

Translation

by

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DESCRIPTION

HELEN GUILD, a successful appraiser of theatre photography, must decide if she wants to trust a stranger to translate a journal that may contain revelations she is uncertain she wants to know. For his part, ORAL TIMMINS, the translator, learns a lesson about the power of words to transform and the capacity of love to transcend time, place, gender, and language.

CHARACTERS

- * ORAL TIMMINS, a free-lance translator
- * HELEN GUILD, a buyer, appraiser, and curator of theatre photography
- * PALLAS WORTE, a buyer, appraiser, and curator of photography
- * JEFFREY MITCHELL, Oral's friend
- * UTILITY 1 will play VOICE OVER INTERCOM, KARLA BAEDER, ROSA at the Goethe Institute, WOMAN WITH CHILD at the café, PIPER at Jeffrey's workplace—late fifties/early sixties, in physically good shape
- * UTILITY 2 will play GEORG BETHE, CUSTOMER at the Goethe Institute, WAITER at the café, SID at Jeffrey's workplace, MAN AT PHONE BOOTH—late fifties/early sixties, in physically good shape

NOTE: All the actors will have to speak some German.

TIME

No cell phones and email, and phone booths still exist

SETTING

Any American city; Berlin

NOTE: The furniture, etc., in each scene should be selected so that it can be re-used in the following scenes; there should be a minimum of moving props on and off in order to speed scene changes. There is also a large picture window in each scene, which will be used in each subsequent scene for different purposes and lit to indicate times of day and moods. However, the director and set designer are free discard any suggestions and do the settings in any way that fits budget and conception.

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SCENE 1

A smartly furnished office, solid, without ostentation. Behind the desk, a window. During the scene the color gradually changes as time passes until it is early evening. A second desk or table sits off to the side.

HELEN looks out the window. On the desk, sitting alone in the middle of the blotter, is a 1-inch thick manuscript in a three-ring binder, black and unlabeled.

A voice comes over the intercom.

VOICE: Ms. Guild? Ms. Guild?

HELEN: Yes?

VOICE: There's someone here to see you.

HELEN: Yes.

VOICE: He's from—

A whispered consultation.

VOICE: —from the translation agency.

HELEN: (*overlapping*)—from the translation agency—yes, I know. Tell him to wait a moment.

HELEN takes the binder. She holds it so that the upper-right hand corner is in her right palm and lower-left hand corner is in her left palm. Then she spins the binder, getting as many revolutions out of it as she can. Then she slams the binder down on the desk, squares it, then calls the receptionist.

HELEN: Send him in.

ORAL enters. HELEN indicates for him to sit down. ORAL sits, clutching a small leather portfolio. HELEN appraises him. ORAL fidgets under her gaze. Time passes.

HELEN: I need some German documents translated.

ORAL unzips his portfolio.

ORAL: Okay—I brought my résumé and samples—

HELEN: Actually, not documents—just one document.

ORAL takes out his résumé.

ORAL: Good—I can show you—

HELEN: What is your name?

ORAL: My name. Timmins. Oral Timmins.

HELEN: Oral Timmins?

ORAL: Oral Timmins.

HELEN: What a—

ORAL: Yes.

HELEN: —singular name for a translator.

ORAL: Yes.

HELEN: I've only heard of -

ORAL: —one man with that name—

HELEN: Yes.

ORAL: The “deeply sighing, always-dying, keeps on crying Oral Roberts.” My namesake.

HELEN: Now you have me fascinated.

ORAL: It's not—

HELEN: But it is—go on—

ORAL: My parents—big supporters, dollar- and Bible-wise. Hoping I'd follow Oral's path—

HELEN: So they named you—

ORAL: They had high hopes.

HELEN: But.

ORAL: (*shrugs*) But. They knew they'd pretty much lost the battle when around ten years old I was calling son Richard "Dental" and his father "Hygiene."

HELEN: Hygiene.

ORAL: You know age ten—thought it was a great joke—repeated it—to everyone.

HELEN: "Were" supporters?

ORAL: Still are. I'm sorry—are you—

HELEN: Not to worry, Oral Timmins. I actually hoped the Lord would keep him when he threatened to die if he couldn't raise money.

ORAL laughs.

ORAL: I know—headline: "GOD TO ORAL: DROP DEAD."

HELEN: And your parents—

ORAL: They are still Sunday-morning folks—though I'm not sure who they're watching now.

HELEN: Do you ever—well, how else to put it?—resent—

ORAL: My parents weren't vicious. Just hopeful.

HELEN: And you don't—

ORAL: You can't hate them for being hopeful.

HELEN: No, we can do that to ourselves well enough.

ORAL: Look, I can show you—

HELEN: And are you a sermonizer?

ORAL: Just a humble hack at heart. "Have tongue, will translate."

HELEN: But raised on the Bible, yes? Words as weapons.

ORAL: More like words as flesh.

HELEN: Flesh—

ORAL: Speaking and living—cognate. Sympathetic.

HELEN: My parents named me Helen because they wanted a goddess.

ORAL: All right.

HELEN: Daughter of Zeus and Leda, wife of Spartan Menelaus—

ORAL: Eloper with Paris to Troy—destroyer of cities—

HELEN: “She moves a goddess—”

ORAL: “—and she looks a queen.”

HELEN: I learned that one early on—used it on the playground to confuse the attack dogs.

ORAL: And the Helenas: All’s Well That Ends Well, St. Helena, mother of Constantine. And St. Helen’s fire—uh, blue flames on the ship’s masts: if one, bad weather; if two or more, it be fair sailin’, me hearties.

HELEN: Their tuition was well spent—

ORAL: They might [argue]—

HELEN: But, to the heart of the matter—your German.

ORAL: Fluent. Since this high.

HELEN: First language?

ORAL: Third-generation parents, so I got English with my oatmeal. It was the older people in town, at the Turn Verein—a kind of community center. Trouped there every day for German lessons—

HELEN: Show me.

ORAL: What?

HELEN: Show me a lesson.

ORAL: Really?

HELEN: Yes.

ORAL: You want me to do a German lesson?

HELEN: How else can I test the goods?

ORAL: All right.

HELEN: Stand up.

ORAL rises.

ORAL: Well, these crusty old Teutons worked us hard.

ORAL takes the posture of a stern teacher, speaks English in a German accent.

ORAL: "Now, class, the numbers. Very important—think of them as pennies, adding up, adding up.

ORAL uses his fingers.

ORAL: Repeat: eins, zwei, drei, vier, fuenf—" I loved saying "fuenf"! Fuenf! Do you want me to—

HELEN: To what?

ORAL: Go on—it gets boring in another three numbers—but I can—

HELEN: Part A done—we'll get to B in a moment—

ORAL sits.

ORAL: Cubic yards of irregular verbs. Getting all the glottals right—

ORAL makes the proper hacking sound in his throat.

ORAL: —“machen.”

HELEN: You hated it.

ORAL: Are you kidding—you could make disgusting noises and get praised!

HELEN: The ten-year old heaven.

ORAL: It just took with me.

HELEN: Oral gratification.

ORAL: Well, yes, in a manner of speaking—

HELEN falls silent. ORAL waits.

HELEN: Help me remember something, Oral Timmins.

ORAL: If I [can]—

HELEN: I memorized this once— How does it begin? (*flat pronunciation*) “Und diese menschlichere Liebe”—would that be right, “menschlichere”? [pronounces it as “mens-likker”]

ORAL: Mensch—the ssh sound, a little forceful, tongue behind the air. Mensch.

HELEN: Mensch.

ORAL: Menschlichere. Not “likker”—let the air escape. Soft, not hard. Menschlichere.

HELEN: Menschlichere.

ORAL laughs.

ORAL: Well, not native—yet. Okay, “Und diese menschlichere Liebe”—“And this more human love—”

HELEN: —“die unendlich rücksichtsvoll”—is that right?

ORAL: “Rücksichtsvoll”—don’t know. Continue.

HELEN: "Rücksichtsvoll und leise"—

ORAL: Ah!—"that will fulfill itself, infinitely"—"Infinitely considerate and gentle"—I know this.

HELEN: "Und gut und klar in Binden und Lösen sich—"

ORAL: "Sich vollziehen wird"—"and kind and clear in binding and releasing."—"Wird jener ähneln, die wir ringend und mühsam vorbereiten, der Liebe, die darin besteht, dass zwei Einsamkeiten einander schützen, grenzen und grüssen."

HELEN: Couldn't have said it better myself.

ORAL: "And this more human love—"

HELEN: Wait.

HELEN opens the drawer of her desk and opens a copy of Rilke.

HELEN: "And this more human love—"

HELEN indicates for him to continue.

ORAL: "And this more human love—that will fulfill itself, infinitely considerate and gentle, and kind and clear in binding and releasing—"

HELEN holds up a finger to stop him; she continues.

HELEN: "—will resemble that which we are preparing with struggle and toil, the love which consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other." Thunderous applause.

ORAL: When did you have to memorize Rilke?

HELEN: Didn't "have to." I wanted to be the young poet.

HELEN puts the book back in the drawer.

ORAL: So you memorized it—

HELEN: Many burned bridges ago.

HELEN walks away.

HELEN: Mr. Oral Timmins, on that desk sits an unusual document.

ORAL: All right.

HELEN: Unsolicited it came to me—though I know who wrote it. Would you bring it to me?

ORAL takes the binder to HELEN. She points to photographs on the “wall.”

HELEN: Some of my background. Please, look.

ORAL walks along the “wall” looking at the photos, listening while HELEN speaks. He finishes as she finishes.

HELEN: I deal in photography—buy, sell, and appraise. This past May I went to Germany to evaluate a private collection taken during the Weimar period. A buyer here wanted photos of American blacks who went to Germany to perform—especially some exquisite Josephine Baker images. He hired me to tell him their worth, agreed to pay all my expenses. So off I went. While there I met the person hired by the family to do their appraisal. We had much in common. I sent off the appraisal and decided to stay for a small vacation. This person made my stay delightful. After my return we wrote several letters, then lost contact—until—

HELEN holds up the binder.

HELEN: I can pick out words here and there—days of the week. Numbers. “Fuenf.” Places. My name. Her name.

ORAL: Work-related?

HELEN: No.

HELEN looks directly at ORAL, the binder clasped to her. ORAL returns her gaze.

ORAL: May I see it—

HELEN moves back to the desk, then to the window. ORAL follows as far as the desk.

HELEN: Weimar Germany—

ORAL: All right.

HELEN: Full of—the right word?—ambiguity.

ORAL: An unsettled time, I suppose.

HELEN: Many of the photographs I saw were chock-full of ambiguity—lines crossed in gender, dress, class. And soon the “facts” ground them out because their lines weren’t neat. As a translator, Mr. Timmins, don’t you always lie?

ORAL: That canard about the Italian for “translator” being the same as “traitor”?

HELEN: Did Rilke say what you said he said?

ORAL: It’s a facsimile.

HELEN: A lie.

