it here?

BRETT

I don't know. I wasn't sure you'd have a copier here and we'd have to waste a whole lot of time getting them made.

GABRIEL

Instead of wasting time waiting for you to show up.

MELISSA

Where on earth did you do that?

BRETT

That hotel where I'm staying has a little "business center" with desks and computers and so on. I got one of the people who work there to help me with the printer.

GABRIEL

They charge you for that, you know. They'll put the charge for the paper and time on your room bill. Which means we'll end up paying for it.

MELISSA

Sorry about the temporary accommodations. You'll be able to move into your permanent digs next week. It's right in town, walking distance.

LLOYD

Hey, at least you got to take the scenic route this time.

Chuckles from the group.

BRETT

Don't remind me! I felt like I was stuck in some never-ending nightmare. Eventually the traffic got diverted onto Long Pond Road. The last time I was over there must have been twenty years ago. And it looks like they haven't repaved in all that time, either. They really need to fix it, you know? Put some guard rails in or something.

Lenore gives the others an "I told you so" look.

MELISSA

Don't you remember, I told you last night that we could send someone to pick you up. To avoid something like this, exactly. Our intern was really worried.

BRETT

Oh, yeah. Sorry about that. So, when I finally got back here, you all had gone out to lunch. So I took a walk around town and, you know, see what had changed since I left.

LLOYD

It's been a while, huh? Not exactly the sleepy little backwater you left.

LENORE

No, now it's a very cultured backwater.

BRETT

Anyway, while I was walking, I solved a couple of problems in the script. You know, if we're going to embrace the whole "reset" thing, let's just do it.

MELISSA

Why didn't you call me about this?

BRETT

Guess I forgot. Sorry.

MELISSA

The whole point of you coming to Square Peg was to work *with* us to solve the problems. Collaboratively. Doing it before you even get here kind of defeats the purpose.

Melissa holds up the new script that Brett just brought.

MELISSA

That is, if you really mean to "tear it apart."

GABRIEL

Or just tear it up. (he tears his now-old script in half)

BRETT

Sorry. I like to turn my phone off when I'm working. It avoids interruptions, helps me get my head in the right place.

MELISSA

Is your head in the right place now or do you need more time?

BRETT

Nah, I'm good, I'm good. Sorry.

GABRIEL

(under his breath) Another sorry.

Lenore picks up the script Brett
just passed out and hefts it.

LENORE

Is it just me or does this draft seem somewhat flimsier than
previous one?

BRETT

I meant it when I said we were going to strip it down. I
really want to get back to the basics of the story.

MELISSA

Well, let's take a whack at the piñata here and see what
we've got. Everybody get settled, Everybody got water?
Coffee? Whatever?

Lloyd continues to have coffee
maker problems.

LLOYD

I'd really like a cup of coffee if only...

SARA

If you don't like Java Hut, you could have stopped at the
diner. Or at the Beans'n'Bagels around the corner. You
could've stopped at any one of them.

LENORE

So how many whacks on the "piñata" does this make for you,
Brett? Is the candy finally going to fall out this time?

BRETT

It may take a little work but yes, I'm absolutely sure of it.

LLOYD

Any time you say something like "whacks," I get nervous,
Melissa. Remember when we were doing Sherlock Holmes? I got
an umbrella to the noggin, courtesy of my dear Lenore here.

Lloyd brushes his hair back from
his forehead, displaying his scar
to Sara.

LLOYD

We had to call the EMTs!

LENORE

Oh, you know head wounds, they bleed a lot, very dramatic looking. No real damage done.

LLOYD

So what exactly did you do to the rest of the cast, Brett? I seem to remember there were a lot more than three characters.

BRETT

I axed them.

GABRIEL

Talk about damage done!

LENORE

This definitely *isn't* the same old piñata!

Brett is still getting himself organized.

BRETT

Well, yes and no. If you guys remember from the original...

MELISSA

I'm the only one here who actually saw the original.

BRETT

Really? Oh, too bad. It really did get a bad rap, you know. Anyway, the main problem -- I'll admit it -- was that everything was overly complicated. The story kept getting in its own way. Too many characters, too many secondary story lines. So! I pared it back to bare bones. Got rid of all the extraneous characters and subplots. Now it's just Richard, Daria and Liz. That's all we need. We're going minimalist.

LLOYD

I was kind of hoping this version would be "Cathexis the Musical" this time around. I haven't had a chance to sing in a while.

Finally the coffee is made. Lloyd pours himself a cup. As he prepares to sit down, Lenore holds out her mug to him. He rolls his eyes, takes the mug, goes back to the coffee pot and pours some into Lenore's mug. He returns to the table and plunks it in front of her.

Lenore surreptitiously takes a small bottle of vodka from her bag and pours a little in.

Gabriel notices. He and Lenore exchange discreet looks.

LENORE

(under her breath to Gabriel) It's going to be one of those afternoons. I can tell already.

BRETT

I mean, this has always been a very intimate story. So I thought, here's a chance, get rid of all the non-essential characters. Make it really small and intimate.

MELISSA

If I remember correctly, Liz was not in the original.

LENORE

Who's Liz?

BRETT

That's true, but she should have been. Now it's just Richard and Daria, and Liz. Also, it's ten years later.

LENORE

It *is* ten years later, darling! When the play opened when I was still in demand as a romantic lead! And who's Liz?

BRETT

Yes, and I've had ten years to think about it and follow their story in my head. And I realized that it's only in retrospect that the tragedy of it becomes clear.

LLOYD

Retrospect? Wasn't the point of the original play to watch their lives unravel in real time because of his obsession?

BRETT

I thought you didn't see it.

LLOYD

I did read it.

LENORE

Just because we didn't see it doesn't mean we're unfamiliar with the drama -- on and off-stage.

BRETT

Anyway, I realized that that was not the real story! Not what we needed to see.

ALL

It's not?

BRETT

No! The real story is about what happens after that! So when we start now, Richard and Daria are divorced. Their marriage, as well as their sanity, has gone through the meat grinder, as you know. They've survived, and they've got the battle scars to show for it.

Once again, Lloyd shows off the scar on his forehead.

LENORE

Oh great! So I'm the tragic divorcée now? The steadfast, self-sacrificing wife who gave up her own dreams to support her husband's stupid obsession, and now he kicks her to the curb? Those wonderful scenes of her coming to pieces are gone? I was looking forward to those.

BRETT

She left him, Lenore. Big difference! From the depths of her despair, she rediscovered herself and found her inner strength and power. Their marriage was shredded, her old life was shredded. But now she's built a new one. She's stronger than ever.

Lenore shrugs.

LENORE

I suppose I can do something with that.

BRETT

But maybe the biggest new thing is that Richard has actually finally finished his book. And he gets the acclaim he was hoping for.

Astonishment from everyone.

BRETT

Yes! He does it.

LLOYD

So what's the point of the whole story then? Wasn't it supposed to be all about the struggle, chasing his obsession and never catching it, and the personal cost of the obsession?

BRETT

But the kicker this time is, it doesn't make him happy or fulfilled.

LLOYD

Be careful what you wish for, huh?

BRETT

Exactly. In fact, he's distraught because he finally sees and understands the havoc that he has wreaked on other peoples' lives, not to mention his own. And the people he's depended on aren't there for him any more. He's more miserable than ever.

LENORE

Forget the same piñata, this isn't even the same party!

BRETT

Anyway, he's drained himself dry, he has nothing left to live for, or so he believes. Nobody to share his good fortune and happiness with. He's driven away everybody he knew in the process -- his agent, his editor, his publisher.

LENORE

And Daria, don't forget her.

BRETT

Right, and Daria. So the whole play now takes place as he's miserable and alone, wrestling with whether or not to kill himself. Liz and Daria keep floating in and out.

LENORE

Trying to stop him or daring him to do it?

BRETT

Both, actually. They're not sure what they want to happen.

SARA

I thought you said he was alone. Are Liz and Daria like ghosts or something?

BRETT

No, they're just in his head. In his imagination.

LLOYD

So, instead of experiencing the suffering, the pain, et cetera et cetera, as the characters are going through it, all of that has already happened and now and we're dealing with the aftermath? This isn't a revision, Brett, it's a fucking sequel!

BRETT

Okay, if you want to look at it like that, yes.

MELISSA

Why did you even want to come here, Brett? If you've got the whole thing worked out, why not just go get it produced? I mean what did you think you would get out of this process?

BRETT

My agent convinced me it was the smart thing to do. Everyone will see I'm serious about it. Give it a layer of artistic integrity. And I'm sure there's still a few kinks to work out.

GABRIEL

So this is just a PR stunt for you? Rehabilitate your reputation? And then what? Back to Broadway?

MELISSA

Not every play belongs on Broadway, Brett. Even if it's good. Even yours. You might want to aim for a smaller, more intimate venue.

BRETT

There have been plenty of two- and three-character plays on Broadway. Award winners, too.

SARA

Wow, the line between Brett and Richard is getting blurrier by the minute. Using other people to achieve their own goals without even thinking...

Sara suddenly realizes what she's saying and who she's saying it to, and she clams up.

SARA

Sorry! Sorry. Sometimes I get carried away, and my inside voice comes out.

LLOYD

That what happened to you last time?

Sara nods.

MELISSA

You'll probably want to keep an eye on that.

BRETT

I'm not denying there's a slight autobiographical influence in it now. The last ten years have been a bit of a humbling experience, to be honest. And I want to transfer some of that feeling to Richard. Add some real depth to him.

MELISSA

So this is about Richard's redemption?

BRETT

Yes, his redemption! Because he has seen the damage he's done, Richard needs to try and make amends.

SARA

(mumbling) Sounds like he's beyond redemption.

LENORE

At Square Peg, everyone's got a chance at redemption, even fictional characters. Or their authors.

SARA

Why does Richard have to come out being the hero at the end? Daria's the real hero. She's the one who put up with his shit for so many years. Is this some kind of *guy* thing? The guy always has to come out a winner? Or the tragic hero?

Melissa bangs her squeaky hammer on the table.

MELISSA

Focus, please!! Sara, Lenore, let's keep an open mind here. Good things can happen here if we let them.

One more bang of the hammer for emphasis.

LENORE

You really can be quite the diva when you want to be, you know that, right?

MELISSA

I avail myself of all the tools in my toolbox.

LENORE

Well, I can be an even bigger diva, so not a problem for me.

LLOYD

Don't we know it!

Lenore smacks Lloyd semi-playfully.

GABRIEL

How do you think you're going to be able to get it up on Broadway again? After the last couple of, shall we say, misfires, do you really think anyone will be willing to put up the money?

BRETT

Actually, I have that lined up already. So you can see I'm ready to go. My brother has a lot of money and he wants to invest it.....

