

NEA High

by

Michael Bettencourt

67 Highwood Terrace #2, Weehawken NJ 07086
201-770-0550 • 347-564-9998 • m.bett@verizon.net
<http://www.m-bettencourt.com>

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DESCRIPTION

Aviva Matthews, an 18-year old senior at Northeast Ashland Regional High School, has a painting pulled from a student exhibit by the City Council chair, Jessica Helms. Helms feels the painting insults her and the new sex education curriculum Helms recently got passed, which stresses abstinence as the only suitable course of study. The ensuing responses examine the intersection of art, politics, sex, and the role of the artist in the community.

CHARACTERS

- AVIVA MATTHEWS, 18 years of age, senior in high school, artist; she should be somewhat dark-skinned, and is a definite punker, with blond-peroxide hair. Interestingly, nothing on her is pierced. She always wears a Walkman.
- BIJU MATTHEWS, AVIVA's father, originally from Haiti but a U.S. citizen, 50s, dark-skinned
- ALEXA MATTHEWS, AVIVA's mother, Caucasian, 50s
- ELTON SAVORY, principal of Ashland High School, mid-40s or so, Caucasian, speaks with a mild British accent
- NORMAN DRAGÓN, art instructor, AVIVA's teacher, mid-50s, American citizen but Argentinean background, speaks with a rich accent
- JESSICA HELMS, council president of the Ashland City Council, mid-60s or so, African-American
- UTILITY CHARACTERS (5) -- referred to for convenience as "he," but they should be two men and three women, mixed ethnicity: UTILITY 1 = female; UTILITY 2 = male; UTILITY 3 = female; UTILITY 4 = male; UTILITY 5 = female

SETTING

The small and mythical but not entirely unimaginable American city of Ashland, predominantly white and suburban, though with a "minority" population. If Ashland were coffee, it would still be mostly blond and sweet, though a little less blond than not long ago. The action takes place primarily in Ashland's high school and the home of AVIVA MATTHEWS.

TIME

Present

MISCELLANEOUS

Set design should be kept simple. If possible, it would be good if the play could be done with all or part of the audience seated in the playing area. Try to avoid a traditional proscenium set-up and try to bring the audience as close as possible to the actors.

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ACT I, Scene 1: The Tempest

On the stage: an easel, a small table next to with a palette, brush, tubes of paint, a trowel, etc. -- enough paraphernalia to set the feel of an artist at work. Also on the table is a Walkman cassette player.

AVIVA MATTHEWS sits in front of the easel. AVIVA then grabs the Walkman and turns on the cassette. A really strong rock-and-roll song comes on, and she begins to paint, which will all be done through movement and lighting, since there is no actual paint on the palette and no actual canvas on the easel. In essence, it is the dance of her creativity. The director and actor are free to use and do whatever they want to do to create the energy and drive of AVIVA's painting, but it should never verge on the melodramatic or operatic: it is a serious business for AVIVA.

At the end of the song, AVIVA shuts off the Walkman. In silence she reviews what she has created. She then moves the easel upstage right or left and exits, take the small table with her. As she does so, she turns on the Walkman again; the song choice is up to the director. It provides the transition music into the next scene. Lights out.

Alternate approach: If the theatre facilities permit it, and the director and actor feel they can do it, then actual painting could be done -- or at least paint placing/slopping/dripping, etc. No finished "work" needs to be produced, since the scene is about creative energy, not actual production, about color and movement, not museum piece.

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ACT I, Scene 2: The Art Show

Stage is dark. The cast comes on, bringing several chairs: they take their positions as a tableau in front of AVIVA MATTHEW's "painting," which is downstage center facing upstage. There is no actual painting; it is described instead.

The music crossfades into a murmur of voices. A light comes up either upstage right or left, and AVIVA comes on and places a large poster on the easel. The poster says, "The 10th Annual North East Ashland High School Art Show." Her parents enter behind her. She and her parents move into the light change that comes up on the cast.

The crowd includes ELTON SAVORY, JESSICA HELMS, and NORMAN DRAGÓN. The five UTILITY characters are the other artists in the show; they are dressed as high school students -- see Act II, Scene 1. AVIVA stands in the background, watching.

She wears the Walkman, headphones around her neck. Several chairs are around.

JESSICA HELMS stands right in the forefront. Everyone watches HELMS examine the painting.

HELMS: Who painted this?

SAVORY: So, Councilor --

HELMS: Who painted this?

SAVORY: -- you find this interesting.

HELMS: Not "interesting" at all, Mr. Savory.

SAVORY: Oh --

HELMS: "Interesting" is a word for when people don't know how to tell the truth. Besides, this -- this -- is indulgent and silly -- and not art.

SAVORY: Not art --

HELMS: Who painted this?

While SAVORY speaks, HELMS reads the title and the painter's name.

SAVORY: A little strong, Councilor Helms?

HELMS: "Abstinence Has No Substance." Aviva Matthews.

SAVORY: (*overlapping*) Perhaps you shouldn't --

HELMS: (*overlapping*) Where is Aviva Matthews?

SAVORY: She should be h[ere] --

HELMS: Is she here?

SAVORY: As I said --

HELMS: I want to discuss this with her right now.

AVIVA: I am here.

Everyone turns to look at her and her parents.

HELMS: The Aviva Matthews. Come here, then.

AVIVA: Good evening, Councilor Helms.

HELMS: Evening, yes. Good --

BIJU: Councilor Helms --

HELMS: And you are?

BIJU: Biju Matthews.

ALEXA: Alexa. Matthews.

HELMS: Come here.

HELMS indicates the painting.

HELM:S Your daughter did this.

BIJU: We're very proud.

SAVORY: Perhaps this is not the best time --

HELMS: Dealer's choice, Mr. Savory.

BIJU: Has Aviva caused a problem?

HELMS: *(to AVIVA)* Come here. The city council gave you money. *(to SAVORY)* Correct?

DRAGÓN: The city council did award --

HELMS: Remind me --

DRAGÓN: -- Ms. Matthews an art scholarship --

HELMS: -- who you are.

DRAGÓN: Norman Dragón.

HELMS: *(with proper pronunciation)* Ah, Mr. Dragón.

DRAGÓN: Head of the Art Department.

HELMS: Right. From --

DRAGÓN: Argentina. No Evita references, please --

HELMS: Don't worry, Mr. Dragón, I won't cry for you --

DRAGÓN: Can't put Juan over on you --

They measure each other.

HELMS: So you're responsible for this --

DRAGÓN: This exhibit? As I have been for the past 10 years. Aren't they good?

HELMS: Did you teach her?

DRAGÓN: I've had the pleasure.

HELMS: To do this?

BIJU: What problem does this make?

HELMS: Mr. Dragón, if you think that proves your teaching skills --

BIJU: What is the problem --

DRAGÓN: As city council president --

BIJU defers to DRAGÓN.

DRAGÓN: You approved Aviva's scholarship.

SAVORY: Norman --

HELMS: A pig in a poke, then --

ALEXA: That's enough!

HELMS: *(to AVIVA)* The people of Ashland gave that money to help an artist.

AVIVA: I am an artist.

HELMS: Then come here.

ALEXA: Aviva has done nothing wrong.

BIJU: *(to SAVORY)* What makes the problem here?

ALEXA: Beeba, you don't have to go --

HELMS: I'm trying to take your daughter seriously -- *(to AVIVA)* You do, don't you? Want to be taken seriously?

ALEXA: It's just a painting.

HELMS: No "just" about this painting. Right? *(to ALEXA)* You don't get the finger-in-the-eye here, do you? *(to AVIVA)* You do, though. Come all the way here. *(to her parents)* She's safe -- I won't eat her.

AVIVA comes to HELMS. HELMS takes a chair and sits in front of the painting. The five UTILITY characters sit on the floor against the legs of the audience in the front row.

HELMS: Explain this to me.

SAVORY: Councilor --

HELMS: Well?

AVIVA: What's not out front for you?

HELMS: No aesthete with me, all right?

HELMS indicates DRAGÓN.

HELMS: Don't be him. Now, Ashland got this back as payback. Explain this to me.

BIJU: Aviva --

HELMS: Defend yourself. We await.

AVIVA: Dad, I'm geared, all right? Don't worry.

Light changes to focus on AVIVA and HELMS.

HELMS: This?

AVIVA: What do you see?

HELMS: "Student?" All right -- I see knees -- I assume a girl's knees --

AVIVA: Why?

HELMS: It's obvious -- don't be subtle about the obvious and consider yourself clever. Now, there. A chain.

AVIVA: Yes.

HELMS: With a padlock?

AVIVA: Yes.

HELMS: Around her knees.

AVIVA: It is what it is.

HELMS: Torn hem on the dress, smudged legs, heavy boots, unlaced -- am I seeing clearly?

AVIVA: Factual.

HELMS: Now under the fact --

AVIVA: The title.

Lights up to full. HELMS stands and lifts the "painting" off its hook; she looks at and shows it to the others and the audience as she talks.

HELMS: "Abstinence Has No Substance." I think you think you're making a "really cool" critique of the health curriculum I got through the council last year -- with a large majority vote, I will add. Do I get the prize behind door number one?

HELMS replaces the painting.

AVIVA: Yes.

HELMS: So. You meant to insult all that effort. And me.

AVIVA: Not hardly --

DRAGÓN: She doesn't mean that at all.

HELMS: Stop answering for her.

AVIVA: It's not about insulting you.

ALEXA: Aviva --

AVIVA: Mom -- my time. (to HELMS) I didn't make it about you -- specifically. Or about insulting anyone -- specifically.

HELMS offers the chair to AVIVA.

HELMS: Defend.

She hesitates.

HELMS: Not me specifically, you said.

She gets on it and squats. The contest begins.

AVIVA: It's about -- It's about taking down a kind of -- mentality. The council's. Lots of people's. Yours.

HELMS: Name it.

AVIVA: (*emphasizing syllables*) Nos-tal-gi [pronounced "jee"] - a. Nostalgic -- and disappointed. Mental/sentimental.

They measure each other.

HELMS: That's all the "deep" we get?

AVIVA: You snap on the lock --

HELMS: Bring order to craziness --

AVIVA: "Just Say No." It's more like, "Just say no to 'Just Say No'" because it's virtual reality --

HELMS: It's a nationally recognized program --

AVIVA: It doesn't even come close to people my age.

HELMS: The whole thing's about your age --

AVIVA: About your age.

HELMS: That makes no sense.

AVIVA: About what you think you had back in the Jurassic --

HELMS: Which would be --

AVIVA: Chastity belt in every closet. Every family white and bright. Women --

HELMS: Bright and white?

AVIVA: Women in the down position.

HELMS: I'd want down -- look at me! -- I'd want down so that I couldn't be up doing this?

AVIVA: All things neat and square, tuned into "all Fifties, all the time" nos-tal-gi-a. Onward, family values!

HELMS: Oh God no, not -- not -- "family values"! Not like, say, the family of Aviva Matthews.

AVIVA: They're out of this.

HELMS: Your family loves you --

AVIVA: Leave them out of --

HELMS: -- don't they? (*to ALEXA and BIJU*) Don't you? The "family values thing," right?, works for you. So just what are you talking about?

AVIVA: You're mad because history won't come back --

HELMS: You speak with Grade-A, prime-cut ignorance about what I want.

AVIVA: Everybody in a box -- dated and stamped --

HELMS: Really?

AVIVA: Yes.

HELMS: Is dat so?

AVIVA: Yes.

HELMS: Bet the farm on that?

AVIVA realizes she's hit a dead-end.

HELMS: Get down. Sit down. How old are you?

AVIVA: Eighteen.

HELMS: Eight and a teen. Tell me, wise one -- have you "unlocked" that chain -- so to speak?

SAVORY: Don't embarrass --

HELMS: Answer me: abstinent -- yes or no?

BIJU: Elton, you do something --

AVIVA: What's that got to do with the painting?

SAVORY: I agree --

HELMS indicates the painting.

HELMS: Do you practice what you have her preach?

BIJU: Let's go.

HELMS stares AVIVA down.

HELMS: Do you take the risks you're telling other people to take? Do you?

BIJU: I trust my daughter.

HELMS: And I trust what I know of people "her age."

BIJU: Let's go.

HELMS: So you're declaring abstinence is stupid.

AVIVA: No.

BIJU: Let's go.

HELMS: That self-restraint --

ALEXA: Honey --

AVIVA: (to HELMS) No.

ALEXA: Aviva --

HELMS: You just want to deny, deny, deny --

AVIVA: I don't deny anything.

