

*House of the Rising Son*

by Tom Jacobson

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Playwrights Ink  
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CAST OF CHARACTERS  
(Four actors)

DR. TRENT VARRO, 30s-40s, a parasitologist, also plays:  
MAUREEN, organizer of a literary festival

FELIX MARTIN, 20s-30s, a fundraiser and folklorist, also plays:  
TOD, a desperate soul

GARRETT VARRO, 50s-60s, a restoration architect, also plays:  
LENDELL, a psychic tour guide

BOWEN VARRO, 70s-80s, a poet, also plays:  
ROBERT, a gay tour guide

The play takes place in various locations in Los Angeles and New Orleans in the present.

SETTING: The space should be very simple and mutable, but evocative of heat and mystery. Locations include an auditorium, several streets and graveyards, a living room, a bar, a bedroom, an alley, and a café.

NOTE: Doubling is suggested but not required.

Lights up on TRENT, 30s-40s, giving a public lecture. He is attractive in an unusual way, not conventionally handsome. He is neatly but casually dressed. His lecture may be accompanied by slides.

TRENT

One of the world's most horrifying predators escapes our notice because it's only the size of the head of a pin. The alien that burst out of John Hurt's chest seems positively merciful next to the tiny phorid fly. A common ant going about its daily business of dragging leaves and dead things back to the colony probably doesn't notice the female phorid landing on her back. She may not even feel the fly's ovipositor piercing her head, and the egg extruded into her brain.

FELIX

(In the front row of the audience.)

Nasty!

TRENT

(Not hearing FELIX.)

But slowly, as the baby fly begins to grow, the ant may notice that the larva is beginning to feed. Ants have basic nervous systems, with functions spread throughout the body, not all concentrated in the head, so the ant can continue following scent trails and cleaning herself for a long time.

FELIX

Damn, he's hot.

TRENT

But eventually there's nothing left inside the ant's head but a fat and happy fly larva. At this point the dried-up husk of the head pops off. The ant, poor simple, dedicated worker, continues her tasks—without a head—until she starves to death because she no longer has a mouth.

FELIX

That is so cool!

TRENT

Parasites are creatures that suck life from other lifeforms from within. The Greek word *parasitos* means “beside food,” and originally described ritual food servers—well—waiters: “Hi, my name is Plato and I'll be your parasite this evening.” Making their homes beside their food, and often *in* it, parasites are among the most successful living things on the planet. In fact, they constitute about 80 per cent of life on earth.

FELIX

Nice voice. Weird sense of humor.

TRENT

Although they've been inside us for millions of years, only recently did humans start becoming acquainted with our little companions.

FELIX

Step away from the lectern. Let's see the basket.

TRENT

In order to prove that bladder worms inhabiting sheep, pigs and cows were a larval stage of tapeworms that infect predators like dogs, wolves, and humans, in the 1840s Friedrich Kuchenmeister—

(Stepping away from the lectern.)

—Fed bladder worms in a body-temperature soup to a condemned prisoner.

FELIX

Oh, my God. His zipper's down.

TRENT

The prisoner, not knowing what he was eating, asked for seconds. Three days later, after the prisoner's decapitation, Kuchenmeister found small tapeworms in his intestine—

FELIX

And he has no idea.

TRENT

—The prisoner's, that is.

FELIX

That's so embarrassing.

(Shifts in his seat.)

TRENT

In six months we'll open a new exhibition here at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County called *Bloodsuckers and Body Snatchers: Parasitism in Nature*.

(Notices FELIX.)

Mmmm, who's that kid?

FELIX

That's right. It's me.

TRENT

As guest curator, I've gathered specialists from all areas of parasitology to show you their favorite little monsters.

FELIX

Let me taste the wax in your ear.

TRENT

Bladder worms, of course—he's staring, like a stalker.

FELIX

The sweat on your neck.

TRENT

Blood flukes that control the behavior of stickleback fish—did he lick his lips?

FELIX

The musk of your armpits.

TRENT

Two-foot long guinea worms that spool out of your leg when they're laying eggs—straining against his jeans!

FELIX

The reek of your crotch—

TRENT

Sixty-foot tapeworms in whales—barnacles that castrate crabs—is he touching himself?

FELIX

No doubt totally hung.

TRENT

Tapeworms that make beetles bold and foolhardy so they're eaten by rats—he's pinching his nipple!

FELIX

Probably too big for me.

TRENT

Single-celled organisms that make men aggressive and women too friendly—daring me to react!

FELIX

Can I get him in the john?

TRENT

This is the first lecture in a series leading to the opening of the exhibition. Ignore him!

FELIX

Up against the wall—

TRENT

Parasites inhabit an amazing world we never see—our own insides. Don't even look! They're right there all the time, eating, reproducing—a whole world hidden in plain sight. God, they're gonna see my bone!

(Steps quickly behind the lectern.)

Lighting change as FELIX joins TRENT at the lectern.

FELIX

Dr. Varro, that was great.

TRENT

Oh...good! Thank you.

FELIX

Very compelling.

TRENT

Not too gross? I get that a lot.

FELIX

I like gross.

TRENT

I kinda noticed that during the lecture.

(They smile.)

FELIX

(Shaking hands.)

I'm Felix Martin. I work here at the museum.

TRENT

Doing what?

FELIX

Fundraising--I'm not a scientist. I wonder—

TRENT

Yes?

I hesitate to ask—  
FELIX

No, that's all right—  
TRENT

Because you're not on staff here—but I was wondering if you'd be willing to have dinner—  
FELIX

(Overlapping.)  
Tonight?  
TRENT

—With some of our donors. I've got a couple who are really into parasites.  
FELIX

*They* must be interesting.  
TRENT

Kinda unusual, but they get it, pretty smart for rich people—  
FELIX

You got something against rich people?  
TRENT

No! Well, yeah, a little.  
(Conspiratorially.)  
Seems like all they think about is, you know, being rich. But this couple loves all that hidden world stuff you were talking about. I love it, too. Must be cool exploring a whole world like that.  
FELIX

Sometimes it's just looking up somebody's butt.  
TRENT

They both smile.

Oh, by the way--your zipper's down.  
FELIX

TRENT looks stricken. Lights out on them and up on BOWEN VARRO, 70s-80s, stumbling about drunkenly.