ORAL: The best way to say in English what’s said in German.

HELEN: And how does that happen?

ORAL: A mix. A guess.

HELEN: Rummaging in the dark—

ORAL: Some words carry over directly but concepts—estimates.

HELEN: How do you estimate?

ORAL: One gets taught—

HELEN: No—not one. Not one. You. If you’re not using the facts—Mr. Timmins—if the reference books don’t tell you what you need—where does it all come from?

ORAL: One develops—I develop—a feel—

HELEN: A grope—

ORAL: A feel for what’s underneath.

HELEN: Rummaging in the dark.

ORAL: Yes, but not in the dark—in life, life in general—in my own life, in my own heart.
“Thoughts come not from the head but from the heart.”

HELEN puts down the binder, opens a desk drawer and takes out a Polaroid camera.

HELEN: Parry with a quote.

ORAL: Always quote to impress.

HELEN: It does not. Look at me.

HELEN takes a picture of ORAL, puts the camera on the desk but holds the picture.

HELEN: You trust your heart?

ORAL: Yes.

HELEN: And why should I?

ORAL: Actions speak louder—you haven't sent me home yet.

HELEN: That just means I don't distrust.

ORAL takes up his portfolio.

ORAL: I can show you my own “pictures,” if you want—

HELEN: Your words to action.

ORAL: Words to flesh.

HELEN points to the portfolio.

HELEN: How would you estimate it?

ORAL: Done as well as anyone's.

HELEN: As well as anyone's.

ORAL: As well as yours.

HELEN: Complimented or dismayed?

ORAL: Depends.

HELEN: On?

ORAL: Pardon me for saying this—"forward" as my folks would say—but it depends upon your own heart.

HELEN: Pass on that for the moment.

HELEN looks at the Polaroid, shows it to him from a distance.

HELEN: And this portfolio—full complement of human virtue?

ORAL: And vice.

HELEN: That is good to know.

ORAL: And in-between.

HELEN: The ambiguities.

ORAL: I have never let a fact outshine the ambiguous.

HELEN hands the Polaroid to ORAL.

HELEN: Is this a face you would trust? Is this face a good translation?

ORAL: *(with a gesture)* Fuenf!

HELEN: I think I have danced enough.

ORAL: All right.

HELEN spins the binder as before, then hands it to ORAL. ORAL hands her the photo, takes the binder but does not open it.

HELEN: I need to know what this says and have to trust you to tell me. At least, I have to not distrust you to tell me. We need to make a contract.

ORAL: Spell out what needs to be spelled out.

HELEN: Not an agency contract—

ORAL: No—not even a contract—a—covenant.

HELEN: Covenant. An “Oral Hygiene” word. Covenant, then. And your end?

ORAL: Simple—what you’ve been testing here: the best my head and heart can offer.

HELEN picks up Polaroid, looks at it and then at ORAL; ORAL looks straight back at her.

HELEN: Open it. Read the first paragraph.

ORAL: Now?

HELEN: “The world wants to be betrayed.” Always quote to impress. Yes, now.

By this time the window has darkened considerably. The room is also in semi-darkness. ORAL opens the binder to the first page and reads silently, tracing his index finger under the lines. He looks at HELEN, then back down to the page.

HELEN: Are you ready?

ORAL: Yes.

HELEN: Two blue flames, wasn’t it, for good weather?

HELEN holds up both hands and wiggles the fingers as if they were flames.

HELEN: And away.

Transition music: The Threepenny Opera.

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SCENE 2

A richly appointed room, though not ostentatious. The light through the window should be bright sunlight, warm and comforting. On the table are several archival boxes of photographs, neatly arranged and in sleeves, and a loupe.

From off stage voices approach. The conversation is animated, friendly. Entering the room are GEORG BETHE and KARLA BAEDER; after several beats, HELEN GUILD and PALLAS WORTE enter. Note: The German characters should speak their English with German accents, though these do not have to be heavy. PALLAS has the lightest accent of all.

GEORG: What a good meal!

KARLA: Georg, I can't believe you.

GEORG: And I love talking with the American!

KARLA: Georg! Don't change the subject.

GEORG: And the subject is—

KARLA: That you believe love is irrelevant.

GEORG: I didn't say "irrelevant," Karla—I said "troublesome." And I added, if you remember, "probably unnecessary."

KARLA: Now you're just being a provocateur!

GEORG: We're born alone, we're mostly alone while we coast along, we die alone. Where's the tragedy in that?

KARLA: So arid. So forlorn.

GEORG: You're my lawyer—you're not supposed to have a heart. If I find out you have a heart—I'm going to have to watch you!

GEORG walks to table, looks at photographs.

GEORG: Besides, it's much better to make money—though I'll be glad when this business is over. Imagine some American wanting to buy this—trash. And for so much lucre!

PALLAS and HELEN enter, HELEN paying close attention to PALLAS.

KARLA: Your parents required it in their will.

GEORG: The dead hand of the dead past.

KARLA: Don't be too sentimental.

GEORG: Ah, our better halves. I hope Frau Worte here hasn't chewed your ear off—don't you just love American slang! Chewed your ear off!

HELEN: Pallas has been just marvelous.

PALLAS: Yes I have! And her ear is quite intact, Georg. Her lovely ear is quite intact.

HELEN: (*halting German*) Alles ist einfach wunderbar.

GEORG: You have just spoken more German than most Americans speak in a lifetime.

HELEN: No excuse for not being better at it, except laziness.

KARLA: And that you are American.

PALLAS: Karla!

GEORG: Karla, you've turned nationalist.

KARLA: I meant in terms of language. Americans are so ignorant of other languages. (*to HELEN*) Accept my apology—I did not mean to mean that you were some “ugly American.”

PALLAS: She certainly is not.

GEORG: Pallas to the rescue again. And a lawyer with manners! Most certainly have to keep a close eye on you! Helen—what did you think of our dear lawyer's penchant for pathos over lunch, all that Rilke about love and solitude? What does the American say about love?

HELEN: (*jokingly*) Is there an American point of view?

PALLAS: Don't let him bully you.

GEORG: Rilke, Rilke, Rilke, Rilke—

KARLA: Grow up—

HELEN: Very true, Georg—Rilke is Rilke is Rilke is Rilke.

GEORG: So?

HELEN: I think what he says is very true. That's it.

GEORG: Which is?

KARLA: Don't bother her with all this. I should go.

GEORG: Wait, Karla. Helen?

HELEN: The American point of view?

PALLAS: One American point of view.

HELEN: In general—

GEORG: The debater's thrust—

HELEN: —love and solitude are two things Americans don't connect. It's much the opposite.

GEORG: But you like Rilke?

HELEN: I do.

GEORG: But you're American?

KARLA: Master of the [obvious]—

HELEN: Yes.

GEORG: So why? What makes you so different?

PALLAS: (to GEORG) Like a mongoose!

GEORG: But debonair!

KARLA: Now you have me curious.

PALLAS: So I guess you must answer.

HELEN: If you insist—because Rilke doesn't give in to the noise.

GEORG: Explain.

HELEN: In the United States, everything has to have a sound track. I was in a bar once where they even had televisions in the bathroom. If you have the noise, you don't have to think.

GEORG: And thinking and love have to do with each other—

HELEN: A very artful debater, Georg—first you pooh-pooh—

GEORG: Pooh-pooh? Was bedeutet das "pooh-pooh"? [What is this pooh-pooh?]

HELEN laughs.

HELEN: An elegant American phrase for "dismiss." First you dismiss Karla for saying that love is necessary, and now you seem to say that love should be spontaneous, not the product of thinking—which would imply that you think it's necessary.

GEORG: Help me out here!

KARLA: Why? (*to HELEN*) Continue making my point.

HELEN: Rilke's point—I think. Before you can love someone else—

GEORG: Does this "you" mean you, too?

HELEN smiles.

HELEN: Before you can love someone else—

GEORG: Another debater's point.

PALLAS: Let her finish.

GEORG: (to KARLA) The summing-up, eh?

HELEN: (to PALLAS) Thank you. Before you can love someone else, you have to so love yourself as to be completely alone with yourself—

PALLAS: Yes.

HELEN: —completely at ease with your solitude—safe in your loneliness. In that respect, Georg, you're right—we're born, live, and die alone.

PALLAS: But not all kinds of alone are the same.

HELEN: Right. Right. This is how it hits me: it's only out of that solitude that you can love someone else. And people who love each other need to protect each other's solitude. No sound tracks. No noise.

KARLA: Game, set, match.

GEORG: Pallas—a kindred soul here, perhaps.

PALLAS: Perhaps.

KARLA: Georg, I must go—I do have other clients.

GEORG: Other lunches, she means.

KARLA: Pallas, a pleasure working with you again. Helen. I know the way out.

GEORG: All the ins and outs. May you find love.

KARLA: May you pay my bill on time.

GEORG: I love you.

KARLA: Put the check in the mail to show it.

GEORG: Consider it done.

KARLA: Then I love you, too.

KARLA leaves.

GEORG: A lawyer with a heart—how rare, how rare. Pallas, I have a question to ask you.

GEORG goes to the boxes of photos on the table; to HELEN.

GEORG: Helen, please excuse me for a moment—a little more business—well, pleasure, for me at least. Unless, of course, your Mr. Wiley wants to buy these as well.

HELEN: Pallas has already persuaded me to spend more of Mr. Wiley's money than he had expected. (to PALLAS) You are sharp.

PALLAS: Always easier to play with other people's money.

GEORG: Pallas. Pallas. We also found these photos in the vault—a hand-signed note said they had been taken by Erfurth.

GEORG shows her the note, a protective sleeve.

GEORG: Pictures of Erwin Piscator, the Red Revue, Blue Blouses. What do you think?

While GEORG is talking, HELEN moves to the window, calm. PALLAS, trying to listen to GEORG, nonetheless lets her gaze go to HELEN.

GEORG: Look at these. Mahagonny. And that's Brecht. Brecht!

Picks up the loupe, leans down to look at the photo more closely.

GEORG: Look. Das ist sehr lecker. Lecker! [This is so delicious. Delicious.]

GEORG becomes absorbed in looking at the pictures. As he does, PALLAS moves to HELEN.

PALLAS: You seem pensive.

HELEN: I'm sorry.

PALLAS: Don't apologize. (indicating GEORG) His beloved Brecht! "The world is poor and men are bad / There is of course no more to add." From Threepenny. Die Dreigroschenoper.

HELEN: Quote to impress?

PALLAS: Only among strangers. Georg knows all of Threepenny.

HELEN: I've never even heard it.

PALLAS: No matter—knowing all of it is not a great accomplishment to my mind. Are you pensive?

HELEN: Just thinking about going back. I'm done here.

GEORG: Pallas—look at this!

PALLAS: In a moment. (*to HELEN*) Is your patron expecting you?

HELEN: Not for several more days. You moved things right along!

PALLAS: Then why not stay?

GEORG: Pallas! Look!

PALLAS: In a moment. Will you? Stay?