HELMS: That's right -- I'm wrong -- you can't deny what you don't know.

AVIVA: I know.

HELMS: You do?

AVIVA: Yes.

HELMS: Were you at the council meetings?

AVIVA: No.

HELMS: Did you speak in opposition?

AVIVA: No.

HELMS: I know you didn't because I sat there for all the evidence from the doctors and nurses, your pregnant classmates -- well, enough, because, obviously --

HELMS indicates the painting.

HELMS: -- you had better things to do.

ALEXA: That's enough!

HELMS: If only that were true! She's made her critique -- here's mine. Her little act of rebellion -- very -- thin, and crude -- and not very well thought out. But, then again, she's eighteen, so the expectations don't run so high. Next paragraph.

HELMS indicates the others.

HELMS: Don't listen to them: they won't give you an honest answer. Why? Because they like you. You need more truth than they will let you bear.

AVIVA: And because you don't like me --

HELMS: I don't have to cut you any slack.

AVIVA: I told you the truth --

HELMS: You made yourself believe that --

AVIVA: So I'm a liar.

HELMS: You're incomplete -- half-baked. In other words, eighteen. Don't get angry -- just learn to defend yourself -- if you really believe, that is.

DRAGÓN: What else do you want?

AVIVA: Better to be eighteen than --

ALEXA: Aviva, we're going.

HELMS: Than what?

ALEXA: Aviva --

HELMS: Better than what?

BIJU: Don't bait her!

HELMS: I'm just bating my breath. Than what?

AVIVA keeps her mouth shut.

HELMS: I can see the fire in there -- answer to it: What will you stand for? Teach me that right now.

AVIVA: I think --

HELMS: Yes?

AVIVA: I think I will obey my parents. I think I shall be their obedient daughter.

The UTILITY characters rejoin the group.

HELMS: You blinked.

BIJU: Blinked?

HELMS: Refused to take the risk.

BIJU: What are you talking about?

HELMS: Mr. Savory.

SAVORY: Yes?

HELMS: Mr. Savory, this is what I want: I want this picture out of here.

SAVORY: Councilor --

ALEXA: You can't do that --

HELMS: Did you hear that?

SAVORY: I did.

BIJU: Elton!

DRAGÓN: You can't force us --

HELMS: *(to DRAGÓN)* And you -- you need to guide her better --

ALEXA: What are you talking about?

HELMS: Guide her, Mr. Drone On --

DRAGÓN: Dragón --

HELMS: I know the name -- I was annotating your character. Guide her, Mr. Dragón, give her good instruction.

DRAGÓN: Should I bow first?

SAVORY: Norman!

HELMS: Help her do something that brings us together -- something that heals us -- shouldn't art do that, in your professional opinion? I do.

DRAGÓN: Art should always be free of "shoulds."

HELMS: Except that "should," of course.

DRAGÓN: You -- no one with power -- should impose any restrict[tions] --

HELMS: Two "shoulds."

HELMS still looks at DRAGÓN.

HELMS: And if I did?

They measure each other.

DRAGÓN: What would you do?

HELMS: What would you do if I did?

DRAGÓN: What I have always done.

HELMS: What you've taught her to do.

DRAGÓN: I've taught her to speak her mind.

HELMS: You've taught her mind to be selfish.

DRAGÓN: I've taught her mind to be honest.

HELMS: You've taught her mind to be disrespectful.

DRAGÓN: *(overlapping)* An artist has the right --

HELMS: *(overlapping)* -- has the responsibility --

DRAGÓN: We can debate this forever --

HELMS: I don't intend to --

DRAGÓN: -- but that still doesn't give you the right --

HELMS: I have a power, given in trust --

DRAGÓN: Then trust it. Don't take her painting away.

HELMS: I will, because I do trust it --

DRAGÓN: You can't.

SAVORY: I think we should all go --

HELMS: A challenge?

SAVORY: Into the reception?

DRAGÓN: A plea -- for sanity.

HELMS: I didn't realize anything I said was insane.

DRAGÓN: That's not what I meant --

HELMS: Do you know yourself that well? You don't know me.

DRAGÓN: What are you thinking?

HELMS: The insults buzz thick and fast around here. It seems the palette of choice. Mr. Savory --

DRAGÓN: You can't --

HELMS: Can't what, Mr. Dragón?

DRAGÓN: You won't --

HELMS: Won't what, Mr. Dragón? Mr. Savory --

SAVORY: Yes.

DRAGÓN: Don't!

HELMS: Mr. Savory, close down the whole exhibit --

SAVORY: Close -- Close down? You really should not --

DRAGÓN: Completely w[rong] --

HELMS: *(to AVIVA, indicating DRAGÓN)* Your cavalry -- too late. And really pretty bad in the saddle.

DRAGÓN: We should fight this.

HELMS: The third "should."

DRAGÓN: The noose starts with things like this --

HELMS: Mr. Dragón -- we're not sliding into fascism here -- so tell your inner Che Guevara to quiet down. *(to AVIVA)* Look at all the effect your art has created!

A pause as HELMS stares at the picture again.

HELMS: You've got talent -- But your values are unbaked -- I'm not stupid. I do know what's going on -- more than you. And it's not good -- too much self-destruction. There comes a time when "no" is the best value -- and, lucky us, I have the power to make it stick and stay. Mr. Savory.

SAVORY: As principal --

HELMS: Yes, yes -- on my desk in triplicate later. But as of now, this exhibit is closed.

Lights out on tableau. Music for the transition is the same music as Act I, Scene 1. Easel removed.

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ACT I, Scene 3: The Search for Miracles

UTILITY 1 lies down in a slightly twisted pose: this is AUDREY. UTILITY 5 holds her; together, they make a "Pieta." UTILITY 5 does not ever speak.

The other three UTILITY characters kneel around AUDREY and UTILITY 5: the PRAYERS. They pray in murmurs. AVIVA is standing upstage of AUDREY. Each grouping is in its own light. AVIVA is asleep but with her headphones on; music bumps out. She wakes up abruptly, ripping the headphones from her ears.

AVIVA: No!

She speaks to the group. The PRAYERS ignore her and continue praying.

AVIVA: Who? Who is she?

PRAYER 1: Please, be quiet!

AVIVA: I just want to know --

PRAYER 1: What?

AVIVA: Who she is.

PRAYER 2: Who are you --

PRAYER 3: -- who thinks she can know anything?

AVIVA: I just woke up.

PRAYERS 1 & 2: Wishful.

PRAYERS 2 & 3: Thinking.

ALL 3: On your part.

AVIVA kneels as well.

AVIVA: Who is she?

PRAYER 1: What she is turning into is more important.

PRAYER 2: This is little Audrey.

PRAYER 3: Our Blessed Virgin Mother's bright note.

PRAYER 1: She is sliding past substance -- and we want to journey with her.

AVIVA: Who is she?

They sit back on their heels, looking and sounding irritated.

ALL 3: Facts.

PRAYER 2: She wants facts.

PRAYER 3: They all want facts.

PRAYER 1: Where the unenlightened --

ALL 3: -- must begin their light.

PRAYER 2: I suppose.

PRAYER 3: Drudgery, though.

ALL 3: So, the facts.

PRAYER 1 stands behind AVIVA and puts her hands on top of AVIVA's head and begins to speak in a mock Gregorian-chant intoning.

PRAYER 1: Little Audrey Santo, of Worcester, Massachusetts, is a "victim soul."

PRAYER 1 drops the chant.

PRAYER 1: She takes on the suffering of people who ask her to intercede with God, relaying their pleas for healing.

PRAYER 2: You could say she sends "heal-mail" to God.

A pause at the bad joke.

PRAYER 1: When she was a child, she injured herself in the backyard pool. Slipped into a coma -- what we like to think of as her "cocoon."

PRAYER 3: Her chrysalis.

PRAYER 2: Her aurelia.

PRAYER 2 gets up and replaces PRAYER 1. Also speaks in a mock chant.

PRAYER 2: After a while, she eased into what the doctors call "akinetic mutism" --

PRAYER 2 drops the chant.

PRAYER 2: -- but we know what it really is. *(whispering)* She is a hyphen.

PRAYER 1: The coma was like a comma -- a pause. Now --

PRAYER 2: A hyphenation. An umbilical to our blessed Mother. Through her --

PRAYER 1: In her.

PRAYER 3: With her.

PRAYER 2: We find the higher compassion that overcomes our egos.

PRAYER 1: *(to AVIVA)* Did you hear that clearly?

ALL 3: We find the higher compassion that overcomes our egos.

PRAYER 2: She soothes the urge for self-expression.

PRAYER 1: We no longer suffer trying to find a voice: Audrey speaks for us.

PRAYER 3 gets up and replaces PRAYER 2. Mock-chant as well.

PRAYER 3: Miraculous things have happened because faith in her is our reason for living.

PRAYER 3 drops the chant.

PRAYER 3: A light-colored oil drips from statues and paintings --

PRAYER 1: The tears of Our Mother.

PRAYER 3: Blood has bloomed on the eucharistic hosts --

PRAYER 2: To show us that God works through our mouths.

PRAYER 3: The stigmata have flowered on her hands during the holy days.

PRAYER 2: With the proper mind --

PRAYER 1: The proper heart --

PRAYER 2: The proper pain --

PRAYER 3: These miracles can ease your dark fears.

ALL 3: Won't you accept her soft embrace?

They return to their original positions around AUDREY, and the murmuring continues. AVIVA rises and speaks to AUDREY.

AVIVA: Is all this true? Have you let go? No more warfare in the gut? No more weary wrestling? I feel -- afflicted by my desires.

PRAYER 1: Audrey feels the affliction of your desires.

AVIVA: My world, right now -- thickened with authority everywhere.

PRAYER 2: She is sickened, Audrey -- heal her.

AVIVA: I have to fight to keep my eyes my own.

PRAYER 3: Audrey, she wants to rise upon your blood-tide.

ALL 3: Bring her sorrow to an end.

AVIVA: Tell me! Unlock me! What is the bargain I need to make?

Each PRAYER does a gesture that makes the light on him or her go out -- one after the other, in succession. As the light goes out, he or she leaves. After the third light, then a slow fade on AUDREY and AVIVA. They exit. Transition music: Gregorian.

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ACT I, Scene 4: The Theses of Councilor Helms

Office of PRINCIPAL SAVORY. To one side an American flag on a stand. SAVORY, HELMS, and DRAGÓN.

SAVORY: I gave the picture back to Ms. Matthews. Is that a problem?

HELMS: It's just that I wanted to use it --

SAVORY: I don't understand.

HELMS: -- to talk to the two of you.

DRAGÓN: I thought you hated the picture.

HELMS: Did I say that?

DRAGÓN: The impression you gave --

HELMS: Don't believe first impressions. I didn't hate the picture -- it made me angry. Not equal. So, we'll do without visual aids.

SAVORY: Do what, Councilor?

HELMS: That's why we treasure you, Mr. Savory. You keep us on message. As I said, something to discuss with the both of you -- but in a moment. I need your help -- you and you -- to talk some things through, first. So bear with me. *(to DRAGÓN)* How long have you been teaching?

DRAGÓN: That's what you want to discuss?

HELMS: "Bear with me," I asked.

DRAGÓN: Why do you want to know?

HELMS: Why wouldn't you want to tell me?

DRAGÓN: For twenty years.

HELMS: Always about art?

DRAGÓN: Art history, techniques --

HELMS: Always here?

DRAGÓN: In Argentina, other countries. And here.

HELMS: Do you paint?

DRAGÓN: Of course. Every day. I've done, and do, everything I ask my students to do.

HELMS: You've exhibited?

DRAGÓN: My students have, so --

HELMS: Sold paintings?

DRAGÓN: -- so I have, yes.

HELMS: But in all that time -- and all those places -- you've never been the public's servant --
as an artist.

DRAGÓN: I'd like to think my art has served --

HELMS: Let me be clearer. You've never had to declare yourself in the marketplace or do
constituent leg work -- What I mean is: you haven't had to answer to anyone.

DRAGÓN: Except my conscience --

SAVORY: And to me, of course.

HELMS: Mr. Savory, I don't think he answers to you at all -- or anyone. Just a pleasant illusion
he's made us believe -- by the blur of his tango!

DRAGÓN: Oh Piazzolla!

HELMS: But a different tune for me. The people who sign my time card mark the ballot, too,
and we partner in the most -- orchestrated of ways.

SAVORY: They haven't called for censorship --

HELMS: Thin ice, principal.

SAVORY: I am just reporting to you that parents have jammed my phone about closing the show.