GABRIEL

Your brother? You mean Andy? I remember him! Nerdy kid in the math club, right?

BRETT

Well, he's not that nerdy kid any more. He's a big time tech entrepreneur. Totally drunk the Silicon Valley Kool Aid, that kind of guy. He had a start that went public last year, called, uh, Grumpy Petunia, or something. God knows what it does. But the IPO went stratospheric. Now he's got more money than he knows what to do with.

GABRIEL

We're all thrilled for him. So?

MELISSA

Ah yes, perfect place to dump millions, not even miss it and get the tax write-off.

BRETT

Rather serendipitous, wouldn't you say? So you can see, I'm ready to go.

LLOYD

Imagine having enough money that pouring a bunch of it into a lost cause is a good idea.

MELISSA

Time is finite, guys, budget notwithstanding. Let's settle down and get to work.

LLOYD

We did a ghost thing a couple years ago, remember?

LENORE

Oh, right! That's when Caroline fell off the riser and broke her ankle.

GABRIEL

Another one of our many "mishaps."

LENORE

How is Caroline, by the way? Has anyone seen her lately?

LLOYD

I ran into her at the Farmers' Market last week. She had just had cataract surgery.

LENORE

How did it go?

LLOYD

Great! She kept commenting on how bright colors look now.

LENORE

My doctor's been suggesting it. It just sounds depressingly like something for old people.

SARA

My father had it done last year. No problems.

GABRIEL

My grandmother had it done and her eyeball blew up.

LLOYD AND LENORE

What??

GABRIEL

Well not blew up exactly, but she had a lot of swelling. It got infected or something. She's okay now, though.

MELISSA

Let's stay on topic, please. So, Brett, where are we when we start?

BRETT

So now the whole play now takes place in this seedy hotel room where Richard has gone to end his life. Only now that he's there, he's unsure, he's lost his nerve. There's lots of flashbacks with Liz and Daria.

LENORE

I thought you said this was the stripped-down version.

BRETT

Relatively speaking. Anyway, back to the hotel room...

SARA

Why do they always have to be seedy? The hotel rooms, I mean. He could afford a nice one, especially if his new masterpiece novel was doing well. Why doesn't he book himself into the Ritz Carlton, for god's sake? That's what I'd do if I were about to kill myself. Run up a big room service bill, too.

LLOYD

Maybe he was actually flat broke. He blew everything he had on the ponies to try and assuage his guilt.

Gabriel shakes his head.

GABRIEL

If he's going to blow it on anything, it should be hookers and blow.

LLOYD

What?

GABRIEL

Nobody loses fortunes on "the ponies" any more.

LLOYD

I'm sure somebody does. There's still horse racing, right?

GABRIEL

Ponies are so old-school, Lloyd! Vices are vice-ier these days. It's gotta be drugs. Or drugs and hookers. That's what any self-respecting miserable, depressed person would do.

LENORE

What about drugs and ponies?

SARA

The horses are snorting coke?

GABRIEL

They've got the noses for it.

LLOYD

What about just hookers? I don't see Richard as a drug abuser. And he's too much of a control freak to be a gambler. Although he does drink. But he's not an alcoholic.

LENORE

How many hookers do you think a washed-up, drugged-out, middle-aged writer can reasonably be expected to go through in a week? He'd never be able to spend his way into poverty like that.

LLOYD

Hey, remember that joke about the old man whose buddies chip in and get him a hooker for his 80th birthday? And she comes to his house and says, "Hi, George, I'm Trixie and I'm here to give you some super sex." And George says, "If it's all the same with you, I'll take the soup."

LLOYD

I'd love to have the chance to kill myself again. I only did it once and it was very unsatisfying. The director really rushed it.

LENORE

Never killed myself, but I did die a couple of times. Let's see...

(she counts on her fingers)

Three! I think it was three, or maybe four. Two were in movies, one at the hands of a serial killer. Hey, maybe Richard is actually a serial killer.

SARA

If he's a serial killer, why would he want to kill himself? He wouldn't have any remorse about it. He'd be a psychopath. He'd be wanting to kill more people.

BRETT

You don't know Richard like I do. He's very task-oriented. He's a one-and-done kind of guy.

MELISSA

How is it you guys can't stay focused for more than 30 seconds? What the hell is wrong with you?

LENORE

I blame Lloyd.

BRETT

That's a very intriguing idea of Richard as a serial killer, though. I mean you could say he's already a psychopath, being so focused on his project. Maybe...

The others look at one another, dumbfounded. Brett's phone beeps. He pulls it out and looks at it.

BRETT

Oh, sorry, I have to take this. It's my agent.

He gets out of his chair and walks to a corner across the room, talking into the phone as he goes.

LENORE

I have absolutely no idea what we're supposed to be doing here.

LLOYD

Ditto that. I've never had the unfortunate experience of working with a Tony-winning playwright before. Are they all like this?

MELISSA

Some of them are actually quite nice people.

GABRIEL

If he's just using us to help burnish his career, I hate him even more than I did before.

MELISSA

Brett's professional life is not our concern. We do the best job we know how, and then move on to the next show.

GABRIEL

Ten weeks of hell and then it's all over.

BRETT

You'll never believe this! I just got an offer to write the screenplay for the remake of Episode 17 of Star Wars!

End of Scene.

ACT I SCENE 3

Some days/weeks later. Lights up on room. It's messy. Chairs are pushed around, things are out of place. Spike marks on the floor.

Lloyd is perched on the edge of the table. Lenore is doing a crossword puzzle. Sara is doing yoga. They watch and comment on Melissa, Gabriel and Brett, deep in serious conversation, verging on argument, at the end of the table.

BRETT

This just isn't working.

MELISSA

That's because you're still resisting every single idea we suggest. We've all been trying to accommodate you and your "vision", but you're making it very, very hard. The key to this process is real collaboration. You have to be receptive to our input.

BRETT

But how can I be when you can't understand what I'm trying to do? This is exactly what I was afraid was going to happen. No offense, but you guys are out of your depth here.

MELISSA

No offense, but we've been swimming in the deep end for a long time, some of us longer than you have. We know what we're doing.

BRETT

Maybe this process works with the newbies, but I'm not just some schmuck just out of drama school with my newly-minted MFA.

LLOYD

And this is when he says...wait for it...

BRETT

I won a Tony, Melissa, in case you don't remember.

Gabriel mimes shooting himself in the head. Lenore and Sara laugh. Lloyd raises his hands in victory.

LLOYD

He just can't help himself.

MELISSA

I hate to break it to you, but you're not the only award-winner ever to pass through here, Brett. In fact there are a few right in this room.

LENORE

I myself have two-count'em-two Daytime Emmys on my mantelpiece.

LLOYD

I won an Obie back in...uh...another lifetime ago.

SARA

I won a National High School Musical Theatre Award.

MELISSA

And I myself, I don't want to brag but -- in addition to winning *multiple* awards for directing -- my cranberry-pistachio biscotti fetched the highest bid at the silent auction at the County Arts Council fundraiser two years ago.

GABRIEL

Get out! They did not!

MELISSA

They did indeed.

GABRIEL

How did I miss that? Where the hell was I?

LENORE

I think you were off directing *The Sound of Music* on a Caribbean cruise ship or something.

GABRIEL

That was fun. I'd still rather have the biscotti.

MELISSA

We're all well aware of your Tony, Brett.

LENORE

We're just not as impressed with it as you'd like us to be.

SARA

Pistachio biscotti? I love those things!

MELISSA

What do you think we've all been doing for the past 25 years? Do you think I just woke up one morning and said, "You know what?"

I think I'm going to be a stage director?" Do you think Lenore just waltzed in here one day and said, "I want to be an actress?"

BRETT

No, of course not.

MELISSA

If we are going to get anywhere, you have got to approach this as a team effort. And we are a very capable team, with or without you. You need to afford us the respect you're expecting from us.

BRETT

Then why am I not seeing anything remotely like I expected?

Melissa's eyes stray to the squeaky hammer on the table. Gabriel deftly slides it out of her reach.

MELISSA

There's a little thing I like to call the "alchemy of theatre." We start with some words on a page, courtesy of the writer. Then everyone else -- the actors, directors, designers, everyone -- brings their own individual magic to it, and voila! You end up with something very different and very wonderful.

BRETT

I don't want something different. I want something exactly the way I wrote it.

MELISSA

You know what, let's you and me back up a step or two here. Set some rules and strategies for collaborating, hmm? Usually the writers we work with already know these things. You, apparently, have never had to learn them.

Melissa sidles over to Brett and puts her arm around his shoulder.

MELISSA

Let's just sit down here and talk this through.

She sits and the table and motions for Brett to do the same. Gabriel ambles over to join the others.

GABRIEL

I'll just let them be for a while. She works best alone with this routine.

Lenore, Lloyd and Gabriel look over at Melissa and Brett, shake their heads and sigh.

LLOYD

This is going to take while. I'm going out for coffee.

SARA

Again with the coffee? What d'you, live on caffeine?

LLOYD

During rehearsals? Pretty much. Plus a little bourbon now and then.

GABRIEL

If you're going out, can you get me a double espresso? And maybe something that passes for biscotti. Now that Melissa mentioned it, I really want one.

LENORE

I'm opting for a nap over caffeine.

SARA

Why don't we do something useful and productive instead?

LLOYD

I don't know, I think coffee's pretty useful.

LENORE

What do you have in mind? Facials and massages?

SARA

Why don't we try and see if we can fix the play? On our own, I mean. We've already come up with some really good ideas.

LLOYD

And Brett has shot down every one of them.

SARA

Hey, Melissa keeps telling us all that our input is crucial. So let's input! Why don't we see what we can come up with when he's not interrupting us every two seconds.

GABRIEL

What, you mean right now?

LLOYD

Do you have anything else to do? Apart from your espresso, I mean. And your biscotti.

GABRIEL

Sure, why not. You're the smarty-pants who brought it up, Sara, so what have you got in mind?

SARA

Well, I've been thinking, the first thing we need to do is get the hell out of that dingy hotel room! It's such a downer. It just sucks the energy out of everything right out of the gate.

The others are intrigued.

LLOYD

It's true.

LENORE

A new setting! Now that is thinking outside the box. Or the hotel room in this case.

LLOYD

Yes! It should be a place that brings something to the story. Someplace with a life and energy and personality of its own.

SARA

And backstory! Like a whole 'nother character.

LENORE

Something that will force Richard out of his own head. A real counterpoint to his own grim thoughts.

SARA

A little wacky, even!

A few moments of hard thinking.
Lloyd has an "Aha!" moment. He
laughs triumphantly.