GEORG: (*to himself*) Truly remarkable! Like silken thighs. Like the soft underbreast.

At GEORG's statement, HELEN and PALLAS look at each other and then burst out laughing.

GEORG: What? What?

PALLAS: Your critical terminology—you're embarrassing our American.

HELEN: I don't scare that easily.

PALLAS: Good.

GEORG: You tell me, then.

GEORG calls them to the table.

GEORG: Look at this Blossfeldt. Look at the luminescence in his picture of the thistle—he makes something so common look extraordinary. Like you'd never seen it before. Something lifted out of the ordinary.

PALLAS: Perhaps Helen would like to see some of your other Blossfeldt.

GEORG: Would you?

PALLAS: Say yes.

HELEN: (*quizzically*) Yes.

GEORG: Good! I'll be right back!

GEORG hurries from the room.

HELEN: What was that about?

PALLAS: I just wanted a moment—to get your answer.

HELEN: About what?

PALLAS: About lingering. For a few days. You said yourself you don't need to be right back.

PALLAS takes HELEN's hand in hers.

PALLAS: It would give me great pleasure if you stayed.

HELEN pulls her hand away slowly.

HELEN: I think it's possible.

PALLAS: What are you doing this evening?

HELEN: I have to write up my report and fax it to Mr. Wiley.

PALLAS: Tomorrow morning, then?

HELEN: Do you really like this picture?

PALLAS: Do you?

HELEN: I can see what Georg liked.

PALLAS: Do you like it?

HELEN: It does shine. Just as Georg said.

PALLAS: It does shine—as Georg said.

HELEN: Do you like it?

PALLAS: This is what I like. I like how it seems to say, “Here and now.” Present at the present tense. Dasein.

HELEN: Dasein?

PALLAS: Being. Zuhanden sein.

HELEN: (*haltingly*) Zuhanden sein.

PALLAS: Being at hand.

HELEN: Coffee tomorrow morning?

PALLAS: That will do for a start.

HELEN: Where?

PALLAS: Near your hotel is a nice little Konditorei.

HELEN: I’ll meet you there. At 10.

GEORG enters with a large volume, puts it on the table and opens it.

GEORG: More and more and more and more.

HELEN: Georg—

GEORG: Yes?

HELEN gives PALLAS a smile as she speaks.

HELEN: Vielen Dank für die Gastfreundschaft.

PALLAS: Very good.

GEORG: Have you been getting tutored? Your German has improved immensely in the last five minutes.

HELEN: It must be the atmosphere.

GEORG: No need to thank me—just thank me by looking. There!

They look at the photo.

PALLAS: Like silken thighs.

HELEN: Like the soft underbreast.

GEORG: Couldn't have said it better myself.

Lights down as they continue looking through the book. Transition music: something from Marlene Dietrich.

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SCENE 3

The Goethe Institute—can be a simple morph from GEORG's house. ORAL sits at a table going through books, doing research, taking notes—quite busy. ROSA comes in, lugging books, and plunks them down on the table next to ORAL. ORAL does not even look up.

ORAL: Rosa, Rosa, my love—

ROSA: (*overlapping*) Not your love, Mr. Timmins.

ORAL: (*overlapping*)—my love—

ROSA: Jeffrey is your love.

ORAL: I was poetically speaking, of course—

ROSA: Not your type.

ORAL: But what would I do without your type? And, to be honest, you without me? And the Goethe Institute without the likes of us?

ROSA: The last two on your list would survive.

ORAL: You are harsh.

ROSA: You should see how I treat people I don't like.

ORAL: I believe you just gave me a left-handed compliment. Then a harsh love is better than none, and I accept.

ROSA rearranges, straightens the materials on the desk. ORAL points to a book.

ORAL: I need that.

ROSA hands it to him.

ROSA: You haven't been here in a while.

ORAL: I have not been many places in a while, Rosa. I seem to be in state of some hibernation.

ROSA: And no more details than that?

ORAL: You'll have to buy the memoir.

ROSA: That will never happen.

ORAL: Your buying?

ROSA: Your writing—you'd actually have to be organized.

ORAL: Touché, ouch, and all of that.

ROSA sits, starts looking through the materials.

ROSA: You were once more talkative.

ORAL: I was once more a lot of things, Rosa—I think—I can't always remember—some days I just feel old and—dodgy—yes—

ROSA: Dodgy—but not today, apparently—a very interesting collection of materials—“priapic,” one might say.

ORAL: Not only phallic—I’ve got Walter Lacquer and Peter Gay around here somewhere—and there’s some “gyno” stuff thrown—somewhere—about prostitutes.

ROSA picks up a book.

ROSA: Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin.

ORAL shuffles the books around as he speaks.

ORAL: And there is this other material about “kul-cha”—the Bauhaus, Dix, Kollwitz—intellectuals—Spengler, Heidegger, Jaspers—

ROSA rises to leave.

ROSA: Well, I will leave you with your “investigations”—

But she doesn’t leave.

ORAL: You’re dying to know, aren’t you?

ROSA: I will formally say no—

ORAL: As a discreet librarian should—

ROSA: But of course yes. Who wouldn’t be intrigued when a penniless translator—

ORAL: Wait—

ORAL rummages in his pockets, holds up two pennies.

ORAL: I have pennies, Rosa—plural—

ROSA: Ah—so when a tuppenny translator, then, looks at dirty pictures of naughty boys—

ORAL: And girls—

ROSA: At a library where he does not belong—

ORAL: Aided by the golden-hearted if gruff and superb—

ROSA: Should he be trusted—

ORAL: He should—because he has a job.

ROSA: Researching this stuff.

ORAL: Not exactly—but it's connected. I know that look, but it's true! My new boss connected it—I wouldn't have thought it up myself. Weimar and ambiguity seemed to niggle at the back of her mind, and so—

ROSA: Straight to arms of the Institute.

ORAL: And my Rosa—you being the only one that lets me use a library without a membership.

ORAL puts away his pennies.

ORAL: And two pennies does not mean I'm still not penniless.

ROSA: Any clues?

ORAL: To?

ROSA: Why?

ORAL: Well, my "job" is translating a document that my boss "she" got from another "she."

ROSA: Is your boss "she" a "she-inclined person"?

ORAL: "She," I think—

ROSA: The "boss she"—

ORAL: The "boss she" is "she unsure"—

ROSA: "She-shy"—so to speak—

ORAL: But, apparently, not completely "she-no"—

ROSA: Or "she-yes"—

ORAL: Aye, there's the rub that brought on the Weimar—

ROSA: And this "other she" wrote—

ORAL: I read part of it out loud to "boss she"—

ROSA: And?

ORAL: "Boss she" said "yes" to what could've been "no" right then and there—because the "other she's" words—

ROSA: Were—

ORAL: Enough to make me glad I have this job.

ROSA: "Boss she" wants to know—

ORAL: Forbidden fruit—

ROSA points to the books.

ROSA: And that's why—

ORAL: I'm looking through the historical garden.

ROSA rises, looking preoccupied, walks away from the table.

ORAL: And, Rosa, it's amazing what was there. Berlin was wide-open—free—

ORAL rummages among his notes, pulls out a notecard.

ORAL: I got this from Louise Brooks: "Sex was the business of the town. At the Eden Hotel, where I lived, the cafe bar was lined with the higher-priced trollops. The economy girls walked the street outside. On the corner stood the girls in boots, advertising flagellation...."

ORAL rummages again, comes up with another notecard.

ORAL: Apparently there was a whole color scheme with boots and shoes that let clients know the inclinations of the wearer—

ORAL tosses the card, continues reading.

ORAL: "The nightclub Eldorado displayed an enticing line of homosexuals dressed as women. At the Maly, there was a choice of feminine or collar-and-tie lesbians. Collective lust roared unashamed at the theater. In the revue Chocolate Kiddies, when Josephine Baker appeared naked except for a girdle of bananas, it was precisely as Lulu's stage entrance was described by Wedekind: 'They rage there as in a menagerie when the meat appears at the cage.'"

ORAL puts the card away.

ORAL: I mean, every orifice had its price listed on the orifice menu. Brutal, I guess, but—free—unfurled—

ORAL sees the preoccupied ROSA.

ORAL: Was it the word "orifice"?

ROSA: I'm thinking of them both—

ORAL: From "she" to shining "she"—so to speak—

ROSA: Stop it—just stop it—

ORAL: All right.

ROSA: Stop thinking it was fun.

ROSA paces.

ROSA: Good—you shut up.

ORAL: What are you thinking about?

ROSA: I'm thinking of prices.

ORAL: For? Or is it "of"?

ROSA: You want some "oral" history? My mother—my dear dear mutter—was a kontroll girl in Berlin.

This takes ORAL back for a moment. Then he rummages, picks out a book, flips to a chapter, holds it up.

ORAL: The clean prostitutes.

ROSA: Let me see that.

ROSA scans the chapter while she speaks.

ROSA: Yes—yes—with their kontroll books certifying their “clean venereal health.”

Light up on UTILITY 1 as CUSTOMER, looking like a figure from a painting by George Grosz or Otto Dix. ROSA moves slowly toward him.

ORAL: She told you this?

ROSA: She showed me the book.

ORAL: She kept it?

ROSA: She wasn't ashamed. She ate well. She had me.

As ROSA approaches the CUSTOMER, she takes a small book out of her pocket and shows it to him. He thumbs it, checks something, hands it back. She puts it away.

ORAL: And your father—

ROSA: Who knew? Who cared? As far as I was concerned, I only had my mother's blood in me. That was certified, at least.

As ROSA speaks, she and the CUSTOMER dance The Dance of Solicitation. The movements should be simply and sharply choreographed, appropriate to the actors' abilities, and get increasingly rougher as the dance goes on.

ROSA: At least she didn't do the cheap crawl of the Alexanderplatz, where every dirty towel bore a face-print like Veronica's veil of torture and spunk. Or the Gravelstone, where crept the disfigured ones—acid-scarred, crippled, limbless—but they had their paying scavengers, too, as do all carcasses. Or the Münzis, pregnant but open—triple rates, and you could have one according to your desired month of gestation—such selection—the “orifice menu”—at least she was too old for a telephone-girl—young nymphs dressed

up as adult celebrities—have a snall-titted Dolly Haas or the hairless cunt of Lya de Putti—

A moment of danger for ROSA with her CUSTOMER. ROSA breathes heavily.

An exchange of looks, of money, of release. CUSTOMER exits, and everything is back to the present tense.

ROSA: It's a dark business, this crossing borders. It's not all—not always—[liberating]—

ORAL: I supposed I shouldn't be so—fizzy—about it, eh?

ROSA gives him what, for ROSA, would be a gentle look.

ROSA: Why do you think I keep bringing you the books?

ORAL: You all right?

ROSA: Do you need anything else?

ORAL: I think I have enough to chew on.

ROSA: You don't, but you will.

ORAL: Did your mother die happy?

ROSA: Who said she's dead?

ORAL: She would have to be—

ROSA: She's every year of what you're counting.