HELMS: Who?

SAVORY: Mostly the parents of the artists in the show, but that doesn't inval[idate] --

HELMS: Appreciate their distress -- don't look so skeptical, Mr. Dragón.

SAVORY: I hear talk about a petition drive.

HELMS: So have I.

SAVORY: End of my report, then.

HELMS: I would even say -- in fact, I will say -- take note -- I was wrong to close the show that way --

DRAGÓN: You would go that far --

HELMS: I might even sign the petition. After all, I'm not after censorship -- I hate it as much as you do. Just as much. But I also have a higher point to make, that I need to make.

DRAGÓN: Which is --

HELMS: Which is why I'm here with the two of you. I have my -- list -- to nail to the church door. (*to DRAGÓN*) Surprised a "politico" would know Martin Luther?

DRAGÓN: I just didn't think leading us to the river of virtue came with your job.

HELMS: Right there, in thesis 96, the one Herr Luther couldn't cram onto on the door; I'm surprised you don't know it --

DRAGÓN: Thesis 96 --

HELMS: -- about my job as a public servant -- it says I have to make life mean something for the people who trust me -- tangible, practical, healing, communal -- with boundaries.

DRAGÓN: What does that have to do with --

HELMS: Follow me closely.

DRAGÓN: Why do I sense that she doesn't like me?

HELMS: Parts of you I do like --

SAVORY: Norman -- Councilor --

HELMS: I do --

SAVORY: You were saying, Councilor --

HELMS: -- so not you, as a whole, not all of you -- but your arrogant beliefs --

DRAGÓN: Which one?

HELMS: This one: you think art is about the artist, that the artist shouldn't be held back by the speed limit --

DRAGÓN: That's true.

HELMS: But to me, art isn't not about the artist at all.

DRAGÓN: That doesn't make sense --

HELMS: The artist is just a means --

DRAGÓN: A means?

HELMS: For something you probably won't like: for morality. Or before you gag on that word -- the moral life.

DRAGÓN: Art has nothing to do --

HELMS: *(to SAVORY)* The retort comes right on schedule.

DRAGÓN: Art has nothing to do with morality.

HELMS: You mean my kind.

DRAGÓN: I mean any kind.

HELMS: And that mistake --

DRAGÓN: Principle.

HELMS: Childishness -- is exactly the problem we are going to fix today.

DRAGÓN: The royal "we" --

HELMS: A collaborative enterprise.

SAVORY: We were talking about the reason you were here.

HELMS: We are getting to it --

SAVORY: Could you now?

HELMS: Not yet. What can you tell me about Aviva Matthews? Your impressions.

SAVORY: Very motivated, talented -- her family supports her in everything.

HELMS: Would you consider her rebellious? Ambitious?

DRAGÓN: Ah, the police work --

SAVORY: She speaks out -- frequently. She has her causes here and elsewhere -- usually people and things on the margins. Why -- ?

HELMS: Gauging -- (to DRAGÓN) What can you add?

DRAGÓN: Add to your dossier that she's an intelligent painter. I've known her all through high school.

HELMS: Passionate?

DRAGÓN: Disciplined.

HELMS: But not passionate?

DRAGÓN: Her work is very crucial to her.

HELMS: But not passionate?

DRAGÓN: She feels very strongly about what she feels strongly -- what are you looking for?

HELMS: Measuring, balancing -- And you would support her?

DRAGÓN: Unconditionally.

HELMS: And "Abstinence Without Substance" --

DRAGÓN: Is a good example of Aviva's work.

HELMS ponders this.

HELMS: Why have you bothered to teach art?

DRAGÓN: Is this for my dossier?

SAVORY: Norman.

HELMS: Don't misread me. I want to know why you bother teaching something that many think is just a frill -- we have them on the school board, don't we, Mr. Savory? That many consider useless. You've been doing it for twenty years.

SAVORY: Councilor, it's a busy day --

HELMS: I'm almost done.

DRAGÓN: She's gauging.

HELMS: *(to DRAGÓN)* Why bother?

DRAGÓN: It's no bother at all. I'll make it simple, because it is, because in places not the United States they understand this: art, the arts, the impulse to make art -- all to help us make sense of pain, suffering, joy and love, death -- everything. Empty out the inside and give it a voice. So that nothing stays buried or oppressed.

HELMS: I can agree with you! *(to SAVORY)* See, we can agree. In the abstract, we can agree. But then we come down to the cases: A crucifix in urine --

DRAGÓN: We have many voices --

HELMS: Women smeared in --

DRAGÓN: A lot of dark vowels --

HELMS: Bullwhips inserted --

DRAGÓN: I'm not their defense lawyer -- they say what they say. They are what they are.

HELMS: "They are what they are." Well, here's my simple take on "what they are": they are mangy dogs, and they spread around a lot of dirt, and in the name of freedom you'd let them lick the food at the table because "they are what they are." Artistically free to do so, yes -- but what good will this freedom do us when we all get sick?

SAVORY: *(to DRAGÓN)* You have a class coming up.

DRAGÓN: It seems I have to leave. See, he is the boss.

HELMS: Tide may not wait, but time will. Principal --

SAVORY: Yes?

HELMS: You wanted my point -- I am now nailing it to the door. I want some kind of -- restitution made by our talented and motivated Aviva Matthews.

DRAGÓN: I don't understand.

HELMS: Something that shows she understands, really understands, her -- power to give "a voice to what is inside us" -- *(to SAVORY)* -- that's correct, right? that's what he says he teaches, right?

SAVORY: Restitution?

The "change of class" bell rings.

HELMS: I'll let the exhibit re-open. The others shouldn't suffer -- I'll admit, a poor decision out of anger -- and it was out of anger, because I also think she has a lot of skill in her art, which I could see, right there in front of me. As I said, I'll re-open the exhibit if she paints another picture that -- matures her point of view.

DRAGÓN: Corrects her point of view.

SAVORY: You want to give her a second chance?

HELMS: Yes -- a second chance to the fiery young girl.

DRAGÓN: You mean betray --

HELMS: From what you've both told me about her, she should do just fine.

SAVORY: I'll deal with this.

HELMS: (to SAVORY) That's why we pay you the large bucks, Mr. Savory. Mr. Dragón --

DRAGÓN: Yes?

HELMS: I expect you to mentor her in this. As you said you would. Unconditionally.

SAVORY: To your class?

DRAGÓN leaves. SAVORY and HELMS face each other as the ringing school bell gets louder and louder until almost unbearable; then lights and sound bump out together. SAVORY removes the flag as he and HELMS exit.

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ACT I, Scene 5: The Search for Miracles Continued

The murmuring voices rise. The three PRAYERS, AUDREY, UTILITY 5, and AVIVA take up their positions at the end of Act I, Scene 3. Lights up. The PRAYERS rise and escort AVIVA back to her "bed." The lights go out on AUDREY except for one tight light on her face. The three PRAYERS force AVIVA to her knees, and then they kneel, all three with their backs to her. When AUDREY speaks, it is in a harsh croak, as if she has not spoken very often.

PRAYER 1: You are a painter.

AVIVA: Yes.

PRAYER 2: Not important.

AUDREY: Unimportant.

PRAYER 3: Audrey places it low on the chain of being.

AVIVA: But I need to speak --

PRAYER 3: Speaking like do -- pure ego.

PRAYER 2: Pure ego: source of the world's evil.

AUDREY: Too -- much -- appetite.

The PRAYERS sit cross-legged.

AVIVA: It's about art -- I want to create art. That means something.

PRAYER 1: You are not interested in art -- you are interested in your own noise.

PRAYER 2: "Abstinence Without Substance" -- created to make people angry.

AVIVA: It was the truth!

PRAYER 3: It did not bring people to healing.

AVIVA: I wanted to make them think.

PRAYER 1: It brought them to anger.

AUDREY: Anger is not thinking.

AVIVA: But it's the highest calling!

PRAYER 1: What is?

PRAYER 2: Pigment on cloth?

PRAYER 3: Stretched on a wooden frame?

AVIVA: Self-expression!

AUDREY: Self is nothing.

The PRAYERS face AVIVA.

AVIVA: Nothing! How can she say that? What are we if not our "selves"?

PRAYER 1: Spirit.

PRAYER 2: Energy.

PRAYER 3: Servants to both.

AUDREY: Self is blinding.

AVIVA: I can't!

PRAYER 1: That's because you are stuck --

PRAYER 2: -- in the old paradigm --

PRAYER 3: -- of thinking you are --

ALL 3: Important.

PRAYER 1: None --

PRAYER 2: -- of us --

PRAYER 3: -- is --

ALL 3: Important.

AVIVA: I am!

AUDREY: Then, unhappiness for you.

AVIVA: I'll take that!

AUDREY: And unhappiness for others.

AVIVA: I'll take that on, too!

PRAYER 1 stands.

PRAYER 1: You'd sacrifice others.

AVIVA: I have to fight what stupid people do.

PRAYER 2 stands.

PRAYER 2: There is strength in letting go.

AVIVA: Strength in a fist.

PRAYER 3 stands.

PRAYER 3: In the end, none of it matters.

AVIVA: The end is at the end, not now.

The PRAYERS get on their knees in front of AVIVA and bow their heads.

ALL 3: Are -- you -- prepared?

AVIVA: For what?

AUDREY: Are you prepared?

AVIVA: For what?

AUDREY: For the pain of trying to be -- for the pain of trying to stay -- awake. Awake.

A sound of murmuring voices rise as the lights fade.

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ACT I, Scene 6: The Gauntlet

The murmuring voices continue during the scene change into SAVORY's office. American flag. In the office are AVIVA, BIJU, ALEXA, and SAVORY.

SAVORY: That's what she nailed to the door -- restitution.

BIJU: And you didn't --

SAVORY: Didn't what?

BIJU: Straighten her out?

SAVORY: She was not open for reversal.

BIJU: Elton, Aviva can't be hammered --

SAVORY: Nobody forces anyone --

ALEXA: And I voted for her.

BIJU: So did I.

SAVORY: So did I.

BIJU: Acting like the lord of the manor --

ALEXA: Restitution --

SAVORY: (*looking at AVIVA*) She was very clear about it, Biju: another picture that "matures" her point of view. Then she'll re-open the exhibit. That, in a hard nutshell, is the offer on the table.

ALEXA: I don't understand what was so wrong with the first one.

BIJU: Alexa -- it's so simple.

ALEXA: I hate when you take that tone.

BIJU: Those with power, who have tasted power, also have the taste for liking to snap it and crack it.

BIJU makes the sound of a whip.

BIJU: Simple.

ALEXA: We've now moved back to Haiti.

BIJU: An early lesson learned. They don't like the little people pointing out their faults. Just as soon break the little fingers off like twigs -- kah-rack! Lord Helms looks at her mirror, sees the face, the visage [French pronunciation], of a protector of the community's virtue. The gatekeeper, the knight in shiny armor --

ALEXA: Biju, sit down.

BIJU: Making the word flesh, that's all.

Imaginary sword stabs.

BIJU: The knight in shiny armor --

AVIVA: Stop it. Everyone -- just -- stop it.

They wait for AVIVA to speak.

AVIVA: There's nothing wrong with her doing that.

BIJU: What?

AVIVA: She's not doing anything wrong by doing that.

The three adults are momentarily struck silent by her words.

AVIVA: Someone should do it. Someone should step up and do it.

SAVORY: Aviva --

AVIVA: I voted for her, too -- my first vote -- my adult ID. Pulled that lever -- ka-ching. I've been thinking.

BIJU: You always do.

AVIVA: I've been thinking a lot. To you: family -- always priority-one -- right?

BIJU: Yes.

AVIVA: Community, too --

BIJU: Just a bigger family --

AVIVA: All those nightmare stories about Papa Doc, Baby Doc, Ton-tons --

BIJU: Family was all that kept those dark nights away.

AVIVA: And you, always on about healing, the spirit --

ALEXA: Your wicked Wiccan mother --

AVIVA: That tee-shirt you made me wear: "The bloom of soul -- "

ALEXA: " -- that breaks the cage of thing" --

AVIVA: (*overlapping*) "-- the cage of thing." From some soy chunk advertising thing, wasn't it?

ALEXA: Yes. Remember how god-awful --

BIJU: I remember that -- oooh!

AVIVA: The cage of thing. Cage, cage, cage, break. Break the cage to heal.

ALEXA: Clean the slate and liberate!

AVIVA: You both have always taught me how important -- all of it --

BIJU: Of course.

AVIVA: So --

SAVORY: Aviva?