BOWEN

(To no one or everyone, in a heavy Southern accent.)  
*Bienvenue a* New Orleans! Ya'll here for the—whatzit—? 'Course you are! Tom—  
 that's what we called him—Tom Williams was my tenant back in the day, that's right.

GARRETT, 50s-60s, appears.

GARRETT

Dad, come on!  
 (Goes to him, gently taking his arm.)  
 Let these people eat their dinner.

BOWEN

They're here for the goddam festival!

GARRETT

(To the unseen diners.)  
 Sorry, my father's celebrating his tragic longevity—let's go.

BOWEN

I'm in mourning!

GARRETT

Not in Galatoire's, Dad.

BOWEN

This is my son. He tries to keep me out of trouble.

GARRETT

The car's right around the corner.

BOWEN

I had a premonition!

GARRETT

Come have your premonition in the car.

BOWEN

Everything's about to change!

BOWEN

Everything!

GARRETT

Everything?

BOWEN

You don't give a shit about our family!



GARRETT

Right, so I guess I should just leave you here to retch on the floor?

BOWEN

(Swings at GARRETT, who easily evades him.)  
Some respect, boy!

GARRETT

(Grabbing him and dragging him out.)  
My sincerest apologies to all.

BOWEN

Help, he's taking me to the home!

Lighting change to FELIX and TRENT.  
Cricket sounds. It's night and FELIX has a  
flashlight. They're sneaking.

TRENT

Don't they have any security? They must've seen us jump the wall.

FELIX

Haven't caught me yet!

TRENT

You do this with every lecturer?

FELIX

If I like the lecture. You afraid of getting in trouble?

TRENT

I'm never afraid of that.

FELIX

(Pointing.)  
Look!

TRENT

A pyramid?

FELIX

Rosedale was popular in the twenties, right after Tutankhamen's tomb was excavated, so lots of mausoleums were built in Egyptian style. I'm terrible on history, but I know graveyards. Oh, and this is pretty cool.

(Points at the ground.)

TRENT

(Peering.)  
Hattie McDaniel? Who was she?

FELIX

You're kidding, you're from New Orleans and you don't know Hattie McDaniel? She played Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*.

TRENT

Who remembers actors' names?

FELIX

You believe in ghosts?

TRENT

I'm a biologist.

FELIX

I don't know if I believe in 'em either—

TRENT

(Overlapping.)  
*I don't* believe—

FELIX

But I love ghost stories. I got an MA in folklore at UCLA, which as you can imagine led me directly to fundraising 'cause a) you can't do shit with an MA in folklore and b) I'll be damned if I go through seven years of a PhD just so I can teach.

TRENT

So you gave it up?

FELIX

Not at all--I'm almost done writing a book, well not so much writing as collecting ghost stories from all over—wanna hear one?

TRENT

In a graveyard at night with a cute but strange guy I just met?

FELIX

Worse yet, a sell-out. A *fundraiser*.

TRENT

I'm a sell-out as well. I write for the lay reader rather than scientific journals.

FELIX

I know. I read both your books.

TRENT

Really? Both?

FELIX

You're different from other scientists. You like the stories best, too.

TRENT

All right. Tell me the ghost story.

FELIX

When I was in college I met this girl who saw auras and spoke in tongues and stuff like that. She also told me she saw faces.

TRENT

What kind of faces?

FELIX

Faces on faces. From past lives. Once she was with a girlfriend of hers and saw this horrible evil hairy ugly face on the friend's face. So she said something, like, I dunno, "excuse me, but you've got a horrible evil hairy ugly face on." And suddenly the face kinda detached itself from the friend and came at her, and she felt this wave of horror and hatred and disgust. Isn't that creepy?

TRENT

But not really a ghost story exactly.

FELIX

You're right. See—I'm a terrible folklorist.  
 (A strange animal wails in the near distance.)  
 Oh my God! It's a *chupacabra*!  
 (Runs off with his flashlight.)

TRENT

A what? Felix! Don't—!  
 (Giggles as he disappears after FELIX.)  
 What the hell are you looking for?

Lighting change. BOWEN and GARRETT  
 are in a car, with GARRETT driving.

BOWEN

Why'd you let him go to Los Angeles?

GARRETT  
That your premonition?

BOWEN  
Stupid little faggot.

GARRETT  
Don't talk like that.

BOWEN  
No one can hear me but you.

GARRETT  
I don't wanna hear that kinda talk about Trent.

BOWEN  
Faggotpansycocksuckerpantywaistqueer.

GARRETT rolls his eyes as the lights change to FELIX and TRENT. It's still night and they're still outdoors. Cricket and other insect sounds.

FELIX  
Hollywood Forever is kinda touristy as you might expect. So it's my *second* favorite graveyard. Cecil B. DeMille is over there—that big monument, and Douglas Fairbanks—

TRENT  
Please tell me you've never seen a ghost.

FELIX  
Gay people have a shamanistic role in our society, and if anybody should see ghosts, it should be us.

TRENT  
So you're a shaman?

FELIX  
I studied up, did spiritual exercises, went to psychics, a seance, but I guess I'm not attuned.

TRENT  
Thank God.

FELIX

But I do like knowing shit nobody else knows. Not in a braggy way, just--

TRENT

Knowledge for its own sake.

FELIX

Like science.

They smile.

TRENT

Nobody in Minnesota sees ghosts. Very stolid population.

FELIX

Minnesota? I thought you were from New Orleans.

TRENT

High school in New Orleans—we moved there—my family—originally from Minnesota—

FELIX

I wondered why no accent.

TRENT

Ever been to New Orleans? Lotta ghosts there—they say.

FELIX

I bet! I've never been.

TRENT

You'd fit right in.

FELIX

And I always wanted to--but isn't it still fucked up from the hurricane and the oil spill?

TRENT

In recovery. Could you take tomorrow off?

FELIX

To go to New Orleans?

TRENT

For a long weekend.

FELIX

I got a couple of appointments....

TRENT  
Be sick.

FELIX  
I met you all of two hours ago—

TRENT  
We've shared two cemeteries. You could bone up on shamanism.

FELIX  
I dunno.

TRENT  
I'm going back anyway. I have a series of parasite lectures at Tulane, which is an excuse to spend some time with my family.

FELIX  
You want me to meet your parents?

TRENT  
(Uncomfortable.)  
Well, yeah, my parents--

TRENT  
--Plus it's the Tennessee Williams Literary  
Festival--lots of stories for you--

FELIX  
Oh, God. What's wrong with them?