LLOYD

Oh my god! I've got it! Lennie? Danger Lives Here!

LENORE

Oh my god! That's so perfect!

The others look questioningly at
Lloyd and Lenore.

LLOYD

It's a radio play we were both in years ago. Everybody loved it. It was a laugh-out-loud funny noir detective farce.

LENORE

Ever since we got here we've been after them, trying to get the piece into the season. And it's the perfect antidote for the turgid mess we've got now.

GABRIEL

I think I remember you talking about it once or twice.

LENORE

More times than that. We lobbied for years to try and get them to put do it.

LLOYD

Our old Artistic Director kept saying it wouldn't be a good fit for the season. Seriously, when is funny not a good fit?

LENORE

By the time Melissa came in, we had pretty much given up on it. Imagine if this were the circumstance that made it possible. Ooh! It's like a gust of fresh air just whooshed through the room!

SARA

And it called Danger Lives Here?

LLOYD

Uh-huh. Years ago we were doing a guest-teaching thing at some college for a semester. Wouldn't have been my first choice, but sometimes you take the gig that comes along. And it turned out to be a lot of fun. With very little stress.

LENORE

We even went back and did it again.

GABRIEL

What college?

LENORE

Oh, I don't remember. Eastern Downstate University at South Pleasant Valley or something. Somewhere west of the Mississippi if I remember correctly.

LLOYD

Not exactly what you'd call a prominent theatre school.

LENORE

But they had a scrappy little Drama Department and they weren't afraid to try stuff.

LLOYD

You can make great theatre anywhere, as we all know. Sometimes the best, most exciting stuff comes from little places like that who have nothing to lose.

SARA

Like Square Peg, you mean.

GABRIEL

Which is something Mr. I-Won-A-Tony over there should be reminded of.

LENORE

One of the professors there had written this play for fun, to use as a silly classroom exercise basically. The year we were there, they decided to use it as the entertainment for their annual gala. It's a spoof of a 1940s film noir detective story, set in a nightclub in Jakarta. We staged it like a radio play, but in a dinner theater. It was like the audience were patrons of the club.

LLOYD

It was a whole-school production. Sammy, the Dean of Drama Department, he was directing it. And since we were part of the faculty that year, we were in it.

LENORE

Oh, my gosh, Sammy! He was one of those fussy old drama queens -- literally --who should have been put out to pasture long ago, but for some reason they kept him around.

GABRIEL

I guess the pool of possible replacements wasn't that plentiful out there.

LLOYD

I remember he kept going on about how it sounded like we were all spouting "word salad."

LENORE

Most likely because we were all hammered by the time we actually performed it for an audience. Lloyd got the brilliant idea of filling the prop glasses with actual martinis.

LLOYD

I figured it would get us all in the proper frame of mind. By the time we started the audience were as drunk as we were, so they loved it. It was a huge success.

LENORE

Years later, when we came to Square Peg, we thought, what a great piece it would be to do here. We called the author and asked him about it. He was thrilled at the prospect! I mean, he never expected anything to come of it. I don't know who was more disappointed that it never panned out, him or us.

LLOYD

Presumably it's still out there, among the multitude of undiscovered gems sitting on shelves, collecting dust.

GABRIEL

So you're suggesting we substitute that for Cathexis?

LLOYD

Not the whole thing, but maybe we could use some bits of it. You know, mash them together. Hey, we're known for taking risks here, aren't we?

LENORE

Just stick'em in a blender together and turn it up to purée.

Sara jumps up in excitement.

SARA

So, like...put Richard in Jakarta? In the nightclub instead of his stupid hotel room.

LLOYD

Something like that. If nothing else, it might help us break our creative logjam here

SARA

So tell us more!

LLOYD

I played Frank Flintlock, private detective. Hard-bitten, ethically fuzzy around the edges, but basically a decent guy.

LENORE

I was Kitty Katzenbach. Jaded, down-on-her-luck chanteuse and manager at the Sing Song Club.

LLOYD

Then there was Lily, the naive young ingenue whose innocent mistake nearly gets Frank killed. Plus various and assorted sad cases and lowlifes.

SARA

What the hell are they doing in Jakarta?

LLOYD AND LENORE

Does it matter?

SARA

I s'pose not.

LENORE

And don't forget, it was done as a radio play, so we were all standing at microphones, script in hand. We could do it that way too, if we wanted.

LLOYD

There were a couple of students doing sound effects and music cues. It got pretty chaotic by the end.

LENORE

And hysterical.

SARA

This could be so great.

LLOYD

So, Richard's in debt to his bookie or his drug dealer or whatever. And the mobsters are coming after him.

LENORE

And in his other life, he'd be crying about, well, all that other stuff.

SARA

So what's he doing in Jakarta?

LENORE

Who cares? He's there now.

LLOYD

So it starts off with this great monologue by Frank.

Lloyd assumes the pose of a supposed hard-as-nails private detective. He slouches into the imaginary spotlight.

LLOYD/FRANK

A slug of gin. A slug in the mouth. Either way it's the same to me. You wake up in an alley somewhere smelling like the inside of a dumpster, your head pounding like a Sousa march and a sour day-old taste at the back of your throat. I didn't even have to open my eyes to know where I was. The butt end of Jakarta has a fragrance all its own...a mixture of curry, rotting fish, excrement and broken dreams. I took one whiff and I knew exactly where they'd dumped me.

LENORE

How do you even remember this any more?

LLOYD

Are you kidding? Monologues like this don't come along every day. Like I said, though, it's gonna need a little retrofitting.

SARA

I love it already!

LLOYD/FRANK

(in voice) Thanks, Sweet Pea.

SARA

This is definitely the play we need to do!

LLOYD/FRANK

Play your cards right, kiddo, and you may just get your chance.

LENORE

So Richard would be Frank, Daria is Kitty and Liz would be Lily. It works!

The discussion on the other side of the room gets heated again and draws their attention.

BRETT

But this is where we find out that Liz is pregnant!

SARA

I'm pregnant?

LENORE

You're hiding it very well.

LLOYD

Are you sure it's Richard's?

SARA

How the hell would I know? I mean Richard isn't the only game in town. He's a jerk anyway.

LENORE

Lily's not that kind of girl! She wouldn't sleeping around with anybody and everybody.

GABRIEL

Well, it is Jakarta, after all. Maybe she was a gangster's girlfriend and he's the father.

GABRIEL

So what is Richard's part in this and why is he here in the first place? Did he just wander into someone else's story?

LENORE

Maybe...maybe he's just teleported into the scene. Like falling into an alternate universe. He shouldn't be part of this story. So he's the wild card that throws everything into chaos. We'll figure it out. We're just getting started.

SARA

Are there other characters? What are we going to do for the rest of the characters?

GABRIEL

We'll make cardboard cutouts of everyone and we can move them around when we need them.

SARA

They won't need to do anything except stand there.

Meanwhile, Brett, Melissa and Gabriel are shouting at each other. Lloyd, Lenore and Sara look over at them.

LENORE

Kitty would never stand for that kind of behavior in the club. She'd toss the lot of them out on their asses. The Sing Song was a very classy place.

Melissa, Brett and Gabriel are still arguing. Brett stands, dramatically rips some pages in half and throws them in the air.

BRETT

No! No! You're missing the whole point!

MELISSA

You know what the point is? The point is that not everything that comes out of your mouth is brilliant and you do not get to throw a hissy fit any time someone says no to you.

GABRIEL

And...it's Bad Cop time.

BRETT

If you're the "seasoned professional" you say you are, you should know that in real theatre, there's shouting and fights on a daily basis!

MELISSA

I swear to god, Brett, if you say "real theatre" one more time, I'm gonna take this hammer to your head.

Sara jumps up and runs over to Melissa and Brett.

SARA

Guys! Guys! Melissa! It's okay! We've got it all worked out!

Sara turns to Lloyd, Lenore and Gabriel for agreement and encouragement. Caught off-guard, they are speechless at first.

BRETT

Excuse me?

SARA

While you've been over here, doing whatever it was you were doing, we took the opportunity to work out some of the kinks and stumbling blocks in the story.

LLOYD

Just playing around, really.

LENORE

Experimenting with some new ideas.

GABRIEL

For fun.

LLOYD

Melissa, you're going to love this!

MELISSA

What exactly did you do?

SARA

Well...umm...

LENORE

We made some revisions.

GABRIEL

What she means is we rewrote the story.

BRETT

You did what??

MELISSA

Just now? You've been busy!

Sara, Lenore, Lloyd and Gabriel try to give a synopsis, but they keep interrupting one another and laughing in their effort to tell the story.

BRETT

You can't just jump in and make whatever ridiculous changes you want. This is my play!

SARA

You've been so busy trying to make "serious theatre" that you drained all the life and fun out of it. And don't tell me serious theatre can't be fun.

Brett throws the script in the air in utter frustration and anger and storms out.

LLOYD

I thought it was a great solution.

OTHERS

Me, too.

Big sigh from Lenore. She picks up her bag, fishes out and uncaps the little bottle of vodka and pours a generous splash into her mug. She toasts Lloyd and Sara with the mug.

LENORE

I guess Happy Hour starts a little early today.

SARA

Do you think he'll come back?

MELISSA

I don't know. We'll have to wait and see. Playing nice doesn't seem to be working very well with him. Clearly we need a whole new strategy.

LENORE

Maybe he'll be like most bullies and fold like a cheap suitcase when he's challenged. I say he'll come back.

MELISSA

I think he just used up his last Get Out of Jail Free card. Guys, I want to hear more about your idea.

LENORE

We've got the script at home.

(turning to Lloyd)

We do, right? We must.

LLOYD

I'm sure we do. We loved it too much to get rid of it. I'll dig it out when we get home. We'll give it to you tomorrow.

SARA

This is gonna be great!

Melissa nods and smiles.

MELISSA

I think you might be on to something really good here.

GABRIEL

(gesturing with his hand
towards the door)

What about that other guy? You know, the one who just stomped out?

MELISSA

I don't know. We'll figure something out. It's what we do here, right?

Enthusiastic agreement from everyone.

END OF ACT I

ACT II SCENE 1

Lights up on the studio. Sara is alone, warming up with stretches or yoga poses. Brett enters.

BRETT

Where is everybody?

SARA

Didn't you get Melissa's text? The plumber was here to fix a leak in the men's bathroom. So she pushed the time back a half hour. You really acted like a jerk yesterday, you know that?

BRETT

You don't mince words, do you? I like that about you.

SARA

Yeah, sometimes it gets me into trouble. We were all wondering if you were even going to show up today.

BRETT

Of course I was going to show up. What, you think that little outburst was serious? I was just blowing off steam.

SARA

That's what you call blowing off steam? Maybe we should get the plumber in to take a look at *your* leak.