ALEXA: Let us help you, Aviva.

BIJU: (*to SAVORY*) What are our options?

ALEXA: Wait a second, Biju. Aviva. Aviva. Keep talking to us. Community, healing, cage --

AVIVA: I had a dream.

BIJU: About what?

AVIVA: It confused me.

DRAGÓN appears in the "doorway." SAVORY motions him to come in.

DRAGÓN: I got your note -- what's going --

SAVORY: Aviva, if you want to talk about it, you're with friends.

AVIVA: Mr. D. This is right in your neighborhood, Mom: ring-ring the I-Ching.

ALEXA: The dream.

AVIVA: The dream -- *(to DRAGÓN)* I had a dream -- *(to ALL)* The dream brought me to someone named Audrey Santo -- a young girl -- in a coma --

DRAGÓN: Her? *(to everyone)* People go to her for miracles.

BIJU: She exists?

DRAGÓN: Four thousand people once came to a Catholic Mass in a football stadium while she laid out stiff in a little glass house. Constant pilgrimages to her home. Even the Church is investigating for possible miracles -- they'd hate to miss a new one. You dreamed about her?

BIJU: How do you know about her?

AVIVA: I didn't -- I didn't think I did.

BIJU: You had a vision.

People ponder the word "vision."

AVIVA: She spoke right into my bones -- right into them. She gave me an -- an -- an annunciation? Is that it?

BIJU: Ah, yes!

ALEXA: About what?

AVIVA: That being a painter was being selfish. That I was -- that I was stuck in believing that I was important. That I should let it -- the whole cage thing of it -- just let it go. If I did something to hurt people's feelings --

SAVORY: Norman --

DRAGÓN: She didn't.

AVIVA: I did, Mr. D., yes, I did. I painted -- what I painted -- even though I liked what I painted -- I painted it to stick a finger in her eye. I did do that. And she got it, right in the eye.

DRAGÓN: I can't say I feel much sorry for --

SAVORY: Careful --

AVIVA: And maybe other people got it, too -- you know

AVIVA uses her finger.

AVIVA: -- jab, jab, jab, jab, jab. So why be surprised when they jerk in pain and go bam, bam? I meant to trash her. I did. Meant it. Because I'd decided she wasn't in on the truth the way I was. So who am I? Who am I to do that? Why should I get away with acting like - like -- some terrorist?

DRAGÓN: You're not a terrorist --

AVIVA: Oh, because I'm an artist? The two can't walk in the same shoes? I think what she did was good. She was protecting the community -- what you told me we all should always do.

BIJU: But I didn't mean this --

AVIVA: Then what did you mean, Dad? Clear it up for me.

ALEXA: Hold my hand.

AVIVA: She speaks for a lot of people.

ALEXA: Here, hold.

AVIVA: And she's doing exactly what I'm trying to do: speak to people.

AVIVA does not hold ALEXA's hand.

DRAGÓN: It's not the same thing at all.

AVIVA: Look -- all of you. Friends, my friends, friends of friends, friends of friends I don't even have -- they're all fucking like rabbits. (to SAVORY and DRAGÓN) Sorry -- but you know this, too, don't you? And what are most of these --

AVIVA makes a hand gesture about "coupling."

AVIVA: Disasters. I know this, you know this -- it's like we're waiting for the balloons to blow.

AVIVA makes a gesture of a rounded pregnant belly.

AVIVA: So what do I do? What's my contribution? I sit on my prissy little "gifted and talented" high horse and say that the person advising them to zip it up is -- ignorant. When clearly she ain't. Who the fuck am I, then? Sorry. Most of these people should "just say no" -- it'd add a new word to their spellcheck.

AVIVA takes a deep breath.

AVIVA: That's what the dream was about, I think. And I don't have a clue to what I'm supposed to do.

BIJU: Well. Aviva -- I don't know what to say.

SAVORY: Nothing has to be decided right now.

ALEXA: But she does want an answer.

SAVORY: One out of two -- yes or no. By week's end. But not right at this moment.

DRAGÓN: (to SAVORY) What are you going to do?

BIJU: That's what I've been wanting to know.

DRAGÓN: What are we going to do?

SAVORY: You can't do anything.

DRAGÓN: Doesn't anyone have a little desire to fight back? (to AVIVA) Don't you?

SAVORY: This is not your call.

DRAGÓN: Listen. Listen. The poet laureate of England gets about a hundred bucks a year, and his only job is to write poetry to celebrate the country that uses him. Almost without exception, the poetry is mierda. Why? Written on demand from a king or a queen who does not want to be upset. Queen Helms wants you as her laureate. Will you, won't you? That's the question on the table. (to AVIVA) Guernica. Remember? Remember? And Goya.

AVIVA: Quinquela Martín.

DRAGÓN: You know this drill, Aviva. They all made the world a different thing to see, which made all the "see-ers" different, too. Don't worry about your power. Worry about people like her who only want to shorten it. Disappointed, nostalgic -- you were on the nail.

SAVORY: Norman -- Look, I hate to bring this up, but, well, here is another two cents here that is a hard fact. You know the power she has over the committee -- especially the school budget. Which is coming up for review. Soon. I'm sorry, I wish I didn't have to say this -- but there is a proposal to cut back arts funding.

DRAGÓN: (to AVIVA) There's the squeeze play.

The "change of class" bell rings.

DRAGÓN: I've got to go. (to BIJU and ALEXA) Call me, talk to me, if you want, okay? (to AVIVA) Welcome to the minefield.

DRAGÓN leaves.

SAVORY: I'm sorry.

ALEXA: Norman's just being the fiery frustrated Norman we love and know.

BIJU: When your feet are bare, you don't need a loose cannon like him around.

ALEXA: He's not the loose one -- well, the only loose one.

BIJU: Steel-toed boots for everyone!

ALEXA: Could we sue her?

SAVORY: Somebody's already working on that.

ALEXA: Run an impeachment?

SAVORY: Is strong principle a high crime?

ALEXA: A coup, then.

BIJU: We'd have to run for the hills if it croaks.

ALEXA: We'd rally the masses.

BIJU: I wouldn't do well in the hills. Neither would you. Besides, we don't have any hills around here -- and masses -- there ain't no masses around here, either!

ALEXA: I know masses of masses --

AVIVA: In the dream --

Everyone pays attention.

AVIVA: In the dream she asked me -- she asked me if I was prepared.

ALEXA: Prepared.

AVIVA: "For the pain of trying to be -- for the pain of trying to stay -- awake." Exact quote.

ALEXA: Did you understand that?

AVIVA: All I know is that it makes me feel like wanting to take a long, long sleep.

AVIVA puts on her Walkman. Lights dim, transitional music comes up. SAVORY removes flag as the PRAYERS, UTILITY 5, and AUDREY enter.

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ACT I, Scene 7: The Dream Complete

The three PRAYERS, AUDREY, UTILITY 5, and AVIVA take up their positions at the end of Act I, Scene 5: the PRAYERS on their knees in front of AVIVA and bowing their heads, AUDREY and UTILITY 5 down center. Lights up. AVIVA takes off her headphones.

AUDREY: Are you prepared?

AVIVA: Tell me for what.

AUDREY: No one can tell you.

AVIVA: Then how can I be?

PRAYER 1: It will not get easier.

PRAYER 2: Or more understandable.

PRAYER 3: It can't be avoided.

ALL 3: And you are responsible for knowing everything.

AUDREY: Do not forget.

AVIVA: What?

AUDREY: The letting go.

AVIVA: I can't.

AUDREY: The peace in letting go.

AVIVA: A peace like death.

PRAYER 1: So is this life of art -- each brushstroke a tick of the second hand --

PRAYER 2: Each color shades into decay --

PRAYER 3: Every canvas haunted by your eventual dissolving.

AVIVA: That's what gives the artist's life such weight and voltage!

PRAYER 1: Oh --

PRAYER 2: -- such --

PRAYER 3: -- confidence!

PRAYER 1: Her faith --

PRAYER 2: So touching --

PRAYER 3: Her faith --

ALL 3: Unearned.

AUDREY: If they disagree? Deny? Demean? Destroy?

AVIVA: Then I will fight.

PRAYER 1: The folly of youth --

PRAYER 2: The overpriced arrogance --

PRAYER 3: They think they have an infinite amount of skin to lose.

AVIVA: I will lose it all, then.

AUDREY: You will.

The PRAYERS gather around AUDREY, as at the top of the scene, leaving AVIVA in her own light, as at the top of the scene.

ALL 3: There is another way.

AVIVA: There is no other way.

AUDREY: You will be sliced naked to the bone.

AVIVA: Good.

AVIVA closes her eyes, as if she has gone back to sleep. Lights out on AUDREY and the PRAYERS. The murmuring continues. Then AVIVA awakens abruptly, and as she speaks, the murmuring stops.

AVIVA: Yes!

Then, with a tone of fear and realization as she sees herself along.

AVIVA: No.

To black. Music for transition into intermission.

INTERMISSION

ACT II, Scene 1: The Theses Nailed To The Door

Lights up center stage, where HELMS stands at a small lectern. Placed upstage, either right or left, is AVIVA in front of a canvas on an easel. She has a palette in her hand and a brush. While HELMS speaks, she paints, but it's clear she has no enthusiasm for it. She wears the headphones. Sounds gradually fade out.

HELMS does not have to stay at the lectern; she can move about freely. However, when she moves away from the lectern, the area into which she moves should be lighted, and the light on the lectern out, and then the area darkened when she moves back to the lectern. The effect is of her causing light to shine wherever she moves. The light on AVIVA stays up.

HELMS: Breakfast with the Rotary -- always a favorite. Because I know that here I will find citizens who make things work, make this city a fine, and a finer, place to live. I also know that breakfast speakers should keep to light topics -- but -- "but" -- I'm sure you heard it coming -- I do want to -- have to -- bring up what has been swirling around like angry bees -- the art exhibit. Yes, I did what was reported -- I closed it down because one of the "artists" made what I thought -- what you all would have probably thought -- made a bad argument. She said that my effort -- on the behalf of your children -- to make abstinence the primary form of the health education we offer in our system was, well, mis-informed. She didn't say this in words, mind you, right to my face -- she didn't face me or you directly. Instead, she snuck her disagreement in under the disguise of the art exhibit. It was a thin disguise.

The five UTILITY characters enter and sit on the floor in front of her, facing her; they are dressed like high school students.

HELMS: It hit the fan -- just ask my secretary. And not an easy decision to live with. I understand the power of the artist. I admire the artist -- I envy the artist. I wish I had the talent, in any medium, to do what this artist did to me: bring the mind and spirit to a boil. But the artist -- and art -- doesn't exist in a vacuum. We ask all sorts of people who do business in our society to live up to standards -- you all have to do that every day -- why shouldn't artists be asked to do the same? And why shouldn't those standards be ones that we can all agree to, that can bind us together at a time when everything in the world conspires to rip us apart? Well -- I've taken up enough of your time. Have some more coffee, and especially another piece of that pastry, and I'll take any questions.

UTILITY 1 stands and faces the audience but speaks as if to HELMS.

UTILITY 1: Councilor Helms --

HELMS: Aren't you supposed to be in school?

UTILITY 5 stands and faces the audience.

UTILITY 5: Homeroom is in an hour.

UTILITY 2 stands and faces the audience.

UTILITY 2: Councilor Helms, we have a question for you -- which is why we came here this morning.

HELMS: Well, I asked for questions, so stand and deliver.

UTILITY 3 stands and faces the audience.

UTILITY 3: We're some of the other artists from the exhibit, and we think that what you did to Aviva Matthews and us is unfair.

HELMS: I don't disagree. Your question?

UTILITY 4 stands and faces the audience.

UTILITY 4: We heard that you'll open up the exhibit again if Aviva paints a new picture that you like. Is that true?

HELMS: Where did you hear this?

UTILITY 5: Around.

HELMS: An art teacher, perhaps? Never mind. Yes, I said that.

UTILITY 1: We just want to say -- all of us here, all us artists -- that we think that's not right.

UTILITY 2 pulls out a piece of paper and reads from it.

UTILITY 2: The First Amendment --

HELMS: Good to see the history teachers are doing their jobs.

UTILITY 2: -- The First Amendment is not about protecting the speech of the majority but of the minority. The majority will always have the power to say what it wants to say, which can lead to tyranny --

HELMS: No one here is a tyrant.

UTILITY 2 hands the paper to UTILITY 5 to finish, who pushes on.

UTILITY 5: The minority, like artists, need to have the right to speak freely so that the search for truth can go forward; this is the essence of democracy --

HELMS: Did you all write that?