FELIX  
I barely know you--we haven't even—

TRENT  
Eaten! I'm starving and you're dragging me to graveyards.  
(Pulls out a cell phone, dials.)

FELIX  
There's a twenty-four hour—

TRENT  
(Into the phone.)  
Hey.

FELIX  
Who are you—?

TRENT

What are you doing still up?

(Listens.)

Just knock him on the head and hope he lands in bed. Listen, is it okay if I bring a friend for the weekend?

(Listens.)

Yes. Exactly. That all right? You okay with that?

(Listens.)

No, I'll get a—*we'll* get a cab. Go give grandpa some aspirin and vitamin C. Good-night.

FELIX

I can't really afford—I mean, on short notice tickets will be—

TRENT

Don't worry, I'm buying.

FELIX

No way.

TRENT

I'm the one dragging you home to meet the family—I should pay.

FELIX

No, I should.

TRENT

You will.

FELIX

Dude, I can't just drop everything--

TRENT

You go cemetery hopping all night but can't hop on a plane? Afraid of getting in trouble?

They stare at each other. FELIX looks away.

FELIX

(Spying something on the ground.)

There it is!

FELIX pulls a paper and crayon from his pocket, drops to the ground, and makes a rubbing of a stone.

TRENT

Now we can add vandalism to trespassing.

Lighting change to GARRETT and  
BOWEN at home. GARRETT brings  
BOWEN some pills and water.

GARRETT

He's bringing someone.

BOWEN

Someone who can help pass on the family name?

GARRETT

Don't get too optimistic.

BOWEN

Optimistic? I told you I had a premonition. Here it is coming true.

GARRETT

When they get here, tone it down, okay?

BOWEN

Tone what down?

GARRETT

The talk, you know. It puts people off, first impressions—

BOWEN

Goddam, I'm sick of this crap!

GARRETT

That's what I mean—

BOWEN

Every day, same piddly-ass—

GARRETT

Don't make me lock you in your room.

BOWEN

Every goddam day for my whole life, you realize?

GARRETT

When some people get drunk, they get philosophical. You just get stupid.

BOWEN

How many years I been doing this? I gotta eat—three times a day—



At least.

GARRETT

Shit once a day—

BOWEN

(Simultaneously.)  
—If I'm (you're) lucky—

GARRETT AND BOWEN

BOWEN  
Brush my teeth, take a shower, have something to drink—!

GARRETT  
Don't forget that—

BOWEN  
Every damn day! I'm bored with it. Aren't you? It just goes on and on into endless tedium. And *breathing!* Think how often we have to do that! How many breaths do I have to draw a day, each one just like the last?

GARRETT  
Just help me get through this with Trent, then you can boycott breathing. I need you to behave yourself.

BOWEN looks annoyed and closes his eyes.  
Lights up on TRENT and FELIX as well.  
They are in another cemetery, FELIX  
searching the ground with the flashlight. An  
even greater variety of insect sounds.

FELIX  
So you still live with your parents?

TRENT  
Sort of, off and on.

FELIX  
At your age?

TRENT  
At their age, sometimes they need help.

FELIX  
You're the good son.

(TRENT laughs.)  
So you're out to them?

TRENT

Oh, yes, in fact--

FELIX

My mom and I don't speak.

TRENT

I'm sorry. Although sometimes I wish my folks didn't speak. They find me--

FELIX

Rebellious?

TRENT

They say I provoke people.

(They stare at each other. FELIX looks away.)

FELIX

(Spies something on the ground.)

Finally!

(Kneels to make another rubbing.)

TRENT

Breaking into three graveyards in one night, just to get--

FELIX

Graveyards freak you out?

TRENT

I'm from New Orleans--I live in a graveyard. But there's something very *Harold and Maude* about this.

BOWEN has gotten very still. Even his  
breathing seems to have stopped.

GARRETT watches him with concern.

FELIX

(Rubbing.)

You do know movies! Forest Lawn is the most famous LA cemetery of all. You ever see *The Loved One*?

TRENT

Don't think so.

GARRETT

(Quietly.)  
Bowen.

FELIX

Very dark comedy based on a Evelyn Waugh novel making fun of California and the death industry. It was all about Forest Lawn.

FELIX holds up the rubbing paper, which clearly says "Trent and Felix." TRENT smiles and takes the paper.

GARRETT

(Louder.)  
Bowen?

BOWEN

(Starting awake.)  
What, goddammit?

TRENT

Does this mean you'll fly home with me?

FELIX

Not ready to take that step.

GARRETT

Don't stop breathing yet.

FELIX

(Overlapping.)  
Yet.

BOWEN

Don't lock me in my goddamn room.

GARRETT

Then watch your vocabulary.

FELIX

I think Bette Davis is here somewhere.

GARRETT walks away from BOWEN into darkness as he speaks. At the same time, FELIX briefly shines the flashlight onto

GARRETT. The insect sounds cease instantly.

GARRETT

I won't warn you again.

Lights out on GARRETT and BOWEN completely.

FELIX

(Turning to run.)  
Okay, let's go.

TRENT

(Stopping him.)  
Why?

FELIX

That guy saw us. You heard him.

TRENT

What guy? There's nobody here.

FELIX

He walked right into my light. He said he's not warning us again. C'mon!

TRENT

(Grabbing the light, shining it about.)  
There's nobody there. We're all alone in the middle of Forest Lawn in the middle of the night.

FELIX

You didn't see him?

TRENT

(Playing the light around.)  
Not then, not now.

The insect sounds return.

FELIX

He was *right there!* How could you not see him?

TRENT

What'd he look like? Was he wearing a shroud?

FELIX

He just looked like...a guy. Fifty, sixty something. Nondescript, wearing khakis, kinda cute even, for a guy that age—

TRENT

Maybe you just saw your first ghost.

FELIX

In khakis?

TRENT

From Dead Gap.

FELIX

I wish! Like I said—I got no abilities. Oh my God--an open grave?

TRENT

Dare you.

FELIX

Dare me what?

TRENT

Pussy. Take that step.

FELIX

What if that guy's still here?

TRENT

Maybe it's his grave. C'mon!

Lighting change as FELIX and TRENT  
jump into an open grave. They stand there  
nervously.

FELIX

Okay, this is way eerie.  
(Measuring above his head.)  
It's exactly six feet deep.

TRENT

You scared?