BRETT

Cute. So...you think I was wrong?

He's humoring her, not taking her seriously.

SARA

About the play or your behavior?

BRETT

The play.

SARA

Yes, I do.

BRETT

Which part?

SARA

The whole thing. Both the story you want to tell, and the way you want to tell it. It doesn't go anywhere.

It's dead, flat, devoid of life. Nobody's going to care what happens to Richard.

Brett shakes his head no
emphatically.

BRETT

I've been working on this for nearly ten years now. I think I'd know it better than you.

SARA

Maybe that's the problem. Maybe you're so deep in the trench that you can't see where you are any more. Maybe you've just worked it to death. Maybe it didn't have the juice to begin with. Who knows. But it ain't workin' the way it is now.

BRETT

So you, with your whole six months of professional experience, have a special insight into it?

SARA

Hey, you asked.

BRETT

In my experience, the newbies are usually more respectful of...

SARA

Please don't say Tony winners.

BRETT

I was going to say experienced professionals. But yes, there's a reason we got to be experienced.

SARA

Because you were respectful and kept your mouth shut.

BRETT

When appropriate, yes. Some individuals don't particularly appreciate getting dressed down by the junior member of the cast.

Melissa is about to enter the room, sees what's going on and stops just outside the door. Gabriel comes up beside her; she puts a finger to her mouth. They both watch silently.

SARA

Aren't experienced professionals like yourself supposed to have developed a thicker skin by now?

BRETT

Look, I can see that you're obviously very bright and have a lot of ideas, many of them probably good ones. But you need to learn to temper your, uh, let's call it enthusiasm.

Eye roll from Sara.

BRETT

I teach writing too, you know. I deal with a lot of promising young writers who, like you, need to learn to get their talent and their attitude under control if they're going to get anywhere. I could coach you if you want. Give you some pointers, share some of my experience. The first of which would be, stop viewing men as the enemy. We're a pretty likable bunch once you get to really know us.

Sara stops and turns to face Brett. She peers at him intently for a moment and then bursts out laughing. He is non-plussed.

SARA

Oh my god! You're hitting on me, aren't you? I knew it!

BRETT

What? Of course not! That's ridiculous! I'm just trying to...I realize I came on a little strong at first and I want to try and reset our relationship.

SARA

Oh man! There's rules now about that kind of shit, you know. If you want to tank your career in a big hurry, that would be a good way to do it.

BRETT

That you would even think I could do something like that is absurd! We've all gone through all the harassment briefings and so on...not that it told me anything I didn't already know.

SARA

You are just digging yourself further and further into that hole.

Melissa and Gabriel enter.

MELISSA

Brett! Nice to see you here.

She looks from Brett to Sara and back to Brett, and moves a little closer to Sara. Gabriel follows her lead.

MELISSA

Is there a problem?

BRETT

No, no, no. Just clearing up a little miscommunication, that's all.

Lloyd and Lenore enter and sidle over to where the others are standing. The five of them are facing Brett, which unnerves him a bit.

MELISSA

About what?

BRETT

I was just telling Sara that I realized that some things I've said might have been construed as rude or insensitive. Firstly...if so, my remarks were entirely misunderstood, but regardless, I'd like to take this opportunity to rebuild our working relationship.

At the word "working" Brett looks significantly at Sara.

MELISSA

To be honest, I'm not sure there's much left to rebuild. After yesterday, you've pretty much drained our reservoir of good will. We may not stand on ceremony here but we do demand respect *from* and *for* everyone.

BRETT

You're right. I fully admit I can be difficult to work with, for anyone. I will try to do better.

MELISSA

Well, for starters I think an apology would be in order.

Brett looks at Sara.

MELISSA

To all of us.

Big sigh from Brett.

BRETT

I'm sorry if anyone took my behavior the wrong way and felt belittled.

GABRIEL

Isn't that one of those non-apology apologies?

BRETT

Anyway, I'm here and ready to get to work. And yes, some of your suggestions might be worth exploring, and I'm confident we can hash out our points of disagreement.

MELISSA

I think we're way past the hashing stage here. No amount of hashing is going to make sense of this train wreck as it is.

LENORE

Honestly, Brett! You've been beating this dead horse so long, you've whipped it into a meringue. And if that isn't a disgusting image, I don't know what is.

MELISSA

It's not just our approach to our relationship that needs to be reset, it's our entire approach to your play. You need to come to grips with the fact that what you want to do won't work. Period.

BRETT

When you say won't work, what exactly do you mean?

MELISSA

Exactly? I mean that the Cathexis that we have here is irretrievably broken. Can't be fixed.

Brett looks as if he's been slapped in the face. He turns to each of the others, searching for a friendly face and finding none. He is at last deflated.

BRETT

In all these years, it never actually occurred to me that it couldn't be fixed.

Melissa ushers Brett to a chair. She sits beside him.

MELISSA

We all have our moments of doubt and despair, Brett. However, I think when you see what these guys have in mind, it will lift your spirits considerably. They've only told me a little, but it sounds promising. And your collaboration is absolutely crucial.

The others nod vigorously in agreement.

BRETT

Cathexis, it really can't be fixed? Is that what you're saying? Really?

SARA

Well, it can, but just not the way you think. Basically what we're suggesting is telling your story but in a whole different way. Which if you think about it is a compliment, because we're saying "this is such a strong story that it can be told in many ways." It's like we're paying homage to it.

MELISSA

Like West Side Story paying homage to Romeo and Juliet.

BRETT

Where did this absolutely bonkers idea come from?

MELISSA

From the minds of our very creative and very professional group of actors here.

LENORE

Yesterday, while you guys were over there "conferencing," Lloyd and I were entertaining ourselves with a couple of monologues from a play we did some years back.

LLOYD

Even though everything about the two plays seem entirely different, we couldn't help noticing how similar the characters and plot were to your play. And we thought, wouldn't it be fun to mash the two of them together.

Brett stirs impatiently. Melissa puts her hand on his arm to quiet him.

LENORE

At first it was just something to amuse ourselves while you were throwing your tantrum or whatever. But then...

LLOYD

But then it started to coalesce.

SARA

And it began to sound like a really great idea.

BRETT

It sounds like a really insane idea to me!

LLOYD

But good insane! It solves all the problems we've been having plus it makes it a whole lot more fun.

BRETT

Fun? Who wants fun? I didn't want fun!

GABRIEL

We noticed.

LENORE

And that was one of the problems.

BRETT

I can't have you messing with my characters. You haven't spent the last decade with them like I have.

LENORE

Of course you know your characters better than anyone, that's our point. And we know the characters and story from our play. Basically we'd be introducing the two sets of characters to each other.

LLOYD

In a new different setting and a somewhat different story.

SARA

But played by the same people.

BRETT

I think you've all lost your minds.

SARA

That's cause you can't see it yet! You have no idea what we're talking about. So we're going to show you.

Lenore, Lloyd and Sara huddle together. Melissa beckons Gabriel to join her and Brett at the table. He does so.

LENORE

Give us a minute.

She turns back to Lloyd and Sara. They continue to talk intently. Brett sighs loudly.

MELISSA

Remember what we talked about. Collaboration. Just take a look. You never know.

Lloyd, Lenore and Sara conclude their conference and turn their chairs towards the others at the table.

SARA

So we're going to set the scene for you, and then we'll give you an idea of the story.

LENORE

Still very rough, of course.

MELISSA

Of course.

Melissa nods encouragingly to
Brett, who humphs uncertainly.

LENORE

So -- you'll be happy to hear, Brett -- it starts out the way
you wrote it. Richard's in the hotel room. He goes through
his whole "oh woe is me" routine. Daria and Liz make some
kind of an appearance. But then...

Sara breaks in excitedly.

SARA

...somehow, and we don't know how yet, but abracadabra, his
hotel room becomes a cheesy night club in Jakarta.

BRETT

Jakarta??

LENORE

Your postmodern existential tragedy has morphed into a
farcical noir detective story. But the basic plot and
characters are the same.

BRETT

How on Earth can they possibly be the same? And why Jakarta?

Melissa shushes him.

SARA

Why not Jakarta?

LLOYD

In Jakarta World, Richard becomes Frank, the detective.
Either this is a fantasy or dream of Richard's that he has
slipped into, or somehow he has crashed through into some
other parallel world.

LENORE

But he's also himself.

LLOYD

Right. Daria becomes Kitty, manager of the nightclub. Liz
becomes Lily, the sort-of love interest. They all have the
same basic existential problems as they do in Cathexis World
Get it?

BRETT

No, I absolutely do not.

Lloyd stands.

LLOYD

Brett, look at me. I'm Richard.

He slides a step to his left.

LLOYD

Now I'm Frank.

He repeats it: I'm Richard, I'm Frank.

SARA

Same thing with me and Lenore.

They both imitate Lloyd's sidestep.

LENORE

You know the Wizard of Oz? It's kind of like that. The scarecrow and the others are like different versions of the guys back on the farm and they help Dorothy figure out what to do.

SARA

But instead of the Wicked Witch of the West, we have a big, bad Singaporean gangster named Bang Bang Tommy. And Richard has to melt him. Figuratively speaking.

BRETT

There's no witch in my play. Or in Richard's book.

GABRIEL

How do you know there's no witch in his book? You didn't actually write it, did you?

SARA

Just go with the flow, okay?

Brett turns to Melissa.

BRETT

Are they just making this up on the fly?

Melissa shrugs and smiles. Brett drops his head into his hands in absolute confusion.

LLOYD

Oh, and we did mention it's a comedy, right?

If possible, Brett is even more aghast.

LENORE

A very emotionally deep, gut-wrenching comedy.

LLOYD

Right. Funny and farcical but not without serious dramatic merit.

SARA

Also guns and drama and lots of clichés and cheesy dialogue.

Brett squirms in his chair,
stands up and pulls his phone out
of his pocket.

MELISSA

Where are you going?

BRETT

Just give me a minute to try and wrap my head around this
insanity. Also I need to check my messages.

Brett stretches and walks to the
other side of the room. He paces
and scrolls on his phone.

SARA

What a prima donna!

MELISSA

Give the guy a break. He's got a lot to process right now.

LLOYD

Think he'll come around?

LENORE

I'd say about fifty-fifty right now.

GABRIEL

If that.

MELISSA

He's a little short on options. We do have a contract.

Brett returns to his seat looking
a bit disturbed or uncomfortable.
He puts his phone in his pocket,
pulls it out again and looks at
it, then puts it away.

MELISSA

Everything okay?

Brett mumbles something non-committal and shuffles to his seat.

LLOYD

Anyway, once Richard is transported to the bar, we have the voice-over intro, like they used to do in old radio plays and movies.