UTILITY 3: With some help.

HELMS: The rest of you believe that?

They agree.

HELMS: I believe in the First Amendment, too, believe it or not.

UTILITY 4: Then why are you forcing Aviva to paint a new picture?

HELMS: I'm not forcing anyone -- freedom of choice. She's free to choose.

UTILITY 3: Except the picture she painted.

HELMS: Limits even on choice -- and she happened to cross one.

UTILITY 5: Artists do sometimes.

HELMS: Look, it's all a balance, isn't it? You can see that. My new curriculum is about dealing with a problem -- her painting directly undercuts that. I'm trying to save some lives -- your lives, really, to bring it down to cases -- and she's telling people that saying "no" is, well, I'm not sure what she thinks about it, only that she thinks her "no" is better than my "no." We disagree. My job is to promote the public good. And it was in the public good to give her "no" back to her.

UTILITY 1: What if she doesn't do the painting?

During the next lines, AVIVA takes out a small pen knife and slowly, methodically, cuts the canvas to tatters.

HELMS: No exhibit. If you don't like that, take it up with her, as I said. *(to the general audience)* This is good, fruitful -- obviously some of our best standing in front of us. I think we should give them a hand for their grit.

HELMS claps. The lights go out one at a time on the UTILITY characters. They sit.

HELMS: Well, back to the business of keeping this a great city. Thank you for having me here. Any time is fine with me -- I like playing this room.

The murmuring comes back up as the lights fade down on HELMS and AVIVA. Cross-fade sound to meditative transition music.

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ACT II, Scene 2: Aviva and Helms

HELMS's office, consisting of an American flag and the lectern she used with a huge Bible-looking book on it, open. BIJU and ALEXA enter carrying chairs; they sit. AVIVA enters carrying a chair and a canvas wrapped in kraft paper. She props the canvas on the chair. Lights up; several beats as the three wait for HELMS to enter. HELMS enters.

HELMS: Sorry I'm late. Business. Over at the school, as a matter of fact. It seems that someone has been organizing support for you, young lady. There's a tee-shirt -- have you seen it? -- "Viva Aviva!" Viva Aviva. Almost a palindrome. Well, it's nice to know you have friends. I see you've brought me something.

AVIVA makes no move to unwrap the canvas.

HELMS: You can unwrap it.

AVIVA continues to remain still.

HELMS: *(to BIJU and ALEXA)* Is she all right?

ALEXA: Aviva, honey, if you don't want to --

HELMS: I hate to push the point, but today is the deadline. *(to BIJU and ALEXA)* Have either of you seen --

BIJU: No -- she did this all in her private way.

HELMS: I see -- or, rather, I don't see -- it -- which is the point of this meeting. Ms. Matthews, would you show me what you've done.

AVIVA unwraps the canvas and hands it to HELMS: it's the canvas she sliced in Act II, Scene 1. The canvas hangs in tatters. HELMS shows the canvas to BIJU and ALEXA.

HELMS: You weren't aware?

ALEXA: No. Beeba --

HELMS is strangely moved by the canvas.

AVIVA: Do what you want with it. I can't say.

HELMS: This wasn't what I was expecting.

ALEXA: You shouldn't be expecting anything from her.

BIJU: I think we're done here. You've humiliated her far more than enough.

HELMS: *(to AVIVA)* I don't want to humiliate her at all.

BIJU: Maybe we should give you your own medicine back.

HELMS: You'll have to take a number -- *(to AVIVA)* What made you do --

BIJU: Let's go, Aviva.

BIJU and ALEXA move to exit.

HELMS: Wait.

AVIVA and HELMS lock eyes for a moment. HELMS looks at the canvas, then back to AVIVA, puts the canvas down.

HELMS: I think I know what's happening with you. Inside. Right here.

HELMS taps her own breastbone.

AVIVA: Then you can more of this than I do.

BIJU: Aviva.

HELMS: Mr. and Mrs. Matthews, let me just have a second with Aviva. A few seconds.

HELMS points to the canvas.

HELMS: It's about this.

ALEXA: Aviva --

AVIVA: It's all right. I'm all right.

ALEXA: This is very painful for her.

HELMS: That's the paradox about fertility, Mrs. Matthews.

BIJU and ALEXA wait.

HELMS: You're disheartened.

AVIVA: That doesn't take a Ph.D.

HELMS: Your anger. Your pride. You can't think straight, can you? Can you?

AVIVA: No.

HELMS: It thickens up your eyes, your ears, your laughter -- doesn't it?

AVIVA: That's all that seemed to come out.

HELMS: That's because those feelings are shaping you, not the other way around.

AVIVA: Your point?

HELMS: You have to shape them. You will make them more powerful that way. Right now it's -

-

AVIVA: Right now I've had about all I can eat.

HELMS: All right -- I understand. But one last thing.

HELMS indicates the canvas.

HELMS: This is not just me, is it? Something else is digging its way through you.

AVIVA: Something, nothing. I don't want to talk about it.

HELMS: But there is.

AVIVA: You wouldn't believe me if I said it.

HELMS: It's enough to for you to say what you're saying. It's enough for you not to want to be stuck on pride and anger, like so many other people.

AVIVA: It doesn't feel good.

HELMS: Then I want to throw one more thing into this stew.

AVIVA: Load it on.

HELMS: To lighten it up.

AVIVA: Throw it in.

HELMS: I admire your grit.

AVIVA: My what?

HELMS: Your grit.

AVIVA: What exactly is "grit"?

HELMS: Like sandpaper -- the rough stuff that shapes something else.

AVIVA: It sounds like an old word.

HELMS: Consider who's saying it. But a tested one. And you've got it.

AVIVA: "Grit" is good?

HELMS: "Grit" is good.

AVIVA: Why are you saying this?

HELMS: Because I admire anything that refuses to take things easy. I never had the luxury -- and I don't think you want to, either.

BIJU: (to AVIVA) We should go.

HELMS: You've got two fights to fight. The outside fight: the world always wants to mark us down as dirt and sweep us away. Or even worse, just make us ordinary. Some resist, like you. Like me. The other fight -- that's in the privacy of your own doubt, your own terror. The fight most people medicate themselves out of. The one that's always frightened me the most.

AVIVA: You, scared?

HELMS: Ah, see? I suspect that you're no different.

HELMS holds up the picture.

HELMS: I am going to keep this -- as your first commissioned work.

HELMS holds it up against what would be the wall.

HELMS: Here?

AVIVA: Yes -- so it can be gritty in the eye.

HELMS: "Viva Aviva!" Now apply that edge.

AVIVA: To what?

HELMS: To another picture.

AVIVA: I don't understand.

HELMS: To another picture. I asked you for another picture.

HELMS holds up the canvas.

HELMS: Interesting, but not sufficient.

AVIVA: I still don't understand.

HELMS: I am giving you an extension until Monday.

AVIVA: An extension.

HELMS: A second second chance.

ALEXA: Why?

BIJU: Because she won't stop until she gets what she wants.

HELMS: (*indicating AVIVA*) What the two of us want -- it's not all that different, is it, Ms. Aviva Matthews? Is it?

BIJU: Well, then, I am lost -- please give me clues so that I may find the light.

HELMS: I'm in a giving mood only this far, Mr. Matthews. (*to AVIVA*) The rest you can figure out on your own.

HELMS holds up the canvas.

HELMS: I do like this, you know. The shock of its honesty. To expose yourself like that. Great pains, great gains. We'll meet in Mr. Savory's office.

BIJU: Let's go.

HELMS: Onward and upward.

Lights change to down center; HELMS exits with the painting and wrapping paper. The lectern is removed. BIJU and ALEXA each bring a chair down center, set it, and sit on it. AVIVA trails. The action is continuous; they can begin speaking before they reach the playing area.

ALEXA: I feel horrible.

BIJU: Imagine how she feels.

ALEXA: I feel -- at the mercy.

BIJU: Think of her.

ALEXA: When you unwrapped that canvas --

BIJU: Want to know a truth?

ALEXA: What?

BIJU: I was glad you gave that to her.

ALEXA: I wasn't --

BIJU: I was proud of you!

ALEXA: Don't prime her!

BIJU: That weasel!

ALEXA: Don't use her!

BIJU: Use her?

ALEXA: Everyone is using her --

BIJU: For what?

ALEXA: To make a point --

BIJU: No one's using her --

ALEXA: Stick it there, twist it --

BIJU: Me?

ALEXA: You! A whiff of that Haitian revolutionary spirit --

BIJU: Not true --

ALEXA: -- and you're ready to push her on the barricades!

BIJU: Not true!

ALEXA: For the greater glory!

BIJU: As opposed to you, of the clean hands --

AVIVA: Dad --

ALEXA: I'll admit it, I'm guilty, too -- I don't want to lose my Beeba.

BIJU: Your Beeba --

AVIVA: Your Beeba --

ALEXA: Yes, my Beeba -- my little girl -- my lost, little, protectable girl.

AVIVA sits.

ALEXA: When you unwrapped that canvas -- I have to be honest -- my heart sank.

BIJU: Me too, I must admit.

ALEXA: Boom, right down!

BIJU: Even as I thought, "Good, right in her eye" --

ALEXA: You know why? Because I suddenly saw the whole road of pain in front of you.

AVIVA: Mom --

ALEXA: Let me finish. I saw how nasty this world turns -- right between the ribs -- not like I didn't know that already -- but not to my baby. Not to my "Beeba." And I felt -- My heart sank. I couldn't protect you anymore -- if ever I could, I couldn't now.

AVIVA: I am eighteen.

BIJU: She is eighteen.

ALEXA: And eighteen has what to do with what's in here?

BIJU: Alexa --

ALEXA: As if eighteen finishes anything! Beeba --

AVIVA: Neither of you -- neither of you -- can protect me. Maybe at one point -- you know, holding me up straight on the bicycle. But then you let go and --

Her gesture should be one of "And then you released me into the world."

BIJU: So what are you going to do?

ALEXA: Biju!

BIJU: She has to make plans. On the other side of second second chances and councilors, she has to make plans --

ALEXA: The world's too quick --

BIJU: What can we do to help?

ALEXA: It's too quick! All right! (to AVIVA) So what can we do?

AVIVA: Begging your pardons, what am I going to do. I have three days to suss out the scene -
- symbolic, huh?

BIJU: Rise, fall, and rise again.

AVIVA: That last step -- slippery.

ALEXA: Really, Beeba: what do you want?

AVIVA: What do I want ? What can I want? There's Councilor Helms, who -- well --

BIJU: What?

AVIVA: I'm not sure. But there's Mr. Dragón guilting me with Picasso and Goya -- Picasoya -- and poor Mr. Savory's pelotas squeezed between Councilor Helms and the school budget, and my fellow classmates middle-fingering me for fucking up an extra-curricular

activity on their résumé. If I re-paint, I can please -- let's see -- one councilor -- maybe, one principal, five fellow canvas-biters: seven bits. Mr. Dragón -- left in the lurch.

BIJU: Us -- in the "lurch" category. Right?

ALEXA nods wearily.

AVIVA: The score: seven pleased, three crushed on the rocks of despair.

ALEXA: And you?

AVIVA: "Me"? At this moment, right here, this spot, this now -- who is "me" in all this backwash?

BIJU: Whatever you choose --

ALEXA: Whoever you choose to make that choice --

BIJU: -- you know we'll support you.

AVIVA: For "granite." I know. But --

ALEXA: Ah, that "but" --

AVIVA: I have to do it this way.

ALEXA: I know the agenda of that "but" --

AVIVA: Because I have "grit."

ALEXA: -- the road of pain -- single fare -- return trip open.

AVIVA: This is solo. Solo grit. Lifted, flung like dung -- voom -- right out there! That's my arc right now.

BIJU: Even Charles Lindbergh had a ground crew, hey?

AVIVA: Hey!

BIJU: Someone to do the worrying --

ALEXA: Someone ground-based. Keep the light in the window burning.

AVIVA: Well, then, you can be my ground-based techies and help me suffah for the ahts!

ALEXA: I'll post the mythic outlines for the journey --

BIJU: I'll do the hospitality.

ALEXA: The Caribbean warmth.

AVIVA: And me --

BIJU: You -- you go long!

Mock soccer kick to AVIVA. AVIVA "heads" the ball into the net, dances for the "goal."

BIJU: And we'll all cheer.

ALEXA: Which cannot be told apart from the sound of weeping.

BIJU: Well -- dinner, anyone? We can still do that one all together.