ORAL: Something improved her mortality.

ROSA: Yeah—not dying!

ORAL: I suppose there's a lesson in that.

ROSA: There's a lesson in everything. Be careful.

ROSA exits. ORAL studies. Transition.

* * * * *

SCENE 4

A small Kafé in Berlin, with some charm to it. PALLAS is sitting at a table, cup of coffee in front of her. Next to the cup is a wrapped gift. A light coat is draped on her chair. Music is playing softly in the background. As PALLAS sips her coffee, she picks up the gift and holds it. HELEN enters in a whirl.

HELEN: Sorry, sorry, sorry.

PALLAS: You aren't that late.

HELEN: I hate being any kind of late.

PALLAS: Don't fret—don't fret. Take off your coat, sit down, relax. I command you to relax.

HELEN: Coat is off. I am seated. I have obeyed. I am obeying.

PALLAS: *(lengthening the "e")* Breathe. Deeply.

HELEN: Notice also that I have closed my eyes.

PALLAS: Quietly.

HELEN: I am obeying.

PALLAS: Good. Breathe. You cannot be late because time only begins when you get here. Our time begins now. Good. You may now rise to higher consciousness.

HELEN: And coffee, I hope.

PALLAS: Aren't they the same thing? A little more patience. In the meantime: small talk. Begin.

HELEN: I was talking with Karla—again.

PALLAS: More negotiations?

HELEN: Karla thinks that my Mr. Wiley is not really serious about wanting to dicker down the price—and I agree. I'm pretty sure Mr. Wiley is just doing it because he thinks it proves the—manhood of the American businessman.

PALLAS: At least his dickering—is that really an English word?—

HELEN: Dicker, dicker, dicker, dicker—

PALLAS: Well, at least his dickering kept you here a few extra days. Without guilt, I might add.

HELEN: Don't add anything.

A WAITER brings HELEN a cup of coffee.

HELEN: Oh, but you can add this, though. Danke. Ah, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I am really beginning to like—this place.

HELEN raises her glass.

HELEN: We can thank my American for adding guiltless time—and extra money, to boot.

PALLAS: I took the liberty—if you don't mind—of having this ready for you the moment you swept in. It has that flavor you like.

HELEN: Vielen, vielen Dank. [Many, many thanks.] Chilly outside.

PALLAS: Unusual weather.

HELEN: But not unpleasant. Reminds me of home.

HELEN indicates the gift.

PALLAS: Yes?

HELEN: Is that for me?

PALLAS: This gaudily wrapped bauble, thing of no importance, sitting by my right hand. That?

HELEN: Yes, that that!

PALLAS: Well, what does it look like?

HELEN: A gaudily wrapped—gift.

PALLAS: No flies on you—is that the phrase?

HELEN: And is that that for me?

PALLAS: So American—no subtlety!

HELEN: Straightforward.

PALLAS: Impatient.

HELEN: Omnivorous.

PALLAS: A thing of appetite.

HELEN: Of hearty appetite.

PALLAS: That's yet to be proved.

HELEN: That's yet to be provoked.

PALLAS: This might be the agent provocateur we're looking for.

HELEN: So I may open it?

PALLAS: Not yet.

HELEN: You dangle—then withdraw. Pout, pout.

PALLAS: It's our European decadence—

HELEN: Really?

PALLAS: —gaudy, full of mystery—luring in the innocent American.

HELEN: In order to?

PALLAS: In order to educate, of course! Raise to a higher power.

HELEN: I thought decadence was a loss of power.

PALLAS: How little you know.

HELEN: How much you don't know how much I know.

PALLAS: It seems, then, more than enough mysteries to go around.

HELEN: And around.

PALLAS: Time to savor.

HELEN: I'll savor this coffee.

PALLAS: Savor this time.

HELEN: Consider me commanded.

PALLAS: You've already said that. So, how did your Mr. Wiley do on his negotiations?

HELEN: Georg held firm. Why not? Mr. Wiley knows what he wants, Georg knows what Mr. Wiley wants and how much he wants it—Without the bluff, you can't win the hand.

PALLAS uses a mock American gangster voice, laced with her German accent.

PALLAS: Ain't it da truth?

HELEN: No, no! More flat: "Ain't it da truth?"

PALLAS: (*mangling it*) Ain't it da truth?

HELEN: Flatter. Here—

HELEN takes PALLAS's jaw into her hand to manipulate it.

HELEN: Move your mouth this way. Say it with me: "Ain't it da truth?"

As they say this, HELEN moves PALLAS' jaw around so that the words come out garbled. PALLAS puts her hand on HELEN's as HELEN moves her jaw around. They laugh. There is a moment when HELEN becomes aware of their physical connection and slowly, but decidedly, moves her hand back to her coffee cup.

PALLAS: That felt nice.

HELEN: Yes. Even as we speak, the phone lines hum with Wiley dollars turning into Bethe deutschmarks. Transaction and translation.

PALLAS: Is that life?

HELEN: Of course not. Economics is not life.

PALLAS: That's good to hear.

HELEN: I've savored five sips of my coffee. May I open it now?

PALLAS: Such impatience! A bit more savor.

PALLAS calls the WAITER over to fill her cup, which he does.

PALLAS: What will you do now?

HELEN: This now?

PALLAS: Later now. After now.

HELEN: I don't know. Some upcoming auctions a few of my clients want me to scope out, but they're not immediate. Curatorial work with a university—probably a summer project. You know, at the moment, I don't have a single, goddamned "should" on my calendar!

PALLAS: You sound—startled.

HELEN: I am!

PALLAS: Awakened.

HELEN: Awakened? You know, if I had left when I was supposed to, I would be back in New York filling myself up with "busy-ness," making believe I was being productive. And yet—

PALLAS: And yet, you're here with me.

HELEN: Here. And here with you. Decadencing my powers—my new word. And things seem to be taking care of themselves. Now may I open it?

PALLAS laughs and pushes the gift towards her.

PALLAS: Christmas has arrived.

HELEN: Oh, Tannenbaum!

At this moment they hear a WOMAN's voice yelling at a young child. It is just audible under the dialogue.

WOMAN: Du bist sehr unerzogen. [You are being very bad.]

HELEN: What is that?

WOMAN: Setz dich! Setz dich! [Sit down! Sit down!]

PALLAS: Someone yelling—at a child, it sounds like.

HELEN: She must be screaming—we can hear her in here. Something's not right—

HELEN gets up and goes to the café door.

PALLAS: Helen, don't, sit—it's not your business.

HELEN opens the door; the WOMAN's voice become very clear. PALLAS joins HELEN. The following lines can overlap as needed.

WOMAN: Du kriegst keinen Luftballon, bis du aufhörst zu jammern. [You will not get the balloon until you stop crying.]

HELEN: What is she saying?

PALLAS: He can't have the balloon until he stops crying.

WOMAN: Und wenn du nicht aufhörst, gebe ich dir wirklich 'nen Grund zum Jammern! [And if you don't stop crying, I will give you something to cry about.]

HELEN: He really wants that balloon.

WOMAN: Ich schäme mich für dich. Nun kriegst du keinen Luftballon. [I am ashamed of you. And now you won't get the balloon.]

PALLAS: She's telling him he's being very bad and that she's ashamed of him. He won't get the balloon.

WOMAN: Du bist aber ein zböser Junge! [You are being a naughty boy.]

HELEN: Look at him—that's all he wants. Why is she so mad? I can't stand this!

PALLAS: Helen—don't—it's not your business.

HELEN: What do you mean—

PALLAS: Don't interfere.

HELEN: She looks like she's going to hit him!

PALLAS: Come back.

HELEN: Oh, look—look—she let go it—she let the balloon go! She let it go.

WOMAN: Siehe dir an, was du gemacht hast! [Now look what you went and did!]

PALLAS: Now look what you did.

WOMAN: Warte bis wir nach Hause kommen! [Wait till I get you home!]

PALLAS: Wait till I get you home.

There is a silence: the WOMAN has gone.

HELEN: What he did?

HELEN walks back into the café; PALLAS follows. They sit.

PALLAS: Are you all right?

HELEN: She should have given him the balloon.

PALLAS: Yes.

HELEN: The child always, always, always deserves to get the balloon.

PALLAS: We can only speak out of our own experiences.

Very slowly PALLAS pushes the gift across the table to HELEN.

PALLAS: Now.

HELEN takes it and opens it. As she does, she smiles.

PALLAS: German on one side, English on the other. It's your balloon.

Without looking at PALLAS, HELEN holds out her hand. PALLAS takes it.

HELEN: Ain't it da truth?

Transition music: German cabaret music segues into rock.

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SCENE 5

ORAL's apartment. The window is dark except for a soft glow, as if from street lights.

ORAL: Home again, home again, jiggedy-jig. Mr. Oral's apartment looks like the sty of a pig.

ORAL leafs through the binder.

ORAL: I'll be damned. Damn! "Was folgt schreibe ich sowohl als Erläuterung wie auch Erklärung." I like that internal rhyme: Erläuterung, Erklärung. "I write this as both an explanation and declaration."

ORAL closes the binder, thinks.

ORAL: "Rule #1: Who says something is as important as what they say. In fact, the two cannot be separated." Who is this Ms.? Frau? Fräulein? Sister? This Pallas Worte? Appraiser of photographs? Yes. Charming host to an American visitor? Yes. Poet? Inclined to "yes" on that. Lover? Hmmm. Ms. Helen Guild's future? Hmmm—what would Rosa say?

ORAL goes back to reading. Appearing next to ORAL is PALLAS.

PALLAS: "As explanation, it will fall short of what my heart wants you to taste."

ORAL: And what, Pallas Worte, do you want Helen to taste?

PALLAS: "I can only hope your heart gives body to the silence that falls between one word and the next and the next after that."

ORAL: Okay, okay, not bad, not bad.

PALLAS: "As declaration, it is straightforward, arrow-like"—

ORAL: Interesting construction there, "aufrichtig wie der Pfeil"—

PALLAS: "I let go the bow string to erase the distance."

ORAL closes the binder, nods in appreciation. PALLAS remains. The phone rings. Lights come up on JEFFREY a small table with a telephone on it. The tone is light-hearted and strained.

ORAL: Oral Timmins.

JEFFREY: Hello, my cunning linguist.

ORAL: Jeffrey! Jeffrey! Jeffrey! Oh, it is good to hear your voice.

JEFFREY: Nice to hear that it's nice to be heard.

ORAL: Everything okay?

JEFFREY: Just fine.

ORAL: What's that I hear, then?

JEFFREY: It's just so unusual to find you home. And in good spirits. The stars must be in their proper houses.

ORAL: I know, I know—

JEFFREY: Busy, yes.

ORAL: Well, I have a new job—and as a writer I think you'll appreciate the "art" of this one.

JEFFREY: Do I get the story through this tinny earphone or a private reading?

ORAL: Private, of course—but not tonight.

JEFFREY: Oh.

ORAL: Got to translate a hunk of this for tomorrow.