LENORE

We borrowed it from the original play, which was called, by the way, Danger Lives Here. I think it's a great title.

LLOYD

It's the classic noir voice-over into. Gravelly, world-weary, you know what I'm talking about.

BRETT

So that's not Richard speaking?

LLOYD

It's Frank. I'm doing the voice for both of them..

BRETT

So he's talking to himself?

SARA

Not really. We'll get into that in a minute.

BRETT

No, let's get to it now. I want to figure this out before we go any farther.

LENORE

Don't get hung up on the details at this point. We're painting a broad picture here.

BRETT

But who is Richard? Himself? Or someone else?

LLOYD

Brett...we're never going to get anywhere if you keep obsessing over Richard at the bar. The voice-over explains the whole thing.

Lloyd stands, adopts a slouchy sort of pose and becomes Frank.

LLOYD/FRANK

A slug of gin. A slug in the mouth. Either way it's the same to me. You wake up in an alley somewhere smelling like the inside of a dumpster, your head pounding like a Sousa march and a sour day-old taste at the back of your throat.

That was me last Thursday...the morning after I crossed paths with Bang Bang Tommy and his little gang of assassins. Did I say assassins? I meant "businessmen." I didn't even have to open my eyes to know where I was. The butt end of Jakarta has a fragrance all its own...a mixture of curry, rotting fish, excrement and broken dreams. I took one whiff and I knew exactly where they'd dumped me.

BRETT

Oh god! This is even worse than I was afraid it would be.

MELISSA

Just wait. You'll see how it all goes together.

Melissa nods to Lloyd, who continues his monologue.

LLOYD/FRANK

What did Tommy want with me? The question nagged at me like a jealous wife as I picked my way between the stagnant pools of sewage and refuse. The remnants of last night's encounter were playing havoc with my stomach. So I bought a bowl of noodles from a street vendor - a squirrely little woman with bad teeth and an attitude to match. As I slurped down the soupy mess, the question came back again. What was Tommy after? Why was I still alive? The only reason could be that I was more valuable to him alive. Did I know something? If so, what? And what did it have to do with a certain desperate young showgirl named Lily?

LENORE

That should give you a good idea of where Richard has landed.

BRETT

Yeah! In the loony bin, along with the rest of us. Richard was already in the midst of an existential crisis. Now he's got to try and figure out what's real and what isn't. He's about to have a full psychotic break!

LENORE

What is "real," actually, when you think about it? There are philosophers who tell us that nothing is real, all of life is an illusion.

GABRIEL

Since when did you become such an intellectual?

MELISSA

You want an existential crisis? How's this? Our theater's operating budget is flirting with zero. The whole pandemic thing nearly did us in for good. Our very existence is dependent on us having a really, really good season. A season that is anchored by your presence here and bright, shiny world premiere of a new Brett Bradley play.

LENORE

Or at least a massively refurbished one.

GABRIEL

So not only does Richard's life, livelihood and sanity depend on the decisions he makes, so do all of ours.

BRETT

You want to pile some more pressure on me?

SARA

Yes, let's make it all about you, shall we?

BRETT

And what kind of decisions can I make? So far you haven't given me anything to work with other than some cheesy atmosphere and decrepit clichés. How about an actual plot? That would be helpful.

SARA

We've got a beautiful young woman on the run from a homicidal gangster, thugs and guns and mortal danger. We've got love and seduction. And by the end, everybody's happy and the bad guy is dead. Maybe. What more could any story want?

BRETT

This is your great story?

SARA

The basics, anyway.

LENORE

"Danger Lives Here." It really *is* a great title.

BRETT

My play already has a title. Which has nothing to do with this cockamamie excuse for a story.

LLOYD

But it does! Like we said before, the two sets of characters are kind of like mirror images of each other. And we can make changes to this play so the stories mirror each other, too.

BRETT

You're still not convincing me.

Lloyd leans in to Brett as if he's explaining basic arithmetic to a preschooler.

LLOYD

Frank, like Richard, is an anti-hero. Bogart, Sam Spade, right? He treads on the edge of good-bad.

He lives in a morally grey zone. But he's likable. You want to like him, but sometimes he does really questionable things.

LENORE

Kitty, like Daria, had been young, talented and ambitious, but she got involved with an attractive, charismatic man. That would be Frank in her case. She sacrificed her own goals and dreams of success to support Frank in his quest for...well...I don't know what.

SARA

Lily, like Liz, is younger than Frank and Kitty. She is smitten with Frank and has glommed onto him. In Lily's case it's a little different because she looks on Frank as her big, strong protector. Which Liz never did with Richard. She just wanted to bask in Richard's reflected glory.

LLOYD

We're saying let's graft your characters onto this story. Or the other way around. You know your guys inside and out. So you'll be able to mesh the two stories.

SARA

You know, like, "what would Richard do in this situation" or "didn't Daria have this same problem." Stuff like this.

LENORE

All the little webby, linky things that connect the two stories.

BRETT

That's like writing a whole new play.

MELISSA

You were ready to scrap the whole thing and rewrite it anyway when you came here. And Sara's right. We can use what we already have as a springboard.

BRETT

As we all dive head-first into the empty swimming pool that is Cathexis...or whatever the hell it is now. And at the risk of repeating myself, this is not... my...story!

SARA

What *is* your story, anyway? This guy realizes he's been a jerk for all these years and he's messed up a lot of lives along the way. That's it!

Brett practically jumps out of his seat but is gently restrained by Melissa.

LLOYD

(half-whispered) Sara, do you have a death wish?

Sara whispers back.

SARA

Too late for that. I'm in too deep now, no going back!

She turns back to Brett

SARA

Ninety minutes of Richard pissing and moaning, with Daria and Liz dropping by now and then to remind him what jerk he is. Would you really want to pay to see that? I wouldn't.

BRETT

So you were just bullshitting me earlier when you said it was "such a strong story."

Sara shrugs apologetically.

MELISSA

I have to say, in all honesty, I never saw it going this way.
(turning to Gabriel)
You?

Gabriel shakes his head.

GABRIEL

You gotta give her credit, though. In ten years, nobody's had the guts to tell him that to his face.

SARA

And if you haven't noticed, Brett, you're turning into Richard.

LENORE

Don't be Richard, Brett.

Brett has his head down, staring at his shoes.

SARA

Are you even listening?

Brett breaks down and begins to cry loudly. The others look at one another in confusion.

BRETT

I can't believe this is happening! My entire life is shattering into pieces right in front of my eyes. Cathexis, my beloved masterpiece that I've nurtured for a decade?

It's an unrecognizable mess. This was supposed to be my defining work, the play I'll be remembered for.

MELISSA

It's one play out of a whole career, Brett! We all have at least one disaster on our resumé's. In my case, more than one. But my career and my life are still chugging right along.

BRETT

Really! Well, my career is in the dumpster, thank you very much. My agent says he's tired of taking my "hysterical" phone calls at all hours and is threatening to drop me. My Star Wars project just got killed. And for the cherry on top, now a dinky little regional theatre, for god's sake, is telling me my play's no good!

LENORE

We never said it was no good. Just that it needed some work. Okay, a lot of work.

BRETT

And now, my marriage is in the dumpster, too. That message I got a while ago? It was from my wife, telling me if I didn't forget this "stupid waste of time project" she would leave me.

LLOYD

Boy, when it rains, it pours, huh?

BRETT

You think Richard's life is a mess? Hah! His life is a carnival compared to mine! A cone of sweet, fluffy cotton candy, all full of happiness. What do I get? A gooey, half-cooked funnel cake that drips all over my shirt. He gets a jolly ride on the carousel. I'm stuck on a lunatic Tilt-A-Whirl that that's flinging me around at warp speed until my brains come spewing out my ears!

A brief moment of stunned silence
while everyone absorbs that.

GABRIEL

(Half-whispering to himself) This may be the best day of my entire life.

BRETT

While you all are having a fine old time tearing my play to shreds, my actual, real life is falling to pieces and the pieces are being stomped on!

Brett continues to sob loudly and dramatically.

LLOYD

Well, look at it this way. It can't get any worse.

BRETT

Can't it? I'm sure you'll find a way!

Lloyd leans over to Lenore.

LLOYD

Well, bombast and tantrum didn't work, and none of us really believed that whole change-of-heart thing. So why not try the pity strategy.

LENORE

Pretty pathetic if it's true.

Gabriel is trying hard to conceal his pleasure and giddiness at Brett's change of fortune.

Melissa reaches out and gently puts her hand on Brett's arm.

MELISSA

You may not believe it, but you're among friends here. We don't want you to crash and burn. We want you to succeed, because if you do, so do we. Unlike Broadway, everyone here is rooting for you.

BRETT

Do you know that at the last reading I had, people were actually laughing?

SARA

If we do this the way we're suggesting, they'll be still be laughing, but for the right reason!

LLOYD

And Richard will also have the opportunity to be a serious, tough hero who vanquishes the bad guys.

Brett stops sobbing. He wipes his eyes, sniffles and tries to compose himself.

LENORE

Now you'll be able to give the play a happy ending.

BRETT

I never wanted that. I wanted Richard's victory to be empty and meaningless.

SARA

And look where that got you!

LLOYD

Think about it! Now Richard will see how things could work out differently. He can take his newfound knowledge and empathy back to his own world and make things right with all the people he's wronged.

BRETT

So basically we've got "It's a Wonderful Life" set in Jakarta! I didn't write Cathexis to reaffirm everyone's faith in the goodness of humanity!

LENORE

Again, look where that got you.

SARA

So you make it funny and ironic instead.

MELISSA

Give it an ironic twist in your trademark Brett-ian style.

BRETT

I can't write a whole new play in the shape I'm in!

LENORE

We're telling you that you can re-purpose a lot of what you've already written. Keep your own words in there.

Brett looks tentatively at
Melissa. Gabriel studiously
avoids Brett's glance.

BRETT

I don't know. I don't know. I'm a mess right now. I can't even think straight. I really need to talk to my therapist.

Brett breaks into tears again.

MELISSA

I have faith in you. You're a smart guy. You'll figure it all out. Let's go get a few six-packs and some take-out and work through it. We'll show you how much fun real collaboration can be.

BRETT

I really need to talk to my therapist.

END OF SCENE

ACT II SCENE 2

Lights up in the studio. Everyone is there except. Brett. They are all looking a bit hung over.

GABRIEL

And once again, we're waiting for Brett.

LLOYD

This time at least he's got an excuse if he feels anything like the rest of us.

LENORE

I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm getting too old to do that any more.

LLOYD

That's actually wisdom. When you're finally smart enough to not drink that much on a work night.