The lights come down as they remain there. Transition music.

* * * * *

ACT II, Scene 3: The Solo Flight

NOTE: The next scene can be staged in any number of ways, but it is AVIVA's journey in thinking through what to do. On her "travels" she comes across a variety of characters that she incorporates. The UTILITY characters play the various people she comes across, and they will exit and enter as needed. As much of the mood and setting should be done through lighting, sound, music, and simple props.

* * * * *

As BIJU and ALEXA leave the stage with the chairs, the transition music cross-fades into the sound of a propeller plane starting up.

UTILITY 5, completely naked, upstage on a platform, in a sharp downlight, swirls her arms like airplane propellers. As they enter, the other UTILITY characters will place the following items on the platform: red panties, red bra, red garter belt, a pair of frilly white ankle socks, a pair of black patent leather shoes, and a white frilly dress. At the end of the scene, UTILITY 5, under AVIVA's guidance, will dress in these items.

AVIVA is given a sketch pad and pencil, and she wears her headphones throughout. She also wears an old leather flying helmet and a silk scarf.

As soon as AVIVA enters, UTILITY 5 stops airplaning; the propeller sounds cuts out. UTILITY 5 then collapses onto the platform into a fetal position.

UTILITY 1 & 2 walk on: 20-something academic deconstructionists, drinking coffee.

UTILITY 1 lays a pair of red panties on the pedestal.

AVIVA overhears them, begins sketching. They should strike poses as they talk, affectedly natural.

UTILITY 1: Tweety Bird or Sylvester?

UTILITY 2: Nothing appealing about either one.

UTILITY 1: Then resonates. In sympathy with.

UTILITY 2: I feel the most tragedy for Sylvester.

UTILITY 1: Not Tweety.

UTILITY 2: Too smug. I'd eat him just to delete that baby-puke speech impediment: "I taut I
taw -- "

UTILITY 1: But Sylvester brings his hunger on himself --

UTILITY 2: It comes from love --

UTILITY 1: He wants to eat Tweety!

UTILITY 2: Only because that's all Tweety offers -- I mean, Tweety's stuck in an old paradigm --
cats eat birds. Sylvester wants a different union -- cross-species. But the only way he
can connect is on terms laid down by Tweety -- he can either play the eating game or
leave the field -- and leaving, obviously, is not a live option for Sylvester.

UTILITY 1: Because he's a -- (*imitating SYLVESTER's lisp*) -- "thyctic thtalker"!

UTILITY 2: Every obsession is based on love.

UTILITY 1: Every love doesn't need to be an obsession.

UTILITY 2: Don't be so sure.

*UTILITY 3 enters, a literal "bag lady," wearing a huge garbage bag like a dress and
an elaborate head-dress made of a folded garbage bag; she carries a spritzer bottle.
She drops a red bra onto UTILITY 5's pedestal.*

*UTILITY 3 squirts the spritzer bottle several times into the air, watches the droplets
descend, then steps under them.*

UTILITY 2: Because obsession's the only kind we are ever interested in, isn't it? Who wants
ordinary when reality comes to intervene?

UTILITY 1: But he -- he is a "he," isn't he?

UTILITY 2: I don't know -- Either of them, actually --

UTILITY 1: We need some anatomically correct animation here before proceeding.

They exit as UTILITY 3 repeats her motion twice more, quickly. UTILITY 3 then blesses herself, and yells out.

UTILITY 3: I thaptize be! Messéd [two syllables] are the bleek. Ressed are the blighteous.

UTILITY 3 exits, repeating the phrases.

UTILITY 3: Messéd are the bleek. Ressed are the blighteous. Messéd are the bleek. Ressed are the blighteous.

AVIVA scrawls UTILITY 3 into her sketchbook in heavy strokes.

As UTILITY 3 exits, UTILITY 4 enters with a chair, a book, and a red garter belt. He lays the garter belt on the platform.

UTILITY 4 sits. He plays with his hair, scratches his scalp, etc. AVIVA sketches him.

UTILITY 4: I always do this -- when I'm reading a good book! -- so go fuck yourself if you can't stand a guy pulling on his brain to tie the words in so they don't leak out.

He reads frantically for a few moments.

UTILITY 4: I went to the diner, had dinner, came here subsequently -- not consequently! -- to read a good book to see if I wanted it --

UTILITY 2 enters dressed all in black wearing a dog collar, chains, and anything which can make his body look pierced. He puts one frilly white ankle sock on the platform.

Half-way through UTILITY 2's first lines, UTILITY 3 comes in with a bucket and drum-sticks and a change of clothes and begins bucket-drumming, low at first throughout, then loud at the end. AVIVA sketches.

UTILITY 4: -- and if you don't wanna know anything else about me, then shut up -- Jeez!

UTILITY 2: (to UTILITY 4) Hey, demon spawn --

UTILITY 4: You don't wanna know anything about me --

UTILITY 2: Hey, lickspittle --

UTILITY 4: I'm just trying to keep things in!

UTILITY 2: Move your pathetic pathogens out of here!

UTILITY 4 exits. As he does, he pulls the second frilly sock out of his pocket and drops it on the platform.

UTILITY 2: Like I had a shirt that said "Let It All Go To Hell," with a copyright symbol next to it. What a goof, man! Copyright misery -- make some bucks off it, why not, everybody does, the transnational multinationals do. Fuck, I bought the tee-shirt, didn't I?

UTILITY 2 begins to talk a little louder to get over the drum.

UTILITY 2: My fucking parents wanted to know why I let everything go. Why not -- everything let me go. Work hard, buy shit, vote for suck-up politicians, die full of poisons and scar tissue.

The drumming is louder now.

UTILITY 2: Everything's bleak, so I wear black. Everything's wrecked, so I retch. I puncture my body because beauty sucks and I can bleed out all the tox-sicks.

The drumming stops.

UTILITY 2: I got the perfect freedom. I got the perfect freedom that comes from hating everything.

UTILITY 2 starts to exit, then abruptly returns.

UTILITY 2: I'm the court jester. I'm the canary in the cave.

UTILITY 2 exits. The drumming continues as UTILITY 1 & 4 enter. UTILITY 4 lays the first black patent leather shoe on the platform.

UTILITY 1 is bedraggled, forlorn; she smokes a cigarette in this manner: her right arm metronomes up and down, she barely puffs, while her left arm strokes her hair or face or ear lobe. She never stops the motions, and smokes all through UTILITY 4's lines. She should carry some kind of ratty bag. UTILITY 4 wears a read bandana around his throat and sits cross-legged. The bucket drummer continues to drum very softly. AVIVA sketches them both.

UTILITY 4: Do you know why you don't fly off the earth? Starlight is heavy. You try to jump -- go ahead.

UTILITY 4 gets up, jumps, then sits back down, or tries to jump from a sitting position.

UTILITY 4: Going up, but something's going down. Like the gentle weight of a mother's breath --

No poetic reference to what you didn't have!

Starlight is heavy, yes. It's all in the equations, yes, but most people --

-- most people are fucking donkeys! --

-- most people don't know it. Einstein wanted to disown it. Secret knowledge --
Kabala. Kabalabalabalabala.

You can't accelerate faster than starlight, which is why it keeps you on the ground. It's obvious. The stars care about you.

Slam the door on that one Slam it Slam it

It's all in the equations --

Einstein didn't want you to know that.

UTILITY 4 gets up and goes to UTILITY 3 playing the bucket.

UTILITY 4: Stop it! You don't spike the rhythm right. You do not have a place in the equations!

UTILITY 4 kicks the drum away.

UTILITY 4: Goddamn, I wish people wouldn't get out of line!

UTILITY 3 begins playing UTILITY 4 as a drum. UTILITY 4 drops to the ground, cross-legged, and lets himself be played. UTILITY 1 continues to smoke, abstracted.

UTILITY 2 comes on with several pendants around his neck: a cross, a peace symbol, a crystal. He drops the second black patent leather shoe on the platform.

UTILITY 2: He is the way, you know -- barbecue me if that isn't the Truth.

He comes to UTILITY 3, still drumming on UTILITY 4.

UTILITY 2: You walk a path of endless sorrow, my friend. My fiend. (to UTILITY 4) You are drummed out of life even as I show you the light.

UTILITY 4: Let me inform you about light.

UTILITY 2 grabs the drumsticks of UTILITY 3 and crosses them, like an "X".

UTILITY 2: To the funkier rhythm of a flukier power.

UTILITY 2 flings UTILITY 3 away and throws the sticks after her. UTILITY 3 leaves with sticks; the bucket remains on stage. UTILITY 2 turns to UTILITY 1, who is still smoking.

UTILITY 2: Endless rhythmic addiction, endless suck never bringing you to fullness.

UTILITY 4: Starlight is our mother. A motherfucker! Mom!

UTILITY 2: (to UTILITY 4) Sorrow cancels starlight.

UTILITY 4: No! Leave her alone.

UTILITY 2: Starlight is smoke -- no more, no less.

UTILITY 4: No!

UTILITY 2: The weight -- gone; the comfort -- dust; the link -- cracked.

UTILITY 4: No!

UTILITY 2: You're going -- going -- g[one] --

UTILITY 4: No!

UTILITY 4 grabs the bucket and puts it on his head, and begins beating his own rhythm. By this time, UTILITY 1's cigarette is out, but she continues making the motions.

UTILITY 3 comes on stage as a panhandler. She drops the white frilly dress on the platform.

UTILITY 3: A buck for luck? Too much drama for this mama. It's okay not to have spare change, not okay to have no sense. Get it -- cents, sense? Yeah, well, burn all my bridges all at once. You can ping me in the morning on my cell phone.

UTILITY 2: Endless prayer by the balls --

UTILITY 2 & 3 begin a slow game of patty-cake, but elaborately choreographed.

UTILITY 3: Equal op-por-tu-ni-ty -- when you have a gun. No big guy, no little guy -- when you have a gun. I hear in Florida they'll make having a gun mandatory. I don't want to be walking point down there -- when they have a gun.

UTILITY 2: Life rips through you at a higher caliber there.

UTILITY 4 pit-a-pats on the bucket in rhythm to the patty-cake, UTILITY 1 wanders, but in synch with the other rhythms.

Then lights out on everyone except AVIVA, who scrawls on her pad.

All the UTILITY people straighten and turn to watch her; UTILITY 4 takes off the bucket.

AVIVA throws down the pad, goes to the platform. She pokes UTILITY 5 with her pencil. Nothing. Pokes her again. Nothing. Goes to poke her a third time, and UTILITY 5 "wakes up." AVIVA gets on the platform with her and begins dressing her -- the artist making her next painting.

AVIVA: Whether I want it or not, it just keeps coming. My fingers drown in it -- charcoal blood, my rag-paper brain. Pours in from the outcasts cast out, line after line after line -- fire always burns from the margins in. More and more and more and more they come -- oh-

pressed, dee-pressed, sue-pressed, ree-pressed, com-pressed -- seeking me for their express purposes.

AVIVA arranges UTILITY 5 into what will be AVIVA's next painting.

AVIVA: Pressed into service -- the halt, lame, salted, blind, bleak, marxed, flattened, surplused, welfared out, branded, browned, blacked -- the nothing-left-to-lose, the depopulated, vox depopuli. I take life from this thickness that won't thin out, this hereness, nowness, thingness, thisness -- reality so distilled that it will not let me betray myself. Here I am at home, Councilor Helms.

UTILITY 5 is now arranged into "Abstinence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder."

AVIVA picks up her pad, turns to a new page. She signs her name and speaks as she does it, then shows it to the audience and UTILITY people.

AVIVA: Aviva. Matthews.

The UTILITY people leave. Transition music: bucket drumming at first with the airplane propellers, then something quieter; the light comes down slowly.

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ACT II, Scene 4: The New Picture

A seamless transition into the scene. UTILITY 5 looks demure: knees slightly in, a stance of modesty, etc. Whatever the stance, it must be comfortable! AVIVA hands off her garb but keeps the sketch pad. BIJU, ALEXA, SAVORY, and DRAGÓN enter. Everyone looks at AVIVA's new painting.

DRAGÓN: So you did it.

SAVORY: And the title?

AVIVA: "Abstinence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder."

SAVORY: Couldn't you just -- modify -- slightly -- She won't miss the sarcasm.

AVIVA: I don't think so. It's a "grit" thing.

SAVORY: What does that mean?

ALEXA: She'll be here soon.

AVIVA: Yes, she will.

SAVORY: *(to BIJU and ALEXA)* Couldn't you -- you know --

BIJU: We all had a long talk about it. She's old enough to bear her own decisions.