JEFFREY: A hunk? Who are you working for?

ORAL: That's for you and you alone. I meant pages.

JEFFREY: I know what you meant. It's just that I'd like you to send a hunk my way once in a while.

ORAL: You're right, we deserve a well-deserved break because we're so deserving. But not tonight. Breakfast tomorrow? I'll fill you in then.

JEFFREY: In public?

ORAL: Jeffrey—

JEFFREY: Just trying to see if the rise can still rise. Yes, breakfast tomorrow. An hour at a formica table with you is better than nothing. Actually, I'd prefer it on the table.

ORAL: Quite the condiment, wouldn't it?

JEFFREY: It's always good to use condom-ments.

ORAL: I'm laughing on the inside. Alishia's?

JEFFREY: I'll grab the table by the window.

ORAL: Great. And Jeffrey?

JEFFREY: Yes?

ORAL: I miss you as well.

JEFFREY: I was beginning to wonder.

ORAL: Wonder no more.

JEFFREY: Took you long enough to read between the lines. Some translator you are. Bye.

JEFFREY hangs up.

ORAL: Bye.

ORAL hangs up. Light down on JEFFREY. ORAL looks at the phone for a moment, lost in thought. He rests his hand on it, pauses, then picks it up and starts to dial a number.

ORAL: (each letter matching a number) J-E-F-F-R-E-Y.

PALLAS: Tomorrow.

ORAL presses the hang-up button and slowly lowers the handset to the cradle. He takes the binder and opens it up. He flips a few pages, obviously looking for his place; he then leans back in his chair and begins reading, exclaiming occasionally about the writing.

PALLAS: I write this as both an explanation and declaration.

ORAL turns to PALLAS.

ORAL: What?

PALLAS: As an explanation, it will fall short of what my heart wants you to taste. I can only hope your heart gives body to the silence that falls between one word and the next and the next after that. As declaration, it is straightforward, arrow-like—I let go the bow string to erase the distance.

ORAL: I have a question for you.

PALLAS: Ask.

ORAL: Well, okay, let me just plunge in, then. You use “eine Bedeutung” when you say “gives body to the silence.” Did you really mean die Bedeutung or did you want to use die Verkörperung? I mean, a world of difference, isn’t there, between Bedeutung, “a meaning,” and Verkörperung, “the incarnation, the embodiment”? I would have used die Verkörperung—seems to fit better. “Meaning” is kind of anemic; “incarnation”—almost sacred, doesn’t it? A kind of thrill. You can answer anytime you want.

PALLAS: Rule #3

ORAL: Rule #3.

PALLAS: There are no synonyms.

ORAL: Right, right! I mean, you wrote in German to force her hand, correct? So it's important that I get it as right as I can if you want her to get your intentions. So what should it be?

PALLAS: Use the second.

ORAL makes a note in the binder.

ORAL: I have to admit that this is one of the better translating jobs I've had. You write—I mean—lines just—thrill me—like here.

PALLAS does not even look at the binder.

PALLAS: "This is a journal, beginning with the day you left, of the time I spent mourning, missing, blaming, cursing you—especially cursing, because you didn't let yourself take what I knew you wanted: the harbor of my arms, my breath, my hands. I am glad the universe offered you to me, but the gladness bitters me because it measures what I cannot have. You will now know what I know."

ORAL: Luscious, really.

PALLAS: All a head game with you, isn't it? A puzzle.

ORAL: No—

PALLAS: It's in your voice: "Luscious, really." Grad student comment, self-congratulation. "Die Bedeutung" or "die Verkörperung?" You're showing off—

ORAL: Come on—

PALLAS: You don't know what you're digging into.

ORAL: Wait—

PALLAS: That is someone's life. Two lives. Risiko.

ORAL: What?

PALLAS: Risiko.

PALLAS gestures for him to translate.

ORAL: Risk.

PALLAS: Verlust.

ORAL: Loss.

PALLAS: Schande.

ORAL: Shame.

PALLAS: All possible.

ORAL: And, also possible—liebe.

ORAL gestures for PALLAS to answer.

PALLAS: Love.

ORAL: Freundschaft.

PALLAS: Friendship.

ORAL: Verständnis.

PALLAS: Understanding. No flies on you, it appears. Rule #2.

ORAL: Yes.

PALLAS & ORAL: “Who you are is as important as what the words say.”

ORAL: “No one can translate who doesn’t know his or her own voice.”

PALLAS: What, mein guter Bekannte, is your voice? What can it say about this covenant?

ORAL: This might be easier for some people, I suppose, if it were an American businessman being pursued by a German woman declaring her love. It would fit all the proper commercial—even ideological—even mythological—story lines.

PALLAS: No danger.

ORAL: Everything ready-made. Look, you may have meant to pierce her heart with this—what’s that phrase you used: “tipped with air and not steel, aimed not to kill but to pierce”—but believe me, with the opening paragraph, two hearts in that room flew out the window. What does gender have to do with what you wrote, what you’re feeling? Your words are a plate anyone can eat from.

PALLAS: How did she take them?

ORAL: When I make a spot translation for someone, I’m so focused on the words I don’t really notice the person.

PALLAS: But she?

ORAL: After I translated the first lines to myself, I couldn’t help it—I had to watch what they would do.

PALLAS: Setting?

ORAL: Four o’clock-ish on a late autumn afternoon, greyish-blue light filling the room.

PALLAS: That light—she said it made her feel outside herself—

ORAL: Had to tilt the page toward the window to get enough light. And the words just fell out so easily—sworn I’d written them. Or at least had thought them somewhere deep in the bone.

PALLAS: But she?

ORAL: In profile to me, both of us facing the window. The words, slowly—and I watched. She put her hand flat against the window and spread her fingers. Then raised it until only the fingertips touched the glass. I finished. A moment of profile. Then she turned on the light—bam!—and said she wanted to see more of it tomorrow. That was all. Very snappy, businesspersonlike.

PALLAS takes ORAL’s hand and places her fingertips against his. His hand automatically follows hers.

PALLAS: Like this?

ORAL: Yes.

PALLAS drops ORAL’s hand.

PALLAS: We agreed to meet at a small restaurant for the preliminary discussions about the collection. I got there early. When she came in, she was blowing on her hands to warm them up. She apologized, saying she had forgotten to bring gloves because she hadn't known she would need them. I told her I had an extra pair in my purse and held up my hand to measure hers.

PALLAS holds up her hand.

PALLAS: She hesitated at first, then put her hand against mine.

ORAL puts his hand against hers.

PALLAS: And for some reason we both thought of the children's hand game about the spider—

They both cup their hands until only the fingertips are touching.

PALLAS: And laughed and laughed. A good beginning.

ORAL: So many questions—

PALLAS: You can't—at least not of me.

ORAL: You're leaving.

PALLAS: I am gone.

She exits.

ORAL: Am I the philosopher or the butterfly? I could love that woman if I could love a woman. Why couldn't I love her?

ORAL puts his two hands together, then cups them so that only the fingertips touch.

ORAL: Spiders. Why not, indeed?

ORAL picks up the phone but hesitates a moment too long and does not dial. He tosses it instead, makes a catch, then puts it back.

ORAL: Your earful tomorrow, Jeffrey.

ORAL takes up the binder.

ORAL: Come on, Pallas—back to the covenant.

Transition.

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SCENE 6

Alishia's. Diner sounds and conversations. ORAL has his hands together like the spiders.

ORAL: And this—this I saw in my waking dream.

JEFFREY: Uh-huh.

ORAL: C'mon, like a spider doing push-ups on a mirror.

JEFFREY: A child's game.

ORAL: I don't know if it's true, that they actually did that. I mean, it was just a dream—maybe—

JEFFREY: Uh-huh.

ORAL: Uh-huh what?

JEFFREY: Been sitting here now for, oh, almost twenty minutes watching your face, and I would swear you'd had some kind of religious experience. You actually look excited.

ORAL: Is that, like, an accusation?

JEFFREY: No—it is, like, jealousy. See the green eyes?

ORAL: Like hot emeralds! About—?

JEFFREY: That would take us through lunch and dinner.

ORAL: We've gone through lunch and dinner before.

JEFFREY: I don't have lunch and dinner. Just tell me some more about these hand-crossed lovers.

ORAL: Jeffrey—

JEFFREY: It's all right.

ORAL: Sure?

JEFFREY: Who can resist?

ORAL: Maybe I shouldn't really be revealing any of this to you.

JEFFREY: You don't reveal things to me—you share them. That's the nature of our nature. "Reveal" implies a surprise, something nasty, like "I've been seeing someone else much hairier than you—and I like it." "Reveal" is what someone ugly does when they take off their clothes.

ORAL: I'll agree with you there.

JEFFREY: "Share," on the other hand—respiratory, linked breaths. You're a linguist—you should know these things. Didn't they teach you all this in Words for Nerds?

ORAL: I made a promise to Ms. Guild, that's all—act with some discretion. You are familiar with discretion?

JEFFREY: Doesn't that require moral fiber? Your moral fiber: polyester—in flame the moment something hot touches it. Now, tell me or not.

ORAL: Well, let me share it with you.

JEFFREY: Up it goes!

ORAL: Ah, but who basks in the heat?

JEFFREY: Flushed, I'm sure. Now, on to the sororal story of Ms. Guilt.

ORAL: Guild! You have guilt, I have Guild.

JEFFREY: I do not have guilt—You have guilt, I have a refined moral nature.

ORAL: I am so lucky to be in the presence.

They both pause. They both relax.

JEFFREY: Proceed: the story.

ORAL: I could only put together a little of the event. That this woman, Pallas, made it known how much she wanted Ms. Guild. That Ms. Guild is quite ambivalent but not turned off. That they seemed to have had a wonderful time.

JEFFREY: That's all?

ORAL: It's a start.

JEFFREY: I could have told you all that without reading the thing.

ORAL: How?

JEFFREY: Why else would our Ms. Guild want it translated except to know the bottom? Could have chucked the thing—gone!—but she aches to know.

ORAL: The first of many yieldings?

JEFFREY: Oral, don't you remember—I distinctly remember a very reluctant “opening up” when I made my first overture to you.

ORAL: I was in the limbo stage—

JEFFREY: But what helped you finally accept the witty man standing in front of you? The excitement of giving in to the desire? My Argyle socks?

ORAL: You've never had Argyle socks!

JEFFREY: That means you looked me over from top to toe. “I like this man because he doesn't wear Argyle socks.” Maybe all of that. But there was something else.

ORAL: What?

JEFFREY: What made you stay up until four a.m. in the bird-singing morning to work on this stuff?

ORAL: It's a job.

JEFFREY: A job. I've seen you finishing your “jobs” on the subway ten minutes before you arrive. You've never been quite this diligent.

ORAL: It's very well written. You can appreciate that.

JEFFREY: Well, if you won't give me the straight answer, I'll go straight to it—

JEFFREY stands behind ORAL, leans over to him, and punches a finger in his left pectoral, over his heart.