FELIX

No! Yes!  
(Grabs TRENT for comfort.)

I might throw up.

TRENT

Your heart's beating really fast.

FELIX

You're not even a little bit scared?

TRENT

Okay, I've got tears in my eyes—how's that?

FELIX

(Turning toward TRENT.)

Tears are good. Anything else?

TRENT

Yeah.

TRENT kisses FELIX hard. They grope each other frantically.

FELIX

(As they make out.)

This is somebody's grave! We're like your parasites.

TRENT

How?

FELIX

Copulating like little hookworms in an intestine.

TRENT

Surrounded by bodies upon bodies upon bodies.

FELIX

All filled with bacteria and amoebas—

The insect sounds gradually increase.

TRENT

(As they sink to the bottom of the grave.)

All munching away—

FELIX

Inside the bodies—

## TRENT AND FELIX

Inside *your/my* body—living off you/me.

TRENT

You *have* to come to New Orleans!

TRENT rims FELIX.

FELIX

(Almost gasping.)  
All right--I'm coming!

The insect sounds reach a climax and the lights go out on TRENT and FELIX. Lights up on BOWEN and GARRETT. GARRETT sniffs BOWEN'S breath.

BOWEN

Sober as a judge.

GARRETT

Forgive me for checking.

BOWEN

I do not take this lightly.

GARRETT

I know.

BOWEN

Nothing could be more important to this family.

GARRETT

You hardly have to inculcate *me*.

BOWEN

You're too damn lenient, permissive. He manipulates you.

GARRETT

He's not a kid. I can't control him.

BOWEN

Never could.

Sound of a key in a door. GARRETT and BOWEN visibly stiffen. TRENT walks in with luggage and FELIX. When FELIX sees GARRETT, he gasps and drops his luggage. GARRETT and BOWEN just stare at FELIX.

TRENT

Felix, this is my father, Garrett Varro—  
 (Nobody says anything.)  
 —And my grandfather, Bowen Varro.  
 (Still everyone remains frozen.)  
 How about a little southern hospitality, *ya'll*?

FELIX

Nice to meet you.

BOWEN

Garrett—

GARRETT

Dad, I won't warn you again.

FELIX

Shit!

BOWEN

Don't *Dad* me!

BOWEN starts to leave.

TRENT

Grandpa!

BOWEN

(Wheeling on TRENT.)  
 Mendacity!

TRENT

Oh, please! No more festival events for you!

BOWEN

(To GARRETT.)  
 He's creating a situation--!

GARRETT



Hush, Dad!

(Reaches for FELIX'S hand. FELIX flinches, but shakes it.)  
Nice to meet you, Felix. Dad, you be nice.

FELIX

(Almost unable to breathe.)  
H—h—hello.

TRENT

Grandpa?

BOWEN

(With an audible sigh.)  
Greetings, young man. We've heard *so little* about you.

TRENT

Felix works at the Natural History Museum in LA. He's never been to New Orleans. He likes ghost stories.

BOWEN

Ghost stories?

FELIX

Yes...ghosts—  
(Glances at GARRETT.)  
I like them.

BOWEN

Welcome to America's most haunted city. Is Trent taking you on one of the ghost tours?

GARRETT

Complete waste of money.

TRENT

Macabre enough right here.

BOWEN

(To TRENT, with an edge.)  
He likes ghosts. Hideous, the luggage.  
(As GARRETT picks up FELIX'S dropped luggage.)  
We had Celeste freshen up my grandson's old room—

FELIX

(Reaching for the luggage.)  
Oh, no, I can—

GARRETT

You're the guest. Relax.

GARRETT

I'm sure someone here knows  
how to fix you a drink.

BOWEN

Our honored guest.

FELIX

That's okay, I don't—

BOWEN

Don't *drink*? This is New Orleans, boy!

FELIX

I just got here—

GARRETT

(Reaching for FELIX'S backpack.)  
I can take that, too.

BOWEN

To toast your arrival. We're  
obligated.

FELIX

(Flinching again.)  
Really, I—thanks—yeah, a drink would be great. I'll keep this.

GARRETT leaves with the luggage but not  
the backpack. TRENT makes drinks.

TRENT

How about a Sazerac?

BOWEN

For me, too. Sit down, young man, and I'll tell you a good Southern ghost story. About  
this very house, once a well-known brothel—

TRENT

Not true.

BOWEN

It's true to me. Felix--sit! Don't  
stand there so awkwardly.

FELIX

I'm sorry--I'm just a little--

FELIX

(Fumbling for a pen and pad.)  
Do you mind if I—?

BOWEN

Not at all, this is highly quotable. When I was much younger, much, much younger, back  
when Louisiana still belonged to France—just kidding—

FELIX

How long have you lived in New Orleans?

BOWEN

All my live-long days. I *earned* this accent.

(FELIX looks quizzically at TRENT, who ignores him while fixing drinks.)  
Back in the days of daguerreotypes—

TRENT

Gramps—

BOWEN

*Mon cher petit-fils* loathes exaggeration. Pure horseshit straight from the gelding,  
however—

TRENT

We don't have to stay here, you know—

BOWEN

Years ago—*years*—I was sitting here in front of this very window with my father when a family friend took a picture. Casual little candid shot. None of us thought about it much, didn't even bother to get the film developed for a month. When we did, call it distortion, call it reflection of the flash, but there was a deformed, demonic face in the window—

(Stands and gestures head high.)

—Right about there. Head high. Glowing. And glowing just the same, on my father's shoulder—

(Puts his hand on FELIX'S shoulder.)

—Was resting a hand. None of us woulda thought a thing about it, like I said, just a bad flash photo, except that three days after the picture was taken, my father died.

FELIX

Chills! Excellent! Do you have it?

BOWEN

The photograph? Oh, somewhere...I ain't the most organized—

GARRETT

(Entering.)

It's in the archive by date, nineteen—

BOWEN

Enough, *son!* My age is mythic, not specific. Hideous here maintains the family history, all the photographs and records, conserved 'em after Katrina, skills from his indentured servitude at Taliesin West—

FELIX

Were--were you a Taliesin Fellow?

TRENT

Grandpa--!

GARRETT

You've been to Taliesin?

FELIX

I guy I dated was a Fellow there, briefly. When were you there?

GARRETT

Too long ago to remember.

FELIX

Did you work with the archivist?

BOWEN

That old queen.