AVIVA: Mistakes.

BIJU: *(laughing)* Interesting choices.

SAVORY: So -- you are going to go with it -- Yes. All right. Just getting a feel for where I can hunker when the artillery begins. Well, we're all here -- let me see if she's here, then.

AVIVA: Wait. Wait.

DRAGÓN: What?

SAVORY: You can still change the --

AVIVA: You all need to know something going in. Come here.

The lights dim except for a light on the "painting." AVIVA opens up her sketchbook and hands it around. People look at it as she speaks. She is free to walk around and "into" the painting as she wants.

AVIVA: Look. Tucked up under -- you can see it in the sketch. Look close -- outline of a garter belt. Red. Just a hint of red, a spit. Slipped up on high on the thigh. And here, in the frill on the hem -- "sex" spelled out in the lace pattern. See, on that page? And here. On the left kneecap -- see the outline of the bone ridge? In profile -- Councilor Helms, but also the Wicked Witch.

The lights come up. Whoever has the sketchbook gives it back to AVIVA.

ALEXA: I didn't know you were -- *(to BIJU)* Did you?

AVIVA: No one will ever notice.

ALEXA: Then why do it?

BIJU: Because the resistance has to come out some way, hey?

ALEXA: But if it's not open --

BIJU: The truth will still be there. That's what's important, right? Poking its nose out.

ALEXA: I don't know --

SAVORY: I wish you hadn't. I really wish you had just gone --

AVIVA: You all defended me before --

DRAGÓN: Aviva --

AVIVA: So let her come --

SAVORY leaves to get HELMS. HELMS enters, nods a greeting to everyone. She then speaks to AVIVA.

HELMS: Well?

AVIVA indicates the painting. HELMS looks at it.

HELMS: What is the title this time?

AVIVA: "Abstinence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder."

HELMS gives AVIVA both a piercing and a quizzical look.

HELMS: Again?

AVIVA: "Abstinence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder."

HELMS: One more time.

Everyone fidgets slightly.

AVIVA: *(deliberately)* "Abstinence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder."

HELMS: A clever thing with words, don't you?

HELMS inspects the painting.

HELMS: But I'm going to ask you a very simple thing with very simple words: Where are they?

AVIVA: Where are what?

HELMS: The inside jokes. The things meant to embarrass me.

HELMS looks at AVIVA. There is an uneasy silence.

HELMS: I know you're not deaf.

AVIVA: Councilor Helms, I delivered the picture you wanted.

HELMS: Did you? *(to ALL)* Would you all testify that she did just that?

A decision has to be made.

DRAGÓN: Councilor, she gave you what you asked for: a shift in her point of view.

HELMS: That is the sound of a hair being split. *(to AVIVA)* Let me try a different tack, since I can't get anyone to 'fess up. Do you believe in this?

AVIVA: I believe in what's there.

HELMS: In the values behind the paint?

AVIVA: I believe in everything that comes out of me.

HELMS: And what comes out of you here -- that you believe? It's a simple, simple question; I'm surprised it tongue-ties you. What's at the heart of your heart? That's all I'm asking you to deliver.

There is a hefty silence.

HELMS: Just one honest thing.

ALEXA: (*half-hearted*) Just stop pushing her.

HELMS: This is barely a worthwhile shove.

ALEXA: Why treat her so badly?

HELMS: (*to DRAGÓN*) Come on. Let me hear the formula.

DRAGÓN: Artists don't need to be questioned --

HELMS: I knew I could depend on you.

DRAGÓN: They don't need to be questioned.

HELMS: Yes, yes, that's what I thought you'd say. (*deliberately, to ALL*) Fuck. All. That. And fuck all of you.

Silence crashes around them.

HELMS: My mother showed more art in cooking a meal for us than any museum full of your paintings. At least she gave something of worth to someone, did it with love, and knew, right down to her eye teeth, why she did what she did. Which is more than you can tell me standing in front of what you say you believe in -- "I believe in the painting." You, believe in the painting? You don't believe a stroke in it, do you? So why betray yourself saying crap like that? Your silence testifies.

AVIVA: The painting is what you wanted. I gave you what you wanted.

HELMS: No, you didn't. No, you didn't, because there's none of your heart in it. That's what you and I were talking about just last week -- the truth in your heart. And you betrayed it for -- what? A gesture? A witticism? A pose? And as for "why," I can't begin to think I know. (*to ALL*) There's no heart in any of you. (*to AVIVA*) I'll ask you one more time -- where are the insults?

Reluctantly, AVIVA shows HELMS all the hidden items.

AVIVA: This hint of red --

HELMS: So you did lie to me.

AVIVA: A garter belt, underneath.

HELMS: And you all knew.

AVIVA: I spelled out "sex" in the lace.

HELMS: So very clever.

AVIVA: And this --

HELMS: It looks like the profile of a witch.

AVIVA: That's you.

HELMS: So. A joke. The picture as stand-up joke. Standing up. A stand-up person, aren't you? Why even bother? (*with rage*) This artist, so true to her art -- Mr. Savory. This is what I want to do. Re-open the exhibit -- the others shouldn't be punished for her lack of character.

ALEXA: There is no need to insult --

HELMS: (*overrides*) Besides, I don't want to give the lawyers any work. As for this --

HELMS indicates the painting.

HELMS: Obviously not. At least not here. Do your dog-and-pony in a place that sucks up to cheap tricks. I'm sure Mr. Dragón knows lots of them.

BIJU: You have insulted all of us enough.

HELMS: Insulted you? Insulted you? Enough? I am amazed. At this moment, right here, right now, I wish I had the power to strike you all from the face of the earth, the way my daddy used to talk about, the way he would thunder about the wicked ways of the wicked ones, when he would strike out, when he would lash out, when he would straighten all of us out with his anger, sparing no rod, spoiling no child, saving our rotten souls --

Abruptly, HELMS breaks off, and it is clear she is agitated.

SAVORY: Councilor? Councilor? Do you need some water? Something? Councilor?

No immediate response, but HELMS looks at them all with a look mixed of anguish at a painful memory and apology for lashing out at them.

HELMS: I am sorry.

ALEXA: For what?

HELMS: The bill of particulars doesn't matter. *(to AVIVA)* You do not need my father. And you do not need me remembering him. *(to BIJU)* If I've insulted you, then don't vote for me next time -- agreed? Assuming you voted for me last time. Mr. Savory? The curriculum.

SAVORY: That is my job, Councilor.

HELMS: Good. *(to AVIVA)* And then you. You betrayed a trust.

AVIVA: You don't have a deed on me.

HELMS: I gave you a second chance.

AVIVA: I took it with no strings.

HELMS: I know. That's fine. But let's finish this journey. If you really believe I'm in the way --

AVIVA: I have my own --

HELMS: -- that I'm the witch --

AVIVA: I have my own --

HELMS: -- then prove it.

AVIVA: What do you want from me?

HELMS: In two days, in my office, you and anyone else you want to bring along, you explain to me what your first picture was all about -- at least that picture has some honesty in it.

HELMS indicates the painting.

HELMS: This ranks with whale shit when it comes to honesty. *(more intimately)* You are not going to avoid what you need to do. And I promise you --

AVIVA: What?

HELMS: Neither will I. Neither will I. Two days. *(to SAVORY)* Forward me a notice about the exhibit.

HELMS leaves. UTILITY 5 breaks her pose. No one speaks at first.

UTILITY 5: They contemplate their betrayals.

DRAGÓN: An artist doesn't --

UTILITY 5: Why so bitter?

SAVORY: Stop, Norman.

DRAGÓN: It's outrageous.

SAVORY: That's irrelevant. We all stood here and lied to her.

UTILITY 5: Remembering his own failures?

SAVORY: We can hardly feel superior.

DRAGÓN: You should --

SAVORY: I should not at all, and I won't -- It was stupid of me --

UTILITY 5: If only Aviva would fight his battles --

DRAGÓN: *(more to himself than the others)* Then we're all cowards --

SAVORY: You lied as well, don't forget. *(to BIJU and ALEXA)* And I have to say I am disappointed --

BIJU: Perhaps we should have --

SAVORY: I wouldn't tell you how to raise --

UTILITY 5: Have they been the best parents through this?

SAVORY: But, still, it would have all been better --

UTILITY 5: Some limits, maybe --

ALEXA: Aviva -- honey --

AVIVA: I need to get to fourth period.

ALEXA: Yes, of course.

AVIVA: Later.

ALEXA: Right.

AVIVA: Can I leave it here?

SAVORY: Pick it up after.

UTILITY 5: She must inevitably come to him.

AVIVA: Mr. D --

DRAGÓN: What?

UTILITY 5: To soothe him.

AVIVA: It's all right.

DRAGÓN: It's not all right, Aviva! You Americans -- Biju, you should know this better than anyone. For almost twenty years I have been here, and you all strike me like the frog in the pot of water. The flame gets turned up, little by little. Then, too late -- you're cooked! A little give-in here -- another stick on the fire. Another "it's all right," and you're slowly tenderized.

SAVORY: This is not the time.

DRAGÓN: (*overriding*) I just can't stand to -- The things I've spent my life loving -- that I've tried to teach you, because you're one of the best I've ever had -- all turned into little nothings that can be tossed away like orange rinds. I came from where, once, your life could be on the hook for the very thing you did -- dare make your voice loud and singular. Blood spilled into the wind over what you take for granted -- to pick up a brush and paint what you want! And you're telling me "it's all right" for this woman to declare that "You may only do this, and nothing else!" Incredible pain in those words for me, the pain of friends, of a country -- Don't expect me to act like the frog. I know the water's boiling -- it's always boiling! -- and don't expect me to shut my mouth!

AVIVA: (*in synch with PAINTING*) What do you want me to do?

UTILITY 5: (*in synch with AVIVA*) What do you want her to do?

DRAGÓN: I don't know. I don't know. My heart says "fight" --

UTILITY 5: "Fight my battles for me" --

DRAGÓN: My head says --

UTILITY 5: "I don't want to lose my job."

DRAGÓN: My head says that this councilor casts the shadow of a flea and that you can live past her, past all this.

UTILITY 5: Sound the retreat.

BIJU: Save energy for the real battles.

DRAGÓN: This is a real battle --

UTILITY 5: I am worth it!

DRAGÓN: -- but some will be more real. Just don't forget when it comes to those!

UTILITY 5: Don't forget me!

DRAGÓN: Don't pick up the habits of the frog!

UTILITY 5: I was your second rebellion!

AVIVA: I have your voice in my head --

DRAGÓN: Pretty annoying, isn't it?

UTILITY 5: It's a good voice, but used-up.

DRAGÓN: I should go.

DRAGÓN leaves.

UTILITY 5: *(to AVIVA)* You, however, are not used-up. Fight my battles, not his!

SAVORY: The home counties have been heard from.

UTILITY 5: In two days make my sister transform the witch.

AVIVA: I gotta book.

UTILITY 5: Two days.

SAVORY: Yes --

UTILITY 5 assumes its former position.

UTILITY 5: Now they will stand here, dumbfounded by their own complexities, and look at me for answers. None here. Try a mirror.

There is a moment when they all stand there, at a loss for words. Then AVIVA exits. The lights come down on the three adults looking at UTILITY 5. A single light stays up on UTILITY 5 briefly, and then all lights out.

* * * * *

ACT II, Scene 5: The Deposition

Lights dim. Transition music. UTILITY 1 now becomes the first PAINTING, the one hanging in the art show but unseen: a similar frilly dress as UTILITY 5 but in a darker color and with a torn hem; a pair of construction boots or Doc Martens, unlaced; and a length of chain wrapped around her knees and locked. The legs can be smudged. AVIVA has her sketchbook and wears her Walkman. UTILITY 2, 3, & 4 also bring

out chairs, and the American flag in its stand is set. The UTILITY characters sit. Lights up.

NOTE: In blocking this scene, AVIVA is allowed to move in any way she wants; her movements must match the force of her words. Also, after AVIVA undoes the chain, UTILITY 1 can move freely in her space.

UTILITY 2: What do you want to do?

UTILITY 3: What do you want us to do?

UTILITY 4: What can we really do?

ALL 3: Why are you even doing this?

AVIVA: No one ever asked me before.

UTILITY 2: To what?

AVIVA: Explain myself.

UTILITY 3: She hates you.

AVIVA: "Loved ones" don't whack you hard enough sometimes.

UTILITY 4: You want pain?

AVIVA: I want to spill the truth.

UTILITY 2 & 3: Whatever --

UTILITY 4: -- that is.