JEFFREY: That.

ORAL: What?

JEFFREY: That—

Jabs him in the left pectoral again.

ORAL: My logo?

Jabs.

JEFFREY: Cold.

ORAL: My pencil protector.

Jabs.

JEFFREY: Colder.

ORAL: Adam's rib.

Jabs.

JEFFREY: Luke, as in warm.

ORAL: The seat of all passions.

JEFFREY: Ah! The night you had dinner with me, and we went to the movies and held hands as timidly as any freshman jock and princess?

JEFFREY feints another jab at ORAL but instead place his hand over ORAL's heart.

JEFFREY: That was where you sat. I know you well enough to know that whatever demons haunt you, your heart eventually tells you enough truth to keep you honest. Your problem now—

ORAL: My problem?

JEFFREY: What makes you and mars you, my sweet prince, is that of late you seem deaf to your heart. Which is why I feel like I'm watching my best friend stand on a ship as it disappears over the horizon. It's not jealousy, really—you've become cautious. With everything. With me especially. And when I see a glister of it as you tell me this story—

ORAL looks hang-dog, apologetic.

JEFFREY: That's not what I want.

JEFFREY reaches for the binder and takes out the manila folder with typed pages in it. Ruffles through the pages.

JEFFREY: Where's that part you read to me? Here: "Today you were late for our morning coffee. You rushed in flushed and emphatic, breathing out apologies. But behind your 'I'm sorry' your face cleaved the light with your happiness at being there." Can you remember the last time your face "cleaved the light" in just that way?

ORAL takes the folder from JEFFREY's hand and puts it back in the binder.

JEFFREY: Not over the guilt coals—really, I'm not. But I'd be lying—taking us at a discount, really—if I didn't tell you how angry I feel inside. I'm just telling you my heart.

ORAL: Just translating, huh?

JEFFREY: Toughest language to work with.

ORAL: I've got to go—

JEFFREY: Yes, right—at that point. But I want you to remember something.

JEFFREY puts his hands together as the spiders.

JEFFREY: Remember skiing in Vermont? Remember how you wiped out so badly you lost your gloves in some glove-sucking mound of snow? And I sandwiched your hands between mine to warm them up, and gave you my gloves to wear back to the lodge? During that late afternoon light I like so much?

JEFFREY stands, takes out money.

JEFFREY: There are no synonyms.

ORAL: Wait.

ORAL holds up his hand, palm facing JEFFREY. JEFFREY hesitates, and then hands the money to ORAL and exits. Transition music.

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SCENE 7

HELEN GUILD's office. HELEN is looking over ORAL's typescript. The binder sits conspicuously on the desk. ORAL waits.

HELEN: (*absently*) A journal, yes—the dates, other things—

ORAL: I need to check some alternate word choices, but I think it's fairly faithful to the original—

HELEN: How did you come to do this? Translating?

ORAL: Excuse me?

HELEN: How did you arrive at doing the work you do?

ORAL: Do you mean because of my name?

HELEN: Why freelance with an agency for—whatever it is they pay you? Why not one of those people behind the president as he travels around the world, whispering diplomacies into his ear? A translator at the U.N.? Working overseas?

ORAL: I don't know—I like this work—it gives me a certain kind of freedom.

HELEN: Limited.

ORAL: Limited?

HELEN: Your work—good, done quickly and well—and you'll make enough for next month's rent. You haven't asked me to explain the work I do. Appraiser of photography—not a

collector or producer, just an—accountant. Not what I would call the most essential of professions.

ORAL: I'm sure it has its merits—

HELEN: The diplomat—appraising photographs has no use whatsoever. People frame what I tell them to buy, trade them like stocks, sometimes even admire them—but all in a series of consciously small concentric orbits. It wasn't something I planned. Actually, I wanted to be on the stage—my picture—(*mimics Brando*) "Coulda been a thespian." But that one high school drama teacher—

ORAL: And you believed him.

HELEN: Doesn't matter. So what else was I fit for?

ORAL: Things are fragile.

HELEN: Fit for dealing in second-hands. You didn't answer my question. Why not the foreign service, etcetera, etcetera?

ORAL: I don't know [exactly]—

HELEN: How much freedom really, Mr. Oral Timmins? Always hustling for work, never producing something of your own—

ORAL: I'm quite—happy with [my life]—

HELEN: —relegated to translating—things—like this—

ORAL: I haven't had as much enjoyment with language in a long time as I have had with a "thing" like this.

HELEN: And what is this "thing," Mr. Oral Timmins?

ORAL: I'm not sure I under[stand]—it's—

HELEN: How can it be trusted? I often have to make judgments about authenticity—money, money, money rides on the outcome. And with dispatch, I bring my best learning to bear, and people nod, say "um-hum," and pay. But so often—nothing more than a good guess because nothing signs the air "Fake" or "Real." I dread that day when I say "Real" and someone—rubbing his hands like a fly and smirking—steps up and says, "Sorry, Fake,

and here's the smoking gun." And then shoots me with it. So this "thing"—where's the gun, what's to trust?

ORAL: The "gun" is in the words.

HELEN: Not an exact art, you said. What if you—

ORAL: Ms. Guild, either you trust what the messenger brings or you don't. There's not much in-between. It's also good not to kill the messenger.

HELEN: Tell me again what you think of the writing.

ORAL: The writing is the "gun."

HELEN: You already said that—surface. Shoot me, I guess—put it through my brain—go on—

ORAL: I read it out loud—to myself—trying to forget a woman wrote it, as if it were some lost text, a scrap of a fragment of some buried scroll from a ghost with no fingerprints, okay? And—no gender—simply heart to heart, to any heart, without a tilt to the X or Y chromosome. The gun? Why I trust? It spoke to me about me. It—gave me—pause—

HELEN: You trust that?

ORAL: I don't have a choice.

HELEN: It's a woman—

ORAL: I know.

HELEN: Don't you wonder—

ORAL: Wonder what?

HELEN: Ball in my court?

ORAL: Yes.

HELEN straightens the typescript.

HELEN: By the end of the week?

ORAL: By the end of the week.

HELEN gets up and moves toward the door, as if to let him out.

HELEN: On Friday, then.

ORAL doesn't move immediately to the door.

HELEN: What?

ORAL: Do you remember our covenant?

HELEN: I do. You said—

ORAL: I said that I would promise you the best my head and heart could offer.

HELEN: So—

ORAL: I had—

HELEN: Go on.

ORAL: I had a dream about her last night.

HELEN: A dream.

ORAL: Actually, more like a visitation, I think. I worked late, fell asleep at my desk.

HELEN: And?

ORAL: She spoke English in the dream—

HELEN: What did she look like?

ORAL: Funny—I don't remember her face, but her voice—

HELEN: Her voice—

ORAL: Saturated. Like a white—like a white porcelain bowl filled with these scarlet raspberries. I remember feeling that her voice wouldn't hurt me. And the hands.

ORAL walks to the window.

ORAL: When you stood here yesterday, when I was reading, you did this.

ORAL demonstrates the “spider.”

ORAL: Now, tucked that away under the stairs because it came back in the dream—only she told me it happened because you didn’t have any gloves and your hands were cold. She said you’d put your hands together like this, like spiders—

HELEN: We never did anything like that. We never did anything like that.

ORAL: Ah—it, um, it must have come from somewhere else—I’m sorry—

HELEN: No, no—this far, why not more?

ORAL: You don’t have to—

HELEN: On the last day, as I was getting on the plane, I walked through the gate and down the runway to board—

ORAL: It’s none of my—

HELEN: —I did not want to turn around, but I did. She was standing to the side of the door, which had a full-length window in the wall. She had her hand pressed against the glass. I turned around and walked back against the press of people. And I placed my hand against the glass as well. That moment—

HELEN stops. A silence descends. HELEN moves to the door.

HELEN: On second thought—on more than second thought—I don’t want you to finish this.

ORAL: Don’t finish this?

HELEN: Are you a parrot?

ORAL: I can’t just stop—

HELEN: I’ll make sure you’re well paid.

ORAL: It’s not the money—I want to finish [it]—

HELEN: I don't. I know enough—

ORAL: You don't know the half of what's unfinished!

HELEN: And that means what, Mr. Timmins?

ORAL: You don't know what "this" is, do you?

HELEN: What are you talking about?

ORAL: When you left, you had a piece of glass between you. In that last moment—

HELEN: Your dream continues—

ORAL: —it wasn't flesh, it was separation—this breaks the glass—

ORAL takes her hand and presses it against his.

ORAL: "This" is a hand, her hand—

HELEN snaps her hand back. ORAL retreats.

ORAL: I'm sorry—I don't have— Damn! Damn! I'll send an invoice—

ORAL leaves. HELEN stares. She then crosses to the desk and places the binder on one corner of her desk. Then she picks it up, spins it, then puts it back down in the same place, but slams it down. She makes a gesture as if she had just let go of a balloon. She sits, then gets up and exits, carrying ORAL's translation. Transition.

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SCENE 8

JEFFREY's workplace—an office shared by three people who work for a children's book publisher, which includes a bunch of stuffed animals on JEFFREY's desk, including a teddy bear wearing a cape like a superhero. Workspaces for UTILITY 1 (PIPER) and UTILITY 2 (SID), JEFFREY's co-workers.

JEFFREY enters. PIPER and SID look up. JEFFREY slams something down onto his desk. PIPER and SID look at each other.

PIPER & SID: An “Oral.”

They nod together like Laurel and Hardy. JEFFREY struggles out of his overcoat, slams it down onto his chair.

JEFFREY: What are we working on?

PIPER: We are working up the story of Crusty Bonecrusher.

SID: Crusty B.

JEFFREY: Crusty—Crusty Bonecrusher—

SID: That’s what we are working on—

PIPER: But you are working on—

SID: Working out—

PIPER: Working in and out—

JEFFREY: Ha. Ha. Ha. Piper. Diaper.

PIPER: Stones and sticks—

SID: Notice he ignores me.

JEFFREY: Ha. Ha. Ha. Sid. Retar-did.

SID: May give their licks—

SID & PIPER: But names’ll never hurt us.

JEFFREY picks up his coat, hangs it straight on the back of his chair, then sits. He fidgets. PIPER and SID watch, amused. JEFFREY knows they’re watching. He gets up, hesitates, then walks around to the front of his desk, drops to the ground, and starts doing push-ups. Not very well. And not very many until he belly-flops to the ground, spent, arms out to side.

SID gets up, goes to JEFFREY’s desk and picks up the teddy bear wearing the superhero cape.

SID: It's time for Crusty Bonecrusher to come to the aid of his creator.

SID kneels, puts CRUSTY on the floor next to JEFFREY's head so that JEFFREY can see it. JEFFREY and CRUSTY eye each other for a moment. They stare. Then SID moves CRUSTY's arm so that CRUSTY punches JEFFREY in the face, then sits back, waits. CRUSTY does it again.

By this time, PIPER has drifted over to watch the action.