LENORE

Well, apparently I'm not there yet.

MELISSA

Still, I think it's worth the fuzzy brains and queasy stomachs if we finally got Brett to act like a genuine human being.

Brett enters, a little tentatively.

LENORE

Ah, here comes the human now.

MELISSA

How are you feeling this lovely morning?

With a shrug and a sign, Brett drops into a chair.

BRETT

I spent hours on the phone last night with my therapist and my agent. At least they're both still taking my calls, so that's something. But I couldn't believe what they said. Both of them! The same thing!

LENORE

Which was...?

BRETT

Pretty much the same thing that you all said, but a lot less diplomatically. That they were surprised that it had taken this long, but that they were actually glad that it happened.

All that stuff about facing defeat and setbacks and finding my inner strength, blah blah blah. And that learning how to play nice with others will help me become a better writer and a better human being.

MELISSA

And how are you feeling about all of that?

BRETT

Awful! It really stung, I can tell you that. But I admit there was a kernel of truth in what they were saying. The thing is, I don't mean to come off as antagonistic.

SARA

That wouldn't have been my word, but okay.

BRETT

In my head it sounds like I'm just strongly defending my opinion. I'm being passionate about my work.

GABRIEL

While to the rest of us you're just being a pain in the ass.

BRETT

How is it nobody ever told me these things before?

LENORE

I'm sure they have. You just weren't listening.

BRETT

Yeah, but how do you do that? That's always been really hard for me.

MELISSA

It's called self-awareness. Looking at your own behavior and trying to understand how it affects other people.

LENORE

Some people are just born with it. For others, yours truly included, it's a learned skill. But it's rather essential if you want to work in a discipline like ours that's built on personal interaction.

BRETT

I guess I never bothered. I've always felt that writing was a solitary endeavor.

LENORE

Maybe that's why you chose it.

BRETT

More like it chose me. I won my first award for writing in fourth grade. My teacher said it was the best essay she'd ever read.

GABRIEL

Not hard in fourth grade. All you have to do is spell everything right and have neat handwriting.

LENORE

I'll bet your mother told you that you were meant to be a great writer.

BRETT

My father started calling me Hemingway.

LLOYD

What's astounding to me is how you made it all the way from fourth grade to Cathexis without any notable failures.

GABRIEL

How is that even possible?

SARA

And I suppose that Richard is the same. No wonder he managed to antagonize so many people.

LLOYD

And got himself into so much trouble. First in his personal life, then he gets shunted off to sleazy Jakarta world.

LENORE

And wanted to kill himself when things got tough. He didn't know how else to handle it.

LLOYD

So here's Richard, beamed into this other, parallel world and suddenly he gets it. He's shocked into another level of awareness. He's stepping back and looking at his life from the outside.

BRETT

Right, I can see what you mean! He's like, "Here I am, stuck in some third-rate genre novel! The kind of writing I hate the most. A sleazy little bar in Jakarta? I mean, how much more cliché can you get? This must be some elaborate joke. But who would do this? Who *could* do this? And *why* would someone do this? But what if it's not a joke!"

MELISSA

What if it isn't a joke? Why would he be *there*, of all places?

Brett becomes animated by the conversation. He stands and starts to pace.

BRETT

Why there? Why there?

He stops pacing, spins around to face the others.

BRETT

Because genre fiction is the type of writing he despises the most! So this is hell, Richard's hell. He's being forced to spend eternity in a world created by writers he thinks are all hacks, who were all commercial successes. You know, with their stupid, formulaic volumes all spilling out of airport kiosks. He gets the connection between his own life and this. He finally realizes the enormity of how fucked up his life is.

SARA

How about how much he fucked other people's live up?

LENORE

Baby steps, dear. Baby steps.

MELISSA

Yes! Now you're getting somewhere!

BRETT

But I didn't actually kill myself. Richard didn't, that is. So how could I have gone to hell? Maybe I did and I don't remember.

Brett stands and starts pacing again and talking out loud to himself.

BRETT

So how does Richard navigate this new world? What even *is* it? It's not like a paranormal kind of thing, is it? I hate that shit. Tell me it's not. I think I'd shoot myself.

LLOYD

Well, that's what Richard was going to do anyway.

BRETT

Yeah, but I'm not Richard.

LENORE

So much for self-awareness.

BRETT

But how is the audience going to believe any of this? It's confusing enough already.

Sara picks up a box of tissues from the table. She cradles it and talks to it like it's a baby.

SARA

You know this is a box of tissues. But right this minute, looking at me, you're totally willing to accept it's a real baby, right? We don't need to explain these things. If we treat them as real or normal, the audience will too. They're pretty smart.

BRETT

So I guess this would be where the comedy comes in, right? Comedy comes from pain and misery, right? So the comedy is me being miserable when I find out I'm stuck in my own hack genre hell of my own making! Of Richard's own making.

SARA

So when he sees Frank behaving the same way, he needs to do something about it.

BRETT

Maybe Richard thinks that if he can change the course of action, he can get out of there and back to his real life.

SARA

Right now I'm wondering why would he want to go back to his real life. He was absolutely miserable and about to kill himself.

LLOYD

Maybe he thinks he can change events in his own life.

BRETT

But how can Richard see what Frank is doing if he is Frank?

LLOYD

Maybe Richard tells Frank what he should do.

BRETT

But Richard *is* Frank.

MELISSA

Another thing we'll have to figure out.

GABRIEL

I'm telling you, cardboard cutouts is the way to go.

BRETT

I think my brain is about to explode.

LENORE

For once I agree with you. Can we take a little break here?

LLOYD

I'm hungry. Is anyone else hungry?

SARA

Oh! Can we get pizza?

GABRIEL

Ugh! How can you even think about eating?

MELISSA

There's muffins and all kinds of stuff over in the kitchen left over from the volunteers' meeting.

Lots of heads pop up in interest. Melissa cocks her head in the direction of the kitchen area. Lloyd and Sara jump up and go to investigate. They forage a bit and return to the table with a bunch of leftover baked goods and other goodies. Everyone picks over the stuff and takes something. Maybe there's fruit too. They relax and nosh.

SARA

Suppose you could go back and change something in your life. Would you?

LLOYD

I guess maybe I wouldn't have tried to take up skiing and the age of 40.

SARA

Why? What happened?

LLOYD

I broke my leg in two places.

SARA

Ouch!

LLOYD

And I had to pull out of a show I'd just been cast in.

SARA

Double ouch!

LLOYD

But because of that, I was available to audition for the part I ended up winning my Obie for. You never know how things are going to play out five, ten years down the road.

Lenore looks over at Lloyd.

LENORE

Speaking of five or ten years down the road, I know you're expecting me to say that I wouldn't have married you. Hmmm, I'd say the jury's still out on that one.

Chuckles around the table.

MELISSA

I often wonder what would have happened if I had taken another job I was offered instead of coming here. It was full-time teaching. More money, higher profile. I think I would have been bored, though. And I would never have met Gabriel. And with him around, things are never boring.

GABRIEL

That first year you were here, oh my gawd! It was the disaster year, from start to finish. Everything we touched turned to shit. And not just your average shit. Absolute flaming turds flying in all directions!

MELISSA

It was pretty horrific, wasn't it? But what came out of it was that Gabriel and I discovered that we worked really well together, especially in crisis. A true symbiosis.

(Turning to Gabriel)

Wouldn't you say?

Gabriel is not quite as enthusiastic about this as Melissa. (Very dramatic)

GABRIEL

For you, maybe. For me it's just constant abuse.

MELISSA

It's one of those things where we seem to need conflict to do our best work.

GABRIEL

If your idea of conflict is screaming at me all the time, then yes.

LLOYD

It's like they're an old married couple.

LENORE

Except Gabriel is married to someone else.

LLOYD

And Melissa already has several ex-husbands.

LENORE

Sometimes I wonder if maybe you two are actually one person.

MELISSA

Brett, what would you change? And don't say not coming here. That doesn't count.

BRETT

I don't know. Right now it seems I could pick anything in my life and say it was the wrong choice.

MELISSA

No matter what you choose, there's going to be times you think you made the wrong decision. But I think it isn't really right or wrong, it's just this way or that way. Chocolate or vanilla. Beach or mountains.

BRETT

My wife and I went to the beach on our honeymoon. It was beautiful. She was beautiful. I thought everything was perfect. And now...

Brett looks to be on the verge of another breakdown.

MELISSA

You know what, maybe we should call it day. I think Brett needs some quiet along time. That okay with you, Brett?

BRETT

Nothing feels okay right now, but yes, I'm done for the day. My biggest crisis now in my long and growing list is that even if I think this is a good idea, I'm not sure I can actually write it.

MELISSA

And that is why you're collaborating with us.

On the verge of tears again, Brett gathers his things with the help of Melissa. He exits. They watch him leave.

LENORE

That is one fragile boy right now.

MELISSA

He's totally convinced his career is in the toilet.

LLOYD

Never mind his career, one wonders how he's managed to make it through life so far.

LENORE

Good looks and lots of sexual favors, one would think. Hey, it worked for me.

Suspicious side-eye from Lloyd.

MELISSA

We definitely should have included "baby sitter" in the casting notices.

SARA

In my admittedly paltry experience, all acting jobs include baby sitting.

LENORE

Usually, though, it's for the actors. Ah well, this is what we signed up for.

LLOYD

This is what we signed up for?

LENORE

Yes, darling! To break out of the mold. To regain our sense of adventure.

LLOYD

I thought it was because we just sold our apartment and we had nowhere to live. Also because we needed jobs.

GABRIEL

What absolutely makes me want to spit is that he will get all the credit and we'll just get a "by the way" mention.

MELISSA

I don't know about all of you, but I think this piece is going to be absolutely brilliant. This is what we do here. Confront the challenges and triumph over them. I haven't worked on anything that's excited me this much since the King Tut musical.

GABRIEL

The set blew up on that.

MELISSA

That wasn't my fault. But now that you mention it, I've definitely been playing it a little safe since then. And I've been in a creative trough since then, too. I think we're onto something here. It's great to be taking chances again!

Gabriel grumbles.

End of scene.

ACT II SCENE 3

Energy levels and attention are waning. Sara picks up one of the bats and cradles it like a baby. Lloyd and Lenore idly watch her. Melissa, Gabriel and Brett sit slumped at the table.

SARA/LIZ/LILY

Our baby, Richard. Our baby!

(breaking character)

Or do I mean "our baby, Frank?" Have I even had the baby yet? Is it Richard's? Does he know it? Or is it's Frank's? Or maybe it's Tommy's!

GABRIEL

What happened to the tissue box? Sara, what did you do to your baby??

LENORE

Are you telling me you actually had sex with Frank?