GARRETT

(A warning.)  
Dad—

BOWEN shoves his fist in his mouth.

TRENT

I didn't bring Felix here for a festival of homophobia. There's always Soniat House—

GARRETT

Trent, you know how he is—

TRENT

Which is why I've been in LA for the last year! Our politics don't mix.

FELIX

It's okay—

TRENT

It is *not* okay. If I bring home someone I'm fucking—

FELIX

Trent, damn!

GARRETT

Don't get him going—

BOWEN

Oh, so you fuck him? He takes it up the ass?

TRENT

He takes my tongue up his ass.

BOWEN

How's that taste?  
 (To FELIX.)  
 You keep yourself clean, boy?

FELIX is mortified and GARRETT simply  
 leaves the room.

TRENT

He's dirty, and I like him that way.

FELIX

Oh, my God—

BOWEN

He shit in your mouth?  
 (To FELIX.)  
 You shit in his little faggot mouth?

Instant lighting change and BOWEN  
 disappears in darkness. FELIX is shaken.

TRENT

Sorry about that.

FELIX

I am so freaked out right now.

TRENT

*Grand-pere's* always been kinda—

FELIX

No—not just your grandfather--your father is the guy--

TRENT

What guy?

FELIX

Garrett— your dad—is the guy I saw at Forest Lawn.

TRENT

The ghost?

FELIX

Or whatever. Spitting image. Even the voice is the same: “I won't warn you again.”  
 Exactly what he said in the graveyard.

TRENT

Perhaps you're a little too immersed in your book research. Forget about ghosts—I'm sorry they were so harsh on you. Especially Grandpa.

FELIX

How's your mother put up with that?

TRENT

She's dead.

FELIX

Your grandmother?

TRENT

Dead, too.

FELIX

You bait him.

TRENT

He rises to it.

FELIX

He likes it! Old people aren't supposed to talk like that! Why didn't you warn me?

TRENT

Some things have to be seen to be believed. Would you have come?

FELIX

Your dad's polite, but he doesn't like me, either. How'd you turn out so normal growing up with those homophobes?

TRENT

Made my politics pretty rad for a while.

(FELIX snickers.)

What?

FELIX

Rad. That's cute.

TRENT

Ageist.

FELIX

Your politics ever creep into your lectures?

TRENT

Nope. Entirely separate. I've organized my share of queer demonstrations, but there's scant research on the sexual orientation of parasites.

FELIX

(Gesturing for separation.)  
Your work—and your life.

TRENT

Exactly. The only gay scientists are botanists.

FELIX

So much for rad. I know how scientists are, but how can you hide--?

TRENT

Gimme a break.

FELIX

Professional and personal integrity--

TRENT

Everybody my generation grew up with intolerant colleagues and homophobic relatives.

FELIX

Ageist.

TRENT

And they're pissed I'm not doing things their way.

FELIX

Clearly. You're a much more understanding son than they deserve.

TRENT

Bowen's heart's in the right place.

FELIX

But it's a *spleen*.

TRENT

He's on a lot of drugs.

FELIX

At his age?

TRENT

Not fun drugs. Chemotherapy.

FELIX

Oh. What kind?

TRENT

Prostate.

FELIX

I'm sorry.

TRENT

It's no excuse, but the hormone therapy gives him mood swings. This was happy.

FELIX

Damn! But he *was* happy fighting with you. And you ate it up. Amazing!

Doorbell rings. TRENT goes to answer it.

TRENT

I think he actually likes you. This is only one of his personalities.

FELIX

Wait, I don't get it—you said your family's from Minnesota but he said he's from here.

TRENT

My mother's family—

FELIX

Yeah, but—no—huh?

TRENT opens the door, revealing  
LENDELL, played by the same actor as  
GARRETT. He's dressed like a middle-  
aged Goth or 19th-century undertaker.

LENDELL

(Sepulchral.)  
Pardon me, is the Varro household?

TRENT

Yes.

LENDELL

May I speak to Garrett Varro, please? My name is Lendell Blosser, and I wanted to ask him about including this house in our Ghosts of New Orleans tour.

TRENT



Garrett went out, but I don't think we'd want--

LENDELL

It is haunted, isn't it? I've heard rumors for years.

TRENT

That's just--

LENDELL

Yes--yes! I'm sensing a presence--!

Instant lighting change and TRENT and  
LENDELL disappear. BOWEN reappears  
near FELIX.

BOWEN

Well, ain't you the turd that won't flush?

FELIX

I'm sorry, I was just—

BOWEN

Sit down. I've been wanting to talk to you without Trent around to fuck things up.

FELIX

You sure?

BOWEN

This insipid bitch from the festival is coming over to get some snapshots, but till she  
does—

FELIX

Why is she a bitch?

BOWEN

She's got this godawful laugh. I hate women's voices, so high and irritating.

FELIX

Misogynist, too—

BOWEN

What?

FELIX

Nothing.

BOWEN

What's it you like about Trent? He's a squirrely kid.

FELIX

Hardly a kid. He's at least ten, fifteen years older than me.

BOWEN

And you like that?

FELIX

A) guys my age aren't all that smart, usually, at least not in LA, and b) not about things I care about.

BOWEN

Like parasites?

FELIX

More than eighty percent of the world's—

BOWEN

Like you gave a shit about that before yesterday.

BOWEN

There's more to Trent than entertainingly gruesome statistics. Did he *tell* you about his work on elephantiasis in Africa?

FELIX

I've done my own research online--

FELIX

That the disease that makes your balls swell up like basketballs?

BOWEN

Technically, it's your scrotum, not your balls, but yes. Trent was one of the researchers who discovered the worms that cause it can be paralyzed with some cheap drug. And he persuaded the pharmaceutical company to donate enough to cure everybody that has it.

FELIX

That is so totally cool! Why doesn't he mention that in his books?

BOWEN

He prefers to be a naughty boy.

FELIX

Yeah, but for all his—I dunno—expertise and his bad boy attitude, he's still kinda like a kid, kinda naïve, kinda vulnerable.

BOWEN

Vulnerable?

FELIX

In his challenges, you gotta see that, when he—speaks like that to you—he’s compensating, insecure, vulnerable.

BOWEN

And you like *that*?

FELIX

I guess I shouldn’t expect you to see it—but I think he wants your approval--

BOWEN

You saying I’m not sensitive?