AVIVA walks to UTILITY 1.

AVIVA: I don't think I've ever really looked at her before.

To the UTILITY characters.

AVIVA: Hey, muchas gracias for coming --

AVIVA laces her hands into a stirrup.

AVIVA: -- for giving me a step up -- but, you know, I think this is a go-alone.

UTILITY 2: We rehearsed.

AVIVA: Dog-and-pony.

UTILITY 3: But we agree with you. Right?

UTILITY 2: Mostly.

UTILITY 4: Yeah, mostly.

AVIVA: If you're just "mostly," we'll be road kill. I need your complete and utter devotion.

UTILITY 3: Oh great one!

AVIVA: Get back to me in twenty years on that. No, look you've all been ace, "butt" --

AVIVA points to her posterior.

AVIVA: -- in the end -- you know, it really is just me and the dragon lady.

UTILITY 4: *(relieved)* WWF-style. Atomic pile driver and all.

UTILITY 2: You sure?

AVIVA: *(looking at UTILITY 1)* She's the only who really needs to be here. Wants to be here. Either we work this together --

AVIVA makes a sign of the cross.

AVIVA: I release you.

The three UTILITY characters rise and start to exit. As they do, HELMS walks in.

HELMS: You're leaving?

AVIVA: I asked them to bear me witness -- but now I've "unmasked" them.

HELMS: And you understand why she's done this?

UTILITY 2: I think so.

HELMS: You were at the Rotary.

UTILITY 3: Yes.

HELMS: Stay for the second round. I'd like them to stay.

AVIVA: Not necessary.

HELMS: *(shrugs)* Your call.

AVIVA: And the call is "Later."

UTILITY 1: We'll stay --

AVIVA: Released.

The UTILITY characters hesitate, only briefly, then exit. As HELMS speaks, she looks closely at UTILITY 1.

HELMS: They wanted to help.

AVIVA: They're like that.

HELMS: Hard to find good help today. But you seem to have no end of people saluting your flag. Why did you send them away?

AVIVA: Not their fight.

HELMS: This what we're having?

AVIVA: You want me to defend myself.

HELMS: I just want you to explain yourself, without lies. But -- if you want to see this as a fight -
- fight.

If AVIVA is wearing any sort of sweatshirt, coat, etc., she takes it off, as if preparing for a round. If not, some other gesture to show the preparation.

AVIVA: All right. You ready?

HELMS: Born so.

AVIVA: Okay. My main point? I just meant to make a point.

HELMS: That's old news.

AVIVA: But that's all of it.

HELMS: You need new news.

AVIVA: I don't underst[and] --

HELMS: Your "point" -- what was it? A little rope, a little dope, a little "dis," a little "dat" -- but no punch. What did you expect people to do after you dazzled 'em with your "point"?

AVIVA: Think about it.

HELMS: Because you made it?

AVIVA: Because it was made.

HELMS: Did the "point" come out in a dialogue?

AVIVA: No.

HELMS: A Q&A where people could "punch" you back?

AVIVA: No.

HELMS: Double fault. So how would you know if your "point" punctured them?

AVIVA: I wouldn't.

HELMS: *(overlapping)* And how would you know --

AVIVA: I was just trying --

HELMS: -- if the point moved them?

AVIVA: -- to make a point! I was just trying to make a point! You seem to make it my job to think about what they thought!

HELMS: You didn't.

AVIVA: I just knew what I thought! Could just barely snag that. What was in their brains -- not part of my plan.

HELMS: Exactly!

AVIVA: Don't look like you just bagged a mouse.

HELMS: It's in your words, your attitude: you didn't really care at all, at all, that they "got it" --

AVIVA: So why would I go to all --

HELMS: But you were damn clear that you wanted me to get it. Preferably right between the eyes. In front of everyone. My round.

AVIVA gestures as if to say, "Whatever."

HELMS: And you wonder why I got my knickers twisted when you, the saintly maid, watched me get your "point" right here --

HELMS indicates between her eyes.

HELMS: -- while you gave the gallery that "what, me?" look -- and then let everyone else take the heat for you. So just how courageous an artist were you? Are you?

AVIVA: So why am I here?

HELMS: Because we're going to do what you have wanted to do all along: make this all about you.

HELMS indicates UTILITY 1.

HELMS: I'm calling out a Q&A. Make her talk back to me. Make you talk back to me.

AVIVA: She's already talking -- I can't make her say anyth[ing] --

HELMS: No, no, no, no, no -- not good enough. Not nearly good enough, Aviva Matthews. You are going to spit out honest words, even if they break your teeth.

AVIVA: And if I don't want to --

HELMS: I will wait you out. I don't answer to a husband or children or cats, my well-padded ass can out-sit you, and my bladder is bigger than yours. I will wait you out.

AVIVA: I'm free to leave --

HELMS: In theory. But you know -- you know what I'm banking on -- don't ask me why because I don't have a feather of evidence to back me up here -- you know what?

AVIVA: I don't read minds.

HELMS: I'm banking on this: that you have integrity -- just like all your handlers said about you. Lover of the lost cause, disciplined by the margins -- I'm banking they're not liars.

AVIVA: They're not.

HELMS: Prove them, then. This round ain't a fight between you and me -- it's between you and you. Again. Private terror, remember? You leave -- and we can both watch you lose your spine bone by bone as you jelly off on your high horse. Stay -- and who knows how many bones you'll find in your spine?

AVIVA ponders the choice.

AVIVA: I could always use being taller.

HELMS: High horse off to pasture, then -- and now begins your third second chance. Next round.

HELMS points to UTILITY 1.

HELMS: Her turn.

AVIVA: Yeah.

AVIVA walks to UTILITY 1.

AVIVA: (to UTILITY 1) Ready?

UTILITY 1: That's how you made me.

AVIVA undoes the chain so that she can move freely. HELMS is free to address UTILITY 1 directly as one of the conversants. AVIVA turns to HELMS.

AVIVA: Without interruption, then, for a moment, all right? You laid down --

UTILITY 1: Forced --

AVIVA: Forced on us a curriculum about our lives --

UTILITY 1: Our bodies.

AVIVA: That was a lie, that you know is a lie.

UTILITY 1: Abstinence --

AVIVA: Not saying it's a bad thing to do. But "just say no" can't begin to match our whole reality.

UTILITY 1: We fuck -- we're alive!

HELMS: Thus, your title.

UTILITY 1: "Abstinence Has No Substance."

HELMS: These -- elements -- parts --

AVIVA: The dress.

HELMS: Ripped.

UTILITY 1: Innocence dee-leted.

AVIVA: No more innocent children today.

UTILITY 1: We can't afford it.

AVIVA: And besides, you adults --

UTILITY 1: Your ge-ge-generation --

AVIVA: Have fucked over -- sorry --

UTILITY 1: Don't be sorry!

HELMS: Let it bite --

AVIVA: It's all of you who's bitched up everything into garbage.

UTILITY 1: Not us.

AVIVA: Boiled down everything, everything -- it makes me sick to watch you do it! -- everything garbaged down to sex, money, power, greed -- we didn't do that.

UTILITY 1: Not us.

AVIVA: But it's us, not you, who has to eat the sewage at the end of your working day.

UTILITY 1: And we just love being morphed into a market niche.

AVIVA: And, in that case of the swanfucking corporate marketeers -- sorry -- innocence --

UTILITY 1: And adolescence --

AVIVA: -- can be a very dangerous socially transmitted disease for us.

HELMS: Not all of us --

UTILITY 1: You're all stained --

AVIVA: Maybe not all --

UTILITY 1: You're too forgiving --

AVIVA: -- but it doesn't take all to infect it all.

UTILITY 1: One fucking bad apple!

HELMS: The chain?

AVIVA: Your guilt --

UTILITY 1: Locking us down --

AVIVA: We're forced to live off your poison --

UTILITY 1: Head >em up!

AVIVA: And when the children of the cesspool --

UTILITY 1: Move >em out!

AVIVA: -- express -- spew! -- the values of your cesspool --

UTILITY 1: Columbine, my Columbine --

AVIVA: "Oh dear God!", you say, "look at the heathen!"

UTILITY 1: Tribal trash!

AVIVA: "They don't know much about --"

UTILITY 1: "History --"

AVIVA: " -- about nothin' at all, they don't!" And we get blamed for the rotten deck of cards --

UTILITY 1: So you, the dealers, lock us up --

AVIVA: Lock us down --

UTILITY 1: Lock us out --

AVIVA: Lock us in to your nostalgia for a lost innocence --

UTILITY 1: Which you never even had!

AVIVA: -- then blame us when our real lives won't tango with your nostalgia. Then -- then --
bring on the goons of "The Good Ol' Days"! Chain those knees closed! Keep those
minds abstinent!

In a rhythm, with some kind of accompaniment from UTILITY 1.

AVIVA: Ab-sti-nence / ab-sti-nence / will surely bring them back / to in-no-cence!

UTILITY 1: Surely all the days of our lives, hey?

AVIVA: But all of which really just brings us back to ignorance --

UTILITY 1: Just Say No.

AVIVA: -- and ignorance in your cesspool --

UTILITY 1: At The Mercy.

AVIVA: -- is a sentence of death for the rainbow.

HELMS moves toward UTILITY 1.

HELMS: The colors -- dark.

AVIVA: Yes.

HELMS: The legs smudged -- the color "cesspool"?

AVIVA: Yes.

HELMS: The way they're bent --

AVIVA: Tipped, knock-kneed. Used a stance most adults like you would think is -- polite --

HELMS: Demure.

AVIVA: But make it look like painful, too --

HELMS: Legs not standing up straight.

AVIVA: Not allowed --

HELMS peers at UTILITY 1 closely.

HELMS: Good detail work.

AVIVA: I like detail.

HELMS: Did those lessons help?

AVIVA: We worked the small-brush.

HELMS: Public money well spent?

UTILITY 1: It put me on the map.

AVIVA: It put clothes on her back.

HELMS: You insulted me --

AVIVA: She deserved to breathe.

HELMS: You lied to me --

AVIVA: I apologize for that.

HELMS: At any cost for your art?

AVIVA: Not any cost -- but that's not easy --

UTILITY 1: At least I'm not a safe bet!

HELMS: It was an adolescent thing to do.

UTILITY 1: At least I'm interesting!

HELMS: And loud.

AVIVA: I am an adolescent.

HELMS: No, you're not.

UTILITY 1: No, you're not.

HELMS: Not if you're going to do this. You want reality -- be prepared for its whip. To snap it -- and get it back.

AVIVA: I've been told that before.

UTILITY 1: So what happens to me now?

AVIVA: What happens to her now?

HELMS: What does she want? You want?

AVIVA looks at UTILITY 1.

AVIVA: You really want to know?

HELMS: I really want to know.

UTILITY 1: Put me in the dark, I die.

AVIVA: She wants the chance to do what she does best.

HELMS: All right. You -- she -- not going back into the exhibit.

AVIVA: Didn't think so.

HELMS: But you and I are going to bring her to the health classes and open this up.

AVIVA: You and I?

UTILITY 1: Let the games begin.

HELMS: We stand there -- we draw out more voices --

UTILITY 1: The circle was too thin.

AVIVA: We thrash it out in public -- WWF-style.

HELMS: Face-to-face. No privileged "art for fart's sake."

AVIVA: And no queen bee from the throne.

HELMS: I won't sting --

AVIVA: I won't prance --

HELMS: We'll see how things go.

AVIVA: And we'll go from there. What now?

HELMS: I have work to do.

AVIVA: You'll talk to Mr. Savory.

HELMS: We'll work out the timing. You must have things to do.

AVIVA: Yes.

AVIVA goes to say something, but HELMS stops her.

HELMS: I'm still not convinced to like you completely -- despite the glowing reports.

AVIVA: Was "liking completely," like, part of the deal? Either way?

HELMS: No.

AVIVA: Good.

HELMS: Good for now -- I prefer to start off cold and honest.

AVIVA: We'll see how things go.

HELMS: And we'll go from there.

AVIVA: Thank you -- from the lips of a snow queen. Don't worry. Cold and honest.

HELMS: Thank you as well -- that measured zero degrees Centigrade.

AVIVA: On target.

HELMS: I have work to do --

AVIVA: So do I.

They look at UTILITY 1 for two beats, then exit. UTILITY 1, without putting the chain back on, takes up her original stance for several beats. She then shakes her knees free, stands up straight, and looks directly at the audience. Lights to black with raucous rock-and-roll music coming up and UTILITY 1 dancing for her life.