SARA

I don't know, just covering all my bases.

MELISSA

Imagine me having kids. I think I'd have made a terrible mother.

GABRIEL

And scores of unborn babies thank you for that. (beat) Seriously though, did you ever think about it?

MELISSA

Came close once, with that crazy Frenchman. Fortunately he left me before I gave in and said yes.

LENORE

I'm sorry, I can't keep the plot straight. Is Lily pregnant or isn't she? Brett?

Brett shrugs helplessly.

SARA

I don't think it matters. I think the baby is a McGuffin.

LENORE

Baby McGuffin! I like that.

GABRIEL

I think everybody's a McGuffin in this play. We think it's about them but it isn't.

SARA

I thought that precious artifact was the McGuffin. Everybody's after it but it's actually worthless.

LLOYD

Kind of like crypto. I hope nobody here has actually invested in that crap.

GABRIEL

Like any of us actually have money to invest!

LENORE

Nothing really has any intrinsic value. Things are valuable because we decide they are.

GABRIEL

Whether it's the artifact of a bag of cash or Lily's life, Frank has to think it's worth stepping in to save it.

LLOYD

Brett, could you weigh in on this, please?

BRETT

About crypto? Why do you think I have anything to contribute? I think my brother bought some but I have no freakin' idea what it even is.

LLOYD

No, buddy, about the play. We're counting on you to give the story some coherence. Not to mention, some reason for being.

BRETT

Another thing I have nothing to contribute to!

MELISSA

Of course you do! Your input is absolutely critical! You're creating the structure, the spine of the story. Think of Cathexis as a Christmas tree. Tall and sturdy, with lots of strong branches that we're hanging our ornaments on.

LENORE

I thought it was a piñata that we were beating on with sticks.

Brett waves his hands and shakes his head.

BRETT

I've completely zoned out. I think my brain has gone to the Bahamas for the holidays. I'm sorry, guys, it still feels like a Twilight Zone episode to me.

GABRIEL

Then make it the best Twilight Zone episode ever written. You're a Tony winner, for god's sake!

LENORE

You know Richard inside-out. Will he rise to the occasion? Does he have it in him? Or will he just continue to wring his hands and cry into his bourbon? And also, just out of curiosity, did he or did he not actually sleep with Lily?

SARA

If you want him to come out of this a hero, we gotta see him start to act like one.

BRETT

You don't understand the creative process! I can't just turn it on, like a faucet, you know. Anyway, you all seem to be doing just fine writing it without me.

LLOYD

We're not writing, Brett, we just making this shit up as we go.

MELISSA

Brett, sweetie, you're still over-thinking it. Relax, unclench your brain, let it breathe a little.

SARA

We're counting on you, Brett.

MELISSA

I can see the end, Brett. It's over there on the horizon, calling to us. Look, it's right here. Let's get there.

Melissa points as if into the distance. Brett follows her gaze, nods wearily, and slowly gathers himself together.

BRETT

Well it looks like Richard has discovered he does have a crumb of humanity in him and that he needs to give something up to help Lily. Sacrifice something of himself.

SARA

Right.

BRETT

Not literally sacrifice himself. Or maybe he does. Maybe he actually gives his life to save hers.

LLOYD

That would be truly ironic, wouldn't it? Richard goes to the alternate world to presumably stop himself from killing himself, and ends up doing it there.

SARA

But at least he would have done it for a noble reason.

LENORE

But would he really be dead?

BRETT

No ghosts, no zombies, I told you.

MELISSA

Remember this is supposed to be a comedy, so no truly tragic deaths allowed.

SARA

So...what exactly does he do?

Brett ponders with great effort.

LLOYD

My rule of thumb is, when in doubt, stage a fight scene. That always provokes some kind of decision or resolution.

Sara runs to the cabinet with the stage combat equipment in it, rummages around and pulls out a couple of Nerf bats.

Lenore and Sara take a few practice swings. Lloyd picks up a bat and plays with it.

BRETT

Hang on! What are nerf bats doing in a Jakarta bar?

SARA

Tissue box, Nerf bat. Same thing.

LLOYD

Okay, how about this? The crisis throws Richard back into the hotel room. Whatever is happening in the nightclub pushes him to his moment of truth. This is the point where the two worlds intersect. He realizes that he's made his decision and he's going to shoot himself.

LENORE

But Kitty follows him back to real world. Instead of Daria, it's Kitty who bursts in and says, "give me the gun, Richard."

LLOYD

Frank.

LENORE

Give me the gun, Frank. Whoever.

Lenore grabs Lloyd's hand with the squeaky hammer in it.

LLOYD/RICHARD

(Speaking to Kitty) You're not real. I'm not giving you anything.

LENORE/DARIA/KITTY

There's always an excuse with you, isn't there, Frank? I mean Richard. Well just because I'm not actually here doesn't mean I'm going to follow your script.

LLOYD/RICHARD

What script? There is no script! This is all a fever dream in my head, remember?

LENORE

(In a spooky voice) Or is it, Richard-Frank? Is it really a dream? Or is it...

MELISSA

Oh my god, Lenore! Don't mess with his head like that!

BRETT

Is this going all supernatural again? I told you, none of that shit in here.

LENORE

We're in both of Richard's worlds right now. And in both of them, choices and actions have consequences.

LLOYD

But what's the right choice? How do I know? What if I can't do it?

SARA?

Oh, grow up, Brett! I mean Richard! Stop being a whiny baby. You want to get out of this hell? You know the way out.

GABRIEL

This is priceless. This is almost worth all the hell he put me through in high school.

BRETT

Maybe Richard decides that he's going to stop butting in and let Frank make his own decisions.

SARA

Oh, what a fucking cop-out! What a typical "guy" thing to say!

LENORE

The answer is staring you in the face! Richard's sacrifice is that he needs to own up to his past bad behavior. He needs to apologize and make amends.

BRETT

Maybe, as soon as Richard makes his decision, Jakarta world disappears. Like Oz, like you said. He learns the lesson, so there's no more reason to be there. "I see now what I've done and I'm ready for face the music and make it right." Something like that.

MELISSA

That's good. Book-ending everything with scenes in the hotel room grounds it in reality.

Laughs at that.

BRETT

So there he is back in his hotel room, and he says to Daria -- is she really there?

MELISSA

Sure, if you want her there. It's your play.

BRETT

Okay so he talks to her now. "I get it. The people in my life are more important to me than achieving my deepest goal." Wait, is that really true?

LENORE

It needs to be for this story to make sense.

BRETT

No, but it's more than that! Richard realized that his version of the truth isn't necessarily any more true than anyone else's! That they can pursue their own inner truth without him trying to shove his version down their throats in his novel.

LLOYD

Wow! That's impressive!

MELISSA

That's quite a leap for somebody like Richard to make!
So...big crunch point here...what is Richard going to do to
make amends?

BRETT

To who?

MELISSA

To Daria, to Liz, to his friends and colleagues. Even to
himself.

BRETT

Well, he's going to tell them how sorry he is. He's going to
try and be a better citizen.

LENORE

Kind of lame.

SARA

Totally.

MELISSA

If you this to be a meaningful, transformative experience for
Richard, he's got to give up something important. Just like
he did for Lily.

BRETT

So you're saying I *should* kill myself?

SARA

No, doofus! He just has to give up something of value. His
sense of male entitlement, for example?

LENORE

Or at least admit something deep and true about himself.
Like, say, how about the reason he was so hypercritical of
mystery novels is that he secretly wished he could write
them?

LLOYD

Yeah, he's been carrying around this burden of having to be a
"great modern novelist" when all he really wants to do is
write regular good stories for regular people.

Brett turns slowly and looks
intensely at each of the others.

BRETT

Wait a minute.

He looks at everyone again.

BRETT

You're talking about me, aren't you?

MELISSA

Is that what you think?

BRETT

Well, isn't that what you were saying?

LENORE

We were talking about Richard. But if you think those things apply to you, then maybe he isn't the only one who needs to do a little self-searching.

BRETT

What is this, some kind of biblical allegory or something? I've been sent into exile to wander in the wilderness, suffering through doubt and despair, searching for my true self? Is that it?

LENORE

Hey! What you call it exile, I call refuge. And yes, I did connect with my true self here. At least the self I had evolved into. If you would for one minute stop looking at this as the worst thing that's ever happened to you, you might come to realize it may be the best thing.

MELISSA

Lenore! I never knew you felt this way! I'm touched, truly.

LENORE

I know, it's a bit embarrassing to admit how happy I am here, and how much I don't miss my old life.

SARA

It sounded pretty glamorous from the stories you told.

LENORE

Oh, it had its moments. A lot of the memories run together, but I do remember that a shitload of champagne was consumed. But like champagne, it all goes flat after a while. That's not a bad metaphor for that life, actually. Glorious but ephemeral.

BRETT

But what does that have to do with me?

SARA

Did it ever occur to you that not everything is about you?

LENORE

Try taking a step outside yourself for a moment, would you? Your inability to see past the end of your own nose is driving us all to distraction.

I don't know about anyone else but I am at the end of my tether dealing with your adolescent carryings-on!

As Lenore speaks, Gabriel idly picks up her coffee cup, sniffs it and goes to dump it. Lenore sees him, and glares at him, stabbing a finger imperiously in his direction.

LENORE

Don't fuck with me, Gabriel! I can make your life a living hell.

Gabriel gives her a sarcastic little snarl and goes about his business.

Lenore turns to Brett.

LENORE

And you! Don't you fuck with me either! Get over it and learn how to be a grownup.

Brett starts to hyperventilate. He stands and walks around the room.

BRETT

I want to get over it but I can't, you know? It's like I'm possessed.

GABRIEL

Then I know exactly what to do! Perform an exorcism! Together we will all drive the evil spirit Cathexis out of you.

BRETT

I don't know if it's an evil spirit.

GABRIEL

Oh, I do! In fact everything associated with you is evil.

BRETT

What???

GABRIEL

We will beat the evil spirit out of you! Come on, let's do it. We need all of our collective energy to tackle this beast!

Gabriel picks up one of the nerf bats and approaches Brett.

GABRIEL

Even back in high school, long before Cathexis, this evil spirit has been oozing out. And now, when I thought I was finally free of your curse, you come around again, sucking up everybody else's psychic energy, just so you can try and feel like a superstar again!

Lloyd, Lenore and Sara join
Gabriel, brandishing bats.

BRETT

Wait, no!

LENORE

Yes! This must be where the candy finally falls out of the piñata!

SARA

Begone, evil Cathexis!

LLOYD

Hit the road, jackass!

They begin to enthusiastically
bop him with the bats. Melissa is
too startled to do anything.

SARA

I can't tell, is it working?