FELIX

Well—

BOWEN

I’m damn sensitive! You like poetry?

FELIX

I guess. Some.

BOWEN

Emily Dickinson? Candy-ass Robert Frost? *Rod McKuen*?

FELIX

Rimbaud. Baudelaire.

BOWEN

(Finding some paper.)  
Any *living* poets?

FELIX

Aren’t all poets dead?

BOWEN

This was written by a young man who lives in the attic.  
(Hands it to FELIX, who reads silently.)

FELIX

Um...this is about shit.

BOWEN

That's right. A fundamental function. He's got the common touch.

FELIX

This is a shit poem.

BOWEN

It's full of practical advice.

FELIX

(Reading.)  
 "Never wash your anus with soap."

BOWEN

It's a delicate mucus membrane. Meant to be clean, but not sterile. You wouldn't put soap in your eye, would you?

FELIX

(Reading.)  
 "Get your caca consolidated."

BOWEN

That's my favorite line. Stuttering alliteration.

FELIX

It's horrible.

Doorbell rings. BOWEN moves to answer it.

BOWEN

It's contemporary. Break out of the nineteenth century, boy. Young people are so goddam prissy these days!

BOWEN lets MAUREEN into the room.  
 She is in a nice suit and played by TRENT.

MAUREEN

(Southern accent.)  
 Mr. Varro, thanks so much for seeing me.  
 (Seeing FELIX.)

Oh, I'm so sorry—you have company! I can come back another time.

BOWEN

It's fine, Maureen, I got the pictures handy.

FELIX

Hi, I'm Felix.

BOWEN

Felix was born during Mr. Reagan's presidency.

FELIX

I'm a friend of Trent.

MAUREEN

Oh, Trent makes his daddy and grand-daddy so proud. All that incomprehensible but important work he does with worms and other squishy things.

(Cheerfully.)

Disgusting!

(Shaking hands.)

I'm Maureen. I don't know if Mr. Varro's told you, but I help put together our little Williams Festival, and he's got the perfect pictures for our photomontage slide presentation on the final night.

(To BOWEN.)

It's so kind of you to let such precious things out of your sight for even a minute.

(Looking at a picture.)

Oh, this is you, isn't it? *With Tennessee*, how exciting! And how young!

(Dabs eyes.)

Oh, I must apologize! I've been running this festival too long—every little thing connected to Tennessee just makes me puddle up! Is he giving you an award?

BOWEN

Some literary thing.

MAUREEN

Don't be so modest! Poet laureate of the state of Louisiana. You and Tenn look so happy.

BOWEN

Gloating toad-frogs of fame.

MAUREEN laughs in an irritating way.

BOWEN reacts.

FELIX

You're the young man in the attic.

MAUREEN

Well, of course! That was the title of his first collection.

(Looking at another picture.)

Is this the house you rented Tenn in nineteen—?

BOWEN

(Quickly.)  
Yes.

MAUREEN

(To FELIX.)  
The Varros owned half the Quarter at one time. Very old New Orleans family. Just couldn't have the Festival without 'em!  
(Laughs her irritating laugh.)

Instant lighting change puts MAUREEN and FELIX in the dark as BOWEN is isolated in light with GARRETT.

BOWEN

Mendacity!

GARRETT

I'm not apologizing—

BOWEN

Your *son* is a deceiving little cocksucker. Bringing that boy into this house under these circumstances—

GARRETT

Trent has to do things his own way.

BOWEN

But he can't force us to accept, condone, abet and *facilitate*—

GARRETT

Just go along with him for now. He'll come around. Has to.

BOWEN

I'm too old for this shit. You wanna dissemble like that you go ahead.

GARRETT

I think I have to.

BOWEN

No, we don't. We should—you *should*—just tell him the way things are and be done with it.

GARRETT

I'll take care of it.

BOWEN

It's your job—don't involve me. This family is your responsibility, no longer my concern.

GARRETT

Mendacity!

BOWEN

Very well, it's my concern, but ain't much I can do at this point. Used to be what I said went, but no more. We had some standards, some traditions, ways of doing things—

GARRETT

And I'm doing the same things—you know I am, hard as it is—

BOWEN

Just keep this family going, that's all I'm asking. I told you I had a premonition.

GARRETT

The world's not the same—we can't always do things the same way—

BOWEN

Oh, so we should adapt—?

GARRETT

That's right.

BOWEN

Like one of Trent's slimy little tapeworms. I'm a man, not a goddam invertebrate!

GARRETT

Then act like a man and help with this. Or at least don't make it harder than it is.

BOWEN

I'm done. I quit. I haven't the energy. I'm just gonna sit here like a turtle in my shell.

GARRETT

That will do.

As GARRETT and BOWEN glare at each other, TRENT and FELIX appear, isolated in another pool of light.

FELIX

I don't get it.

TRENT

What's to get?

FELIX

I'm sure you mean well and maybe you're trying to spare me from something—more homophobic abuse no doubt—

TRENT

I want you to get to know them slowly. They're kind of overwhelming—

FELIX

You coulda told me more in advance—

TRENT

Like what?

FELIX

Like your grandfather's some kinda famous poet.

TRENT

Not any more. He's too focused on the parts of his body that don't work.

FELIX

And you're totally rich and living off your family.

TRENT doesn't speak.

BOWEN

Time for me to leave.

GARRETT

Leave?

BOWEN

This earthly plane.

FELIX

Aren't you?

GARRETT

Don't talk like that.

TRENT

Not totally.

BOWEN

I'm ready even if you're not.

FELIX

Only own half the French Quarter.

GARRETT

Don't make me wish I was ready.

TRENT

I dunno. Dad handles all that.

BOWEN glares at GARRETT, then begins



to sing.

FELIX

Maybe you can be casual about it,  
but it's all new to me—I'm no trust  
fund baby—is that why you put up  
with all that crap? To get your money?  
I work with rich people all day, and I hate  
to think of you like that—a slave to your  
inheritance—

BOWEN

Swing low, sweet chariot  
Comin' for to carry me home!

Instant lighting change puts FELIX in the  
dark and TRENT in the same space as  
GARRETT and BOWEN.

TRENT, GARRETT AND BOWEN

(Singing in harmony.)

Swing low, sweet chariot  
Comin' for to carry me home!

TRENT

Not yet, Grandpa. You've got business to attend to.

GARRETT AND BOWEN

What?

TRENT

Felix.