JEFFREY still does not respond. Instead, he levers himself up to do, at most, two or three more push-ups, then collapses. CRUSTY waits, then punches JEFFREY again.

JEFFREY: All right you flea-bitten bag of synthetic—

JEFFREY grabs CRUSTY. CRUSTY resists. And the two of them roll on the floor in a wrestling match, with JEFFREY switching voices between CRUSTY and himself. CRUSTY's voice, if described in a phrase, would be a cigar-and-whiskey voice.

JEFFREY: (*own voice*) I'm not gonna take—

As CRUSTY.

JEFFREY: Yer gonna take it and like it—

His own voice.

JEFFREY: Yeah, booger breath?

As CRUSTY.

JEFFREY: Yeah, weenie toast!

His own voice.

JEFFREY: Blue punk.

As CRUSTY.

JEFFREY: Dweeb dick.

His own voice.

JEFFREY: Cotton crotch.

As CRUSTY.

JEFFREY: Suck face.

Finally, they come to a stand-off—that is, JEFFREY holds CRUSTY at arm's length, and they eye each other warily.

SID gets up, goes to JEFFREY's desk, and grabs two more animals, tosses one to PIPER. Now the three toys face JEFFREY, and when SID and PIPER speak, they speak for the toys, using any kind of voice they want.

JEFFREY: What? What?

SID: It looks like him and Oral—

PIPER: Had another quarrel.

SID: Good!

JEFFREY (as CRUSTY): You been shakin' and he ain't been bakin'.

His own voice.

JEFFREY: Crusty!

JEFFREY speaks to the other animals.

JEFFREY: Cut it out, you guys—

As CRUSTY.

JEFFREY: Get wise, shmuck—yer outta luck—

PIPER: Let's get choral—

SID: For Oral—

SID & PIPER: The luckless shmuck who needs a—

As CRUSTY.

JEFFREY: Yer offendin' my ears!

The tune for the following "ballad" has to be improvised, just as it might be in an improv performance—it's not based on any known song.

SID: I've got a linguist in my heart—

PIPER: But I want his tongue in my ear—

SID & PIPER: I want some multilingual lingering / 'Round my front door and my rear—

JEFFREY: My sentence he can diagram—

As CRUSTY.

JEFFREY: My clause he can subordinate—

JEFFREY, SID, & PIPER: I want a good irregular verb / That we can conjugate—

As CRUSTY.

JEFFREY: But you only get shit / From this little twit—

His own voice.

JEFFREY: I do, my Crusty, I do—

As CRUSTY.

JEFFREY: So dump the little chump / Get yerself a hump—

His own voice.

JEFFREY: A little whoop-ti-doo?

SID & PIPER: Yoo-hoo!

JEFFREY looks at them all.

JEFFREY: No can do.

PIPER: You love him?

JEFFREY: I do.

As CRUSTY.

JEFFREY: You just need a screw.

His own voice.

JEFFREY: That's true.

SID: The world according to Crusty—a screw makes everything new.

As CRUSTY.

JEFFREY: 'Sbetter than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick!

His own voice.

JEFFREY: And it's better than a poke in your stick with a sharp eye. Don't even know what that means.

Show over. SID, PIPER, and JEFFREY hold their animals, look around.

JEFFREY: Sorry.

SID: Not a problem. Is it a problem, Piper?

PIPER: Not a problem, Sid.

JEFFREY: I'm always bringing it in—

PIPER: Look, if we ever do a Crusty for adults, we got the show all mapped out. And besides, at least speaking for myself—at least you have someone to kvetch about.

SID: You sentimental fools!

SID speaks as his pet.

SID: Oh my, he's so full of—

As SID.

SID: Don't listen to her!

As pet.

SID: —braggadocio and bravado, don't it just make you wanna weep for his lonely—

JEFFREY (as CRUSTY): Cut it out, youse wimps! Life ain't nothin' but a bump and grind, with mostly not enough bump and too much grind—you'd think ya kept yer brains in yer pelvises—just suck it up and die with a hard chin and no pee stains on yer underwear—what more do ya want than that?

PIPER: So saith.

The three of them do a “belly bump” with their animals, and then animals dance around as if they are all in the end zone after a touchdown. Lights out. Transition.

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SCENE 9

Park and bench. HELEN enters with ORAL's translation and sits. PALLAS enters. The convention is that what HELEN reads becomes what they are saying to each other.

HELEN: Pallas—I need you to talk again.

PALLAS: Talk.

HELEN: Very cunning of you—force me to find a translator who cares enough to make a fool of himself, just to make sure I go the whole distance to you.

PALLAS: I didn't plan that.

HELEN: I doubt it.

PALLAS: But he has turned out well. Read.

HELEN: "May."

PALLAS: May.

HELEN: "You had just arrived."

PALLAS: You had just arrived.

HELEN: Ah, yes—set me. Soothe me.

PALLAS: You had just arrived.

HELEN: I had just arrived. I tried a few German phrases—

PALLAS: And you looked immensely relieved when I comforted you in English.

HELEN: Comforted, yes.

PALLAS: Out of all the details in that moment—

HELEN: So many details, Pallas—

PALLAS: What struck me was the way your cheekbone slightly rouged caught the sunlight off the leaded windows.

HELEN: A moment of tenderness.

PALLAS: A moment saved from the mercenary logic of the moment. Have you ever felt anything like that?

HELEN: I did with you. "Here. Now. Here and now—"

PALLAS: "This is what it's about."

HELEN: My cheek, sketched by the light—

PALLAS: Lifted me in just that way, said "Now."

HELEN: Passion, yes.

PALLAS: Passion, yes! I admit—

HELEN: I admit, too—that for the rest of the meeting I had to force myself to concentrate on that other business between us.

PALLAS: But also, surprisingly, patience—

HELEN: Yes.

PALLAS: As if a siege had been lifted—

HELEN: And all the anxiety could escape.

PALLAS: Dissolve.

HELEN: Passion and patience—

PALLAS: It made for an interesting afternoon.

PALLAS takes the pages and selects one; HELEN reads.

PALLAS: Remember the child and the balloon? We didn't talk about it when we sat down again at our table, but I had learned something about you from reading your face as you watched. This above all: You could be reached.

HELEN turns to the last page in the stack.

PALLAS: I can only guess how hard it is to trust a stranger to know you by translating me. But if you have taken that chance -

HELEN: —then a deeper chance to know much deeper.

PALLAS: This is not easy love—

HELEN: —this opening of solitudes. Sex, gender, the entire constructed self—

PALLAS: —all lean against the offer. But here it is. It makes no difference in the beginning and the end—

HELEN: What shape the skin takes or how the equipment works.

PALLAS: What matters—

HELEN: What matters is the company we choose—

PALLAS: The company that keeps our hearts alive and our eyes full of light.

PALLAS: I want you for this journey—

HELEN: I want this journey—

PALLAS: Do you assent?

HELEN: Do I assent? Thank you.

PALLAS: For the company.

HELEN: And the light.

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SCENE 10

Park and bench, this time with a payphone nearby. Sitting on the bench is ORAL. In the background are muted traffic and park sounds. JEFFREY comes in and sits beside him.

JEFFREY: Twice in one day.

ORAL: Will miracles never cease.

JEFFREY: You sounded very upset on the phone.

ORAL: I've been sitting here for the better part of the morning. This phone has been used exactly four times: twice to make lunch dates (I—you—you and I—were one of those), once to make conversation so low I couldn't hear it, though the caller laughed a lot. And once to yell at someone in a foreign language that spit a lot.

JEFFREY: What happened?

ORAL: Great device, the telephone. Closes the distances, opens the world. Puts people in touch.

JEFFREY settles back. ORAL gets up, goes to the phone, picks up the receiver.

ORAL: Such a hopeful device, really. Bell—what a great name, really, for a guy dedicated to making something that would allow deaf people to hear—you punch in a code, and in the flicker of an electronic moment you suddenly have a path open up to exchange yourself with someone else. A translator’s dream. Simple physics. Simple, simple physics. It’s what lies at either end that mucks up the elegance.

ORAL hangs up the receiver.

ORAL: I mucked up, Jeffrey, pure and simple. I really mucked it up.

JEFFREY: What happened?

ORAL: Straight lines open, number dialed. I told her about the dream. But it was all wrong—the hands touching, it didn’t have anything to do with gloves. When she was leaving, Pallas put her hand on a window that separated them, in a gesture of goodbye. Ms. Guild put her hand against the other side of the glass. Semaphore of farewell. How was I supposed to know—

JEFFREY: Know what? Am I feeding you the right lines to keep this conversation going?

ORAL: It’s all because of you.

JEFFREY: You must explain my wonderful influence.

ORAL: After she told me about the hands, she followed up by saying that she didn’t want me to finish. I don’t know exactly what happened—but something in me became very—fierce.

JEFFREY: Crusty Bonecrusher.

ORAL: I couldn’t accept her—dismissal. So, I said something like “You don’t know what’s unfinished,” and I grabbed her hand—

JEFFREY: You grabbed [her hand]—

ORAL: Right—put it against mine and proceeded to lecture her that what Pallas—as if I know her!—that what Pallas was doing was giving them a way to break the glass. A little sanctimonious?

JEFFREY: Hmm. And I—

ORAL: This morning, at Alishia's. One thing you never do, you gunsel, is give up. I swing between a bit moody and a lot moody, and you just keep knocking on the door and saying "But there's this matter of a man I love—"

JEFFREY fidgets.

ORAL: When you wouldn't take my hand this morning, it stung—but it also made me realize how long it had been since I had actually felt you. So when Ms. Guild decided to end it, it was your hand that made me grab hers.

JEFFREY: Sanctimonious? Naw! Naw. Mawkish.

ORAL: What?

JEFFREY: (*in a Big Daddy voice*) "I smell the odor of mawkishness." Believe me, I love the compliment, and it's true, I do keep knocking because I love what's behind Door Number Three. But please! Not opera. What do you want me to do now? A little gush? A hand on your shoulder and a squeeze? So you can come away a little humbled? You think a little hand-touching this morning would have made up for—I want to see you next week, when this moment has passed.

ORAL: So I'm not sincere—

JEFFREY: Always sincere. But always hedged around, guarded, until it busts—and then drowns all unsuspecting bystanders. Sincerity comes daily—not a gesture, not an explosion—

A MAN walks into the scene and to the phone. Not slovenly, not neatly dressed.

MAN: Either of you gentlemen have coins for the phone? I got fifties and others but no silverado for the jingle.

JEFFREY: I think—here—

MAN: Many and mighty thanks.

Picks up the phone, dials, waits, gets an answer. He speaks very loudly during the scene and draws all attention to himself. The MAN should pause wherever it feels comfortable in the speech to simulate a phone conversation, but the conversation should move rapidly.

ORAL: What should I do?

MAN: Jimbo?

ORAL: Should I go back and—

MAN: Get Jimbo for me.

ORAL: —properly abase myself?

JEFFREY: You've already reached demeaning. By all means, move on to abasement.