GABRIEL

It is for me! I finally get to purge years of festering pain and resentment!

Gabriel whaps Brett with a little
more force.

BRETT

Hey!

Brett frantically grabs a bat and
tries to defend himself against
Gabriel. The others are cheering
them on.

MELISSA

Hey! Hey!! Stop it!

She's completely ignored. She
picks up her squeaky hammer and
bangs it repeatedly on the table.

MELISSA

EVERYBODY STOP!!!!!!

One final squeaky bang.

Everybody stops, catches their breath, steps back. Combination of embarrassment and giggles.

Melissa takes a long inhale and blows the air out. She gestures for everyone to do the same.

MELISSA

Big, deep breaths! Let's dial it back, shall we! I know we have all been riding an emotional roller coaster for weeks now. I guess I shouldn't be surprised by this. But we're done. Now I think everyone needs to decompress a little.

Melissa looks over at Brett and Gabriel, both still panting.

MELISSA

Or a lot. Let's break for the day. Go outside in the fresh air, take a little walk. Go get a beverage and a nosh. Calm down.

Lloyd's gaze drifts over to the coffee maker.

SARA

Lloyd, leave the stupid coffee maker alone. I'm going to Beans'n'Bagels. Come with me.

Lloyd dithers, unwilling to give up the battle. Sara gently pulls him away.

LLOYD

I feel like it's laughing at me.

SARA

It's a stupid little kitchen appliance, okay? Don't endow it with sentient powers.

LLOYD

Seriously, it hates me.

BRETT

It probably hates me more. Everybody hates me more.

Sara manages to maneuver Lloyd towards the door. The others follow.

End of scene.

ACT II SCENE 4

Rehearsal room. Everyone enters and collapses on chairs, sofas, etc. They are all exuberant except Brett, who is oozing fear and doubt.

MELISSA

That's it. We've done it. We achieved the impossible. I am so proud of all you.

LLOYD

Best dress rehearsal I've done in years!

GABRIEL

Did you see the faces on the (board members)?

LENORE

Did you see the faces on everyone? They loved it!

BRETT

I don't know. Is it really ready? Maybe we should take it out of town first.

SARA

We are out of town.

BRETT

I mean way out of town.

LENORE

We are way out of town.

Melissa stands, takes a deep breath and stretches.

MELISSA

Stop worrying, Brett! We've got a winner here. Feel proud of yourself. This was a monumental effort by everyone. And by you in particular. You got pushed way outside your comfort zone, you confronted your demons...

BRETT

Some of them, anyway.

MELISSA

And you rose to the challenge! You vanquished the Cathexis monster and did some stellar work.

BRETT

I know you're right, but a big part of me still doesn't want to let go.

MELISSA

But you've got something new and wonderful to welcome in its place.

GABRIEL

It's kind of like when your child comes out as transgender, you know? You mourn for the loss of the old one, but have the new one instead.

MELISSA

A weird analogy, but okay.

SARA

Makes me think of my friend Arnie from high school. Arnie was struggling with whether or not to come out to his parents as trans, and he went hiking to think things through and figure it out. And while he was in the forest, a tree fell on him and killed him.

LENORE

Did anyone hear it?

LLOYD

Apparently he didn't.

SARA

Make all the jokes you want, it was really sad. Real death can be very tragic.

LENORE

Even if it sounds ridiculous.

MELISSA

Brett, I'll tell you what to do. Put Cathexis in the drawer for another ten years and revisit it then. See what it feels like after letting it rest for a while. Life changes a lot in ten years. For instance, you got married and had kids.

BRETT

Yeah, I don't know how much longer that's going to last. And my kids probably won't speak to me after that.

MELISSA

Pretty much everybody I know has gotten divorced at least once.

LLOYD

We nearly got divorced a couple of times.

GABRIEL

I got married and don't plan on getting divorced.

LENORE

Nobody does, dear.

SARA

I've moved four times and have had two cars.

MELISSA

I bought and sold two apartments. And ditched a cheating boyfriend.

BRETT

So I've got to say goodbye to my wife, to my play, to what else? My Audi, probably.

LENORE

It's a process, darling. Do you know how long it took me to get used to being out here in the boonies?

BRETT

From the way you were talking, it was love at first sight!

LLOYD

Far from it! You don't want to know about the panic attacks and the tantrums I lived through for the first year we were here.

LENORE

It wasn't that long!

LLOYD

Are you kidding? I'm being generous here! She drove me out of the house on at least two occasions. I ended up staying with my sister in California for most of the winter.

LENORE

But you're back now.

LLOYD

Yes, I'm back now.

Some kind of goofy affection
between them.

LENORE

The point is, Brett darling, once I finally let go and accepted where I was in my career and my life, I was able to discover a whole new facet to my acting. And no, I'm not in The Big City any more, but I'm a big deal around here and I don't have to work nearly as hard at it.

BRETT

Are you suggesting I follow your path and move back here?

LENORE

I'm not suggesting anything. But you've got the chance to remake yourself and your career. Don't blow it. Do you want to end up as just another whining, tedious, stuck-in-a-rut, pain-in-the-ass middle-aged playwright, obsessively chasing his lost glory days? Or do you want to create a whole vibrant new chapter in your noteworthy career?

LLOYD

Pay attention. That's the voice of experience talking.

Lloyd gets up and goes to the coffee maker. He opens the pot, sees it's empty and groans.

BRETT

Laugh all you want, but I feel like I'm in mourning for my old life. From Broadway and a Tony to...I don't even know what.

LENORE

I won two daytime Emmys. But at a certain point, you realize that you're the only one who cares any more. Eventually I had to let go of that version of myself.

BRETT

That's hardly the same thing.

LENORE

Hey! My two Emmys could beat the shit out of your one Tony, buster! You ever seen one? Those suckers are big! And heavy! And they're all pointy and stabby. And I got one for each hand.

Lenore stands and takes a menacing step towards Brett, holding the imaginary Emmys in her outstretched hands. Brett takes a step back, just in case.

LLOYD

Clearly you didn't totally let go of it.

BRETT

I really, really need to talk to my therapist.

Brett composes himself, takes a couple of deep breaths, snuffles a little.

MELISSA

Brett, right now you're only seeing what's behind you, and you have no idea what's coming up. If you, if all of us, could do what we did in the last weeks, imagine what other kinds of amazing work you can create in the future.

BRETT

What should I do?

MELISSA

First, go home, take a nap. No, take a bath first, then take a nap. You don't have to make any big decisions right now. And tomorrow night, when you hear the audience roaring with laughter, you might have a clearer idea. Ironically I think you washed up on exactly the right desert island to help you figure that out.

BRETT

Washed up is right!

MELISSA

Shut up, I'm telling you how to save your own ass here.

GABRIEL

Brett, I'd just like to say that the past ten weeks have been sheer hell for all of us, and we will all be happy to see the back of you. That said, and it kills me to say this, I think you managed to create a really great play under really difficult circumstances.

Brett goes to hug Gabriel, who fends him off,

GABRIEL

That doesn't mean we're friends or anything. I'm not going to invite you over for cocktails and munchies. But I do have a new professional respect for you. Now go away and let me sulk.

BRETT

Well, I'd just like to say that this all turned out in a way I never expected.

MELISSA

That's exactly what I told you the day you got here.

BRETT

I've got a boatload of shit to sort out. But I truly am proud of what we created together.

SARA

Did you hear what he said? He said "created together!" Those are two words I never thought I'd hear come out of your mouth at the same time.

MELISSA

Validation is very sweet.

BRETT

I just wish I could feel a hundred percent positive about all of this. In some way I feel like I'm burying my child.

LLOYD

If it helps any, think of Cathexis as an organ donor. Your beloved but mortally ill child who bravely and magnanimously sacrificed parts of itself to give life to a new play that will carry on its legacy for years to come.

BRETT

When you put it that way, it actually sounds noble. And totally creepy.

LENORE

Or how about this. Cathexis has simply evolved into something else. From a caterpillar to a butterfly. A beautiful, laugh-out-loud butterfly. A metamorphosis. There you go, another Greek word.

BRETT

I'm serious, Cathexis really has been like my child. I had hoped eventually I'd be able to give it a kiss on the head and send it out into the world to seek its fortune.

LENORE

And anyway, children have a way of confounding your dreams in the most uncomfortable way possible. They're the universe's way of telling you that, no matter how much you would like to believe otherwise, you have absolutely no control over anything.

LLOYD

Your kids are still young, Brett. Wait another five, ten years, they'll put you through the wringer. Give you a whole new perspective on existential crisis.

Lenore nods in agreement and commiseration.

BRETT

I know I've been a pain to work with on this. That's only because I cared so much about it! I had a perfect vision in my head and I was willing to try anything to realize that vision. But ultimately, I realized that there is no one perfect vision. And now I'm ready to...

Melissa cuts him off.

MELISSA

That was lovely, Brett. Anyone else have anything to say? No? Okay, then I'd like to add something. Brett, you made our lives miserable these last few months. That said, I have to say that I do admire your determination, your refusal to give up. In this particular case, I think it was a monumentally stupid thing to do, but admirable all the same.

The others nod and mumble in agreement. Everyone finally falls silent.

BRETT

So this is it?

MELISSA

No, it's not it. In case you've forgotten, you have a new play opening here tomorrow night.

BRETT

Oh my god, that's right! I better go get some notes together for interviews afterwards. And for the talk-back with the audience afterwards. Do you guys do talk-backs?

Groans and facepalms from the others.

LENORE

Okay, then! If this it really "it," let me be the first to offer a toast to dear, departed Cathexis. Gabriel, gimme the damn bottle back.

Gabriel fishes the empty bottle out of the trash, turns it upside down and shakes it. It's empty. She grumbles.

MELISSA

Let's take this party somewhere else. We have to clear out anyway because the local tango club uses this space for their weekly milonga, and they'll be showing up any minutes.

BRETT

You certainly have a very interesting community here.

LENORE

That's what we've been trying to tell you.

GABRIEL

Guys, take your puffy weapons with you, please. I don't want them falling into the wrong hands.

They get themselves together and move towards the door.

Brett stops, takes a deep breath and looks around.

BRETT

You know what? I feel like a huge weight has been lifted. I don't feel that calling it quits on Cathexis is an act of cowardice any more. I feel like it's the boldest, smartest move of all! This is great!

They continue walking toward the exit.

LLOYD

I still think Cathexis would have made a really fun musical.

They all beat on Lloyd with the bats and hammers.

Everyone exits. Gabriel re-enters and goes to the kitchen. He picks up the coffee maker, sniffs the contents, makes a face and dumps it in the sink. He turns it off and then turns off the lights. He exits and shuts the door behind him.

THE END.

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