BOWEN

Felix ain't the issue.

TRENT

Yes, he is. Whether you acknowledge it or not.

BOWEN

Lying is the issue.

TRENT

You lie all the time.

BOWEN

Not this way. What the hell do you think you're doing?

TRENT

Patience, Grandpa, patience.

(BOWEN glares.)

Do you like him?

BOWEN

Goddammit, Trent!

BOWEN

He's a little prissy pants.

TRENT

He's idealistic. I don't expect you to remember that far back.

(To GARRETT.)

I was asking *you*.

GARRETT

I've hardly spent five minutes with him.

TRENT

Would you, please?

GARRETT

I don't know any ghost stories.

BOWEN

Yes, you do.

TRENT

The ghost stories are a little silly, but he's got a real responsible job—

BOWEN

Bilking money outta people—

TRENT

For a natural history museum—

BOWEN

For a bunch of stuffed giraffes and monkeys—

GARRETT

A dead zoo.

BOWEN

What kind of accomplishment is that? Talk about a parasite!

TRENT

He hates it, okay? Wealth gives him the willies 'cause his mom had to sell Mary Kay to put him through college. *We* give him the willies. Sometimes we give *me* the willies!

GARRETT

Let's not get off track. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we're talking about our family's future here, right?

We are indeed. BOWEN

Okay, yeah, so? TRENT

You have a responsibility— GARRETT

I have a responsibility to myself. TRENT

Self, self, self! The mantra of youth! BOWEN

You have to think about us as well. GARRETT

I am. Just have coffee with him. TRENT  
 (Shows paper rubbing of “Trent and Felix.”)  
 He gave me this.

Childish. BOWEN

You have before you a choice. GARRETT

And so do we. Do not make a foolish one. BOWEN

Instant lighting change puts BOWEN and  
 TRENT in darkness and isolates GARRETT  
 and FELIX sitting at a small café table with  
 two cups of coffee and some beignets.

Not much of a choice. FELIX

(Fairly uptight.) GARRETT  
 People come here just for coffee and beignets, so that’s all they sell.

FELIX

(Eating.)  
Good, though.

GARRETT  
Are you from Los Angeles originally?

FELIX  
The Valley.

GARRETT  
Do you like it?

FELIX  
It's cool.

GARRETT  
Miserably designed. LA, not the Valley. Well, the Valley, too.

FELIX  
LA's not designed at all, just sort of vomited all over.

GARRETT  
Exactly.

FELIX  
But I love the architecture.

GARRETT  
The architecture? In LA?

FELIX  
It's so damn goofy! So—I dunno—flawed.

GARRETT  
No city has destroyed more of its architectural heritage—no sense of tradition—tore down the Neutra house—

FELIX  
That was Palm Springs.

GARRETT  
Practically LA. Unacceptable!

FELIX  
I agree. But once I was on top of the LA County Museum of Art—

GARRETT

That's not even architecture!

FELIX

And I looked around the city—panoramic view—and I could see Park LaBrea, which is basically projects for yuppies, the blue whale—the Pacific Design Center, the *Diehard* building out at Fox, the Hollywood sign, and the bizarre Pavilion for Japanese Art—

GARRETT

Bruce Goff was the only visionary architect that worked on that place—  
The Broad? A box with a buzz-cut--!

FELIX

The Broad Contemporary Art Museum--

FELIX

--The Resnick Pavilion--and it was all so frail, so silly, so *human*, that I had to love it. Not crystallized like other cities—New York, Chicago, San Francisco, New Orleans—

GARRETT

It has no history to speak of.

FELIX

It's not trapped by its history.

GARRETT

Nothing to build on.

FELIX

LA hasn't found itself yet. My heart went out to it.

GARRETT

You're attracted to vulnerability.

FELIX

I guess.

GARRETT

But Trent—

FELIX

Been talking to your dad?

GARRETT

You told him that's what you liked about Trent.

FELIX

I like flaws.

GARRETT

Very worldly—for such a young man.

FELIX

I'm too young for Trent? That your issue?

GARRETT

Oh, no, not at all.

FELIX

Look, I'm sure you—and especially your father—have some very outdated notions of what gay people—gay men—are like.

GARRETT

Just because we live in New Orleans doesn't mean we're—

(Mimes playing the theme from *Deliverance* on a banjo.)

Ding de ding ding ding ding ding ding—

FELIX

We're not all running down the street with our dick out all the time.

(GARRETT chokes on his coffee.)

Sorry. That was coarse, but you know what I mean—

GARRETT

No—just—the image—

FELIX

These days, my mom and I are—well—*estranged*—is the nice way to put it. She's religious. And I never knew my dad.

GARRETT

Sorry to hear it.

FELIX

So basically I have no family and I'm looking for one. Trent could be—I mean I have no idea—we just met—but I'm intrigued by the possibility—and my intention, whether it's Trent or someone else—is to be with him. Just him. I had my wild time when I was younger, but a) I kinda got it out of my system and b) I don't want a relationship like my parents apparently had—my mother told me she once broke a full-length mirror over my father's head—I want something more—I dunno—*reliable*. Know what I mean?

GARRETT

You have great expectations.

FELIX  
Unrealistic, you mean.

GARRETT  
Your generation is so...rigid.

FELIX  
We know what we want.

GARRETT  
I know how men are. Not just homosexuals. I don't think there's much of a difference. Men. Fidelity. I'm skeptical. And *two* men—*well*—

FELIX  
*That's* a generational attitude. The world has changed. But I understand. I don't expect you to—

GARRETT  
How's your coffee?

FELIX  
Excellent.

GARRETT  
Chicory.  
(Blows powdered sugar from the beignet onto FELIX.)

FELIX  
Hey!

GARRETT  
Tradition. You wanna hear a ghost story?

FELIX  
Of course!  
(Pulling out his pad.)  
First person?

GARRETT  
From when I was a kid.

FELIX  
Great. And I've got one for you, too, sort of. Remind me.

GARRETT

I was staying with my grandmother in Yazoo City, Mississippi. I woke up in the middle of the night and saw an old man with long white hair sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed, bowing to me. I hid under the covers, called to my grandmother, and she told me to go back to sleep. Years later, I was looking at some old family pictures—nineteenth century, very formal—and there he was. My grandmother told me he was my great great grandfather, who was part Indian, uh, Native American. Cherokee or Choctaw, she thought. Not that I believe in ghosts or anything.