MAN: Hey, my man—Yeah, yeah, my action is crap, too, my Carib amigo. Look, I got to cut out today—

ORAL: I want to finish what I started—

MAN: What?

JEFFREY: Sounds like she needs to as well.

MAN: Now, look, I've covered your sawtoothed ass many times, and I think you owe—yeah, owe!

ORAL makes a "T" with his hands.

ORAL: Time out.

MAN: Don't pull sanctimony on me. I know your secrets, and they'll die with me, unless of course you try to take my head off, and then I'll puree your life quicker than ginsu knives—Call waiting? You got fucking call waiting?—All right, take it.

MAN waits.

MAN: Jesus Christ's Buddha tits.

MAN looks over at JEFFREY and ORAL.

MAN: The quality of help today.

JEFFREY: It's horrible.

MAN: He's from St. Croix, St. Crotch—what more do I need to say?

ORAL: What more?

The voice comes back on. From here on in, the MAN can, through facial and body gestures, include JEFFREY and ORAL in the conversation.

MAN: Are you done with your fancy-dick call waiting? Who was it? Oh, now you got secrets you ain't puttin' in the hopper. Fine, fine. I don't have time to help you feel more important than you really are. I just got to cut out today, and I need your lyin' ass to sing a song to the boss. Wait, wait, wait just a minute for the love of the Virgin Mary's gynecologist. Are you refusing? Call waiting again? How fucking convenient. He'll give in—

JEFFREY: Yeah?

MAN: He always does. Just watch.

MAN makes a gesture with his hand as if he's holding something.

MAN: The magic of his balls in my hand. Watch.

The conversation returns.

MAN: No more call waiting, all right. Listen closely, my friend—I only got four words to say to you: Jo-se-phi-na. Actually, let me add two more words to that: under-eighteen-Jo-se-phi-na. Just six little words. That's better.

MAN makes a squeezing gesture to ORAL and JEFFREY.

MAN: I only need about an hour. Yeah, yeah, I'll call you when I'm done.

MAN hangs up and turns to ORAL and JEFFREY.

MAN: You know, sometimes you gotta make a move to make sure you don't have to do something later that's worse.

MAN balances a quarter on the tip of one of his fingers.

MAN: Got this left over—want it?

JEFFREY: Put it in your trust fund.

MAN: Well, then, this is how I'm gonna go spend my hour, right out to the fingertip. She'll love it.

MAN exits.

JEFFREY: Another visitation?

ORAL: An annunciation.

JEFFREY: Of what?

ORAL: I don't know. But there it is—with a dirty joke.

JEFFREY: Single entendre. What are you going to do?

ORAL: I don't know. Anything salvageable?

JEFFREY: I don't know. Why would you want to go back?

ORAL: Moral fiber? Okay, okay, I want to convince her not to give up listening to Pallas.

JEFFREY: Because—?

ORAL: Because I want to tell her—because I want to tell her—and talk about sanctimonious lingo!—I want to tell her not to let caution defer the sunlight.

JEFFREY: Whew!

ORAL: Because knowing is better than regret.

JEFFREY: Better. But translate.

ORAL reaches into JEFFREY's pocket, takes out a quarter, and balances it on his finger.

ORAL: Right out to the fingertip.

ORAL palms the coin in JEFFREY's hand.

ORAL: I love Jeffrey. And Helen for Pallas.

JEFFREY: Brief. Succinct. No stitch dropped. And gives me back the quarter. Lunch?

ORAL goes to phone, dials his number.

ORAL: I am famished.

JEFFREY: You have been famished a long time.

ORAL: And you, too.

JEFFREY: Then I declare it's time for health.

ORAL: I agree. Messages.

ORAL listens.

ORAL: She wants to see me this afternoon, at two o'clock.

JEFFREY: Oh? Lost appetite?

ORAL hangs up.

ORAL: Actually, no. Sharper. Let's go.

They leave. Transition.

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SCENE 11

HELEN in her office. ORAL in the doorway.

HELEN: Sit down. It's all right—nothing's rigged. I want you to deliver something for me.

HELEN takes out a letter from the desk, indicates for him to read it.

ORAL: Are you sure?

HELEN: Yes—sure. At least sure that that is what I want to say. Or what I want our common German poet to say for me. Not so sure of the rest.

ORAL: You said, "Deliver"?

HELEN: To Berlin.

ORAL: You want me to go to Berlin?

HELEN: Expect you to go. I know you don't have any other clients at the moment because I called the agency and had them re-assign your other work. I told them that I needed your undivided attention for a very important project.

HELEN takes a piece of paper and writes on it while she talks.

HELEN: You see, I've been busy since we last—engaged. There's a ticket waiting for you at the airport for a late afternoon flight. Included in that package are two return tickets.

HELEN slides the paper over to ORAL.

HELEN: This is an important phone number and address—don't lose it.

ORAL: Should I eat this once I'm done with it?

HELEN: You mean eat my words?

ORAL: Just kidding.

HELEN: Neither of us have time for that.

ORAL: Stupid question, maybe—

HELEN: It is a day for them.

ORAL: Why send me? Why not go yourself?

HELEN: She sent me a journal—now I'm sending one back.

ORAL: Me.

HELEN: You. I don't want to make it too easy—and besides, I need to ease [into]—

ORAL: Turned into someone else's words—what an appropriate [fate]—

HELEN: Will you go?

ORAL's body language says "yes."

ORAL: But what if she's not there?

HELEN: I called.

ORAL: You spoke with [her]—

HELEN: No. A message left—so, it's a crap-shoot. But no more hedging. Besides, you said you haven't been to Germany in a while—here's a trip, gratis.

ORAL: When do I leave?

HELEN: In four hours. Sorry. Impulse commanded.

ORAL: And I will be staying—

HELEN: Booked you into the same hotel where I stayed.

ORAL: And what did you tell her?

HELEN: That you would meet her at high noon at the café, bearing an important gift—that being you, of course.

HELEN indicates the letter.

HELEN: That is your letter of introduction to Pallas Worte from the Court of Helen Guild. Note the coat of arms: two blue flames. We're crossing borders here, so you will get to do some diplomatic work after all.

ORAL: And my portfolio?

HELEN: Up to your discretion. You know all you need to know.

ORAL: Something more specific, please. I really don't want to screw this up.

HELEN: This, then: I want her to finish translating the journal to me. I like your work, but—

HELEN indicates the letter.

HELEN: Might as well bring in the heavy artillery.

ORAL: You won't need to lay in much of a siege. "Kunst-Werke sind von einer unendlichen Einsamkeit..."

HELEN: "Works of art are—

HELEN & ORAL: "—of an infinite solitariness."

ORAL: "Only love can apprehend and hold them." I guess I better get going.

HELEN: Yes.

HELEN gives him the binder. ORAL offers her his hand in a handshake. Instead, she takes it and puts it against hers in "spider style." Transition music.

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SCENE 12

ORAL's apartment. JEFFREY is there. ORAL has a small suitcase.

JEFFREY: Three times in one day.

ORAL: I've heard good things come in threes.

JEFFREY: This doesn't feel so lucky.

ORAL: I don't know what the flight times are, but I will call you and let know when we're coming back.

JEFFREY: It'd be a shame to go to all this trouble and come back with the same baggage you left with.

ORAL laughs.

ORAL: I've been stung by a metaphor.

JEFFREY: Isn't this a little above and beyond?

ORAL: I don't know—just feels right. Why not take the charge and follow it through? Jeffrey, Jeffrey. Love of my life. Yes, love of my life. I am going to return.

JEFFREY: To me.

ORAL: To you. Not a question. But I also want to come back to something else. I don't know what, but—clean. Simple. Simpler. Less. And it can't be done without you. I have to go. Lock up, okay?

ORAL picks up the suitcase.

ORAL: I will call you with all the details about arrivals and stuff. I want you there to welcome me home.

They embrace, kiss. ORAL leaves. JEFFREY takes a coin out of his pocket and flips it, catches it, and slaps it on the back of his hand. He looks at the result, smiles slightly, puts the coin at the end of his finger, and then pockets it. Transition music.

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SCENE 13

An airport terminal for international arrivals. There can be announcements overheard and other ambient sounds. HELEN is seated; JEFFREY enters and sits, takes out a magazine but then immediately gets up and starts pacing around. He tries to read the magazine while pacing but gives it up and sticks the magazine in his coat pocket.

JEFFREY: (to HELEN) I do not wait well.

HELEN acknowledges him but does not answer.

JEFFREY: It also makes me talkative. I hope you don't mind. I'll keep it low and to myself.

HELEN again acknowledges him but does not speak.

JEFFREY: (singing, breathily) "Danke schön, ooh darling, danke schön..."

HELEN looks at him.

JEFFREY: "Edelweiss, edelweiss..."

JEFFREY pauses.

JEFFREY: "Wunderbar, wunderbar..."

JEFFREY pauses.

JEFFREY: "Welcome, bienvenue, welcome..."

JEFFREY's momentarily at a loss for another song, then starts singing again.

JEFFREY: "Danke schön, ooh darling, danke schön..."

HELEN: You're singing German.

JEFFREY: I'm trying to remember all the songs I know with German in them. Do you know any?

HELEN: I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you.

JEFFREY: I wish I knew more songs. I only know parts of songs.

HELEN: I can't seem to distract myself when I'm nervous.

JEFFREY: I can't seem to do anything else when I'm nervous. I hate how everything inside feels like a Slinky going downstairs.

HELEN: You're waiting for someone.

JEFFREY: Impatiently. You?

HELEN: For friends. From Berlin.

JEFFREY: So am I. What a coincidence.

JEFFREY starts pacing again.

JEFFREY: How does that go: "Du bist mein..."

JEFFREY stops pacing.

JEFFREY: From Berlin?

HELEN: Yes.

JEFFREY: Berlin. Do you like word games?

HELEN: What?

JEFFREY: Could I try a word association with you?

HELEN: What?

JEFFREY: A word association. It'll pass the time—and keep me from singing.

HELEN: I suppose airport serial killers usually don't sing German show tunes. All right.

JEFFREY: (*emphasizing the words*) Oral hygiene.

HELEN: What?

JEFFREY: Oral. Hygiene. What does it make you think of?

HELEN: You know—?

JEFFREY: —Helen Guild? Not directly.

HELEN: I don't know you.

JEFFREY: Jeffrey Mitchell. The significant other of one Oral Timmins.

HELEN: He never told me—that's why—!

JEFFREY: We share some common ground here.

HELEN: Yes, we do.

JEFFREY: (*quietly*) "Danke schön—"

HELEN: (*chiming in*) "Ooh, darling, danke schön—"

JEFFREY: Sing it to me, Wayne Newton.

VOICE: Flight 422 from Frankfurt, with connections from Berlin, has arrived at the International Terminal. Passengers will be passing through customs shortly.

HELEN and JEFFREY look at each other, then face the audience, as if facing the doors through which ORAL and PALLAS will come. The sounds of the airport rise in volume as the lights quickly go to black.