FELIX

Did she believe you?

GARRETT

I never told her. You don't have to tell people everything.

FELIX

Thanks for telling me. Payback: I think I saw a ghost once.

GARRETT

Where?

FELIX

In LA. In a cemetery the night I met Trent. You'll never guess what he looked like.

FELIX blows powdered sugar on  
GARRETT. Lighting change. TRENT is  
delivering his first lecture at Tulane.

TRENT

The cleverest parasites are masters of manipulation that put Machiavelli to shame. The barnacle *Sacculina* weaves its roots throughout the body of a crab, sucking life from its blood, preventing the crab from going about its normal business of finding a mate and laying eggs. No energy is devoted to activities other than those that serve the parasite. *Sacculina*, in effect, chemically castrates the crab, preventing the female from laying eggs, and effeminizing the male. But both male and female crabs retain a maternal instinct, and when the barnacle eggs appear—where the crab's eggs would normally grow on its abdomen—the crab cleans them and cares for them as if they are her own—or his own. The parasite turns its host into a surrogate parent, an arthropod Mary Poppins, a crustacean Maria von Trapp. When the barnacles hatch, the crab releases the parasites into the surf, helpfully stirring up the water with its claws to speed them on their way—

(Makes "crab claws" and stirs.)

--The cycle continues.

Lighting change places TRENT in the same pool of light as GARRETT in GARRETT'S bedroom. GARRETT is wearing a robe.



GARRETT  
 You're the scientist—you tell me.

TRENT  
 About hormones?

GARRETT  
 A frequent topic these days.

TRENT  
 Bowen overdosing?

GARRETT  
 No, not that. Me, underdosing. Emotions come from rushes of hormones, right?

TRENT  
 Sort of, yeah.

GARRETT  
 And hormones rush a lot more when you're young.

TRENT  
 Adolescence, etcetera, right.

GARRETT  
 Lately, my emotions are muted, smoother than in my youth. I'm neither depressed nor elated, neither passionate nor pissed off. No peaks nor valleys, just gentle rolling hills descending to a flat plain. I used to get tension—  
 (Points to his neck.)

TRENT  
 I remember.

GARRETT  
 But that's rare nowadays. Does that make scientific sense?

TRENT  
 Sure. Emotions have a purpose—

GARRETT  
 And I've outlived my purpose?

TRENT  
 No—

GARRETT

Bowen thinks he's outlived his.

TRENT

Are you concerned? About blurring emotions?

GARRETT

I can't even muster concern, really. But a certain degree of interest, I suppose.

TRENT

I'd feel relief. No more manipulation by biological imperatives.

GARRETT

Free from the manias and depressions of youth.

TRENT

Or do you miss them?

GARRETT

Some.

TRENT

How do you feel about Felix?

GARRETT

Surprised, quite frankly.

TRENT

How?

GARRETT

Surprisingly *not* muted.

TRENT

(Placing his hand on GARRETT'S shoulder.)  
So you haven't lost it entirely.

GARRETT

No.

TRENT

(Massaging GARRETT'S neck.)  
There it is. This knot is "what does Felix mean to the family?"

GARRETT

Yes.

TRENT

This is “what does Felix mean to Trent?”

GARRETT

Of course.

TRENT

This is “what does Felix mean to Garrett?”

GARRETT

A particularly embarrassing and delicate knot.

TRENT

Not as delicate as this one.

GARRETT

Which is?

TRENT

“What does Garrett mean to Trent?”

GARRETT

Ow!

TRENT

Thought so. Would you like some relief on that one?

GARRETT

If it’s not too much trouble. Ooh.

TRENT

(Massaging gently but thoroughly.)

Garrett will always mean what Garrett has always meant to Trent. Garrett is the father, the rock and hiding place, a very present help in trouble, the still small voice of calm.

GARRETT

How about the burning bush? Am I still the burning bush? I’ll understand if I’m not, I have reasonable expectations, you don’t have to worry about that—

TRENT silences GARRETT with a kiss on the mouth. After a moment, GARRETT returns the kiss with great passion, even a sense of desperation. The kiss breaks, they stare into each other’s eyes for a moment, and then TRENT opens GARRETT’S robe and begins kissing GARRETT’S chest.

GARRETT

Thank you. You don't have to, you know.

(Gasps as TRENT bites his nipple, pulling hard.)

Even with muted emotions—I missed you.

(TRENT kisses down GARRETT'S belly toward his crotch.)

So much.

(Gasps.)

FELIX

(Coming in with brochures.)

Trent, you probably did all these tours a million years ago, but there's voodoo shops, cemeteries, ghosts—

FELIX sees TRENT with GARRETT. He freezes for a moment. TRENT moves as if to hide what he's doing, then decides not to. Speechless, FELIX looks around the room, considers leaving, then speaks.

FELIX

You told me get the brochures--

TRENT

I didn't plan on--

FELIX

--And come here!

GARRETT

Welcome to the family, Felix.

END OF ACT ONE

## ACT TWO

FELIX, TRENT, GARRETT and BOWEN  
in separate pools of light.

TRENT

There's no such thing as ghosts.

FELIX

Nobody knows what ghosts are really, but they're something. They even appear in photographs—real legitimate photographic processes, not fakes. I think they're memories, past actions that get repeated. Somehow they get attached to a place, sometimes to a person. The process is probably a lot like photography, I bet. That's how we get haunted houses or people who keep seeing the same ghost again and again.

TRENT

It's a completely unscientific concept.

GARRETT

I always heard—and of course I'm very skeptical—but my understanding is ghosts are people—or more accurately *souls*—with unfinished business. They left the living world with some important work yet undone, and feel compelled to finish it. Or help others finish it. That's what I *heard*.

TRENT

Scientific investigations of “the paranormal” always prove fakery is involved. Conversations with “the dead” play on the weakness of loved ones left behind, emotionally devastated and willing to believe anything.

BOWEN

Ghosts have nothing to do with the dead. The dead do not produce energy, unless you count decomposition, and supposed ghostly manifestations move and glow and sometimes even knock things around, for which energy is clearly required. The living generate an enormous amount of energy—scientists are only beginning to figure out how much. Poltergeists are the best example of how living humans create phenomena we call paranormal. Every time there's a poltergeist knocking over furniture, there's always a young person nearby. Usually one in psychosexual turmoil. What spews out more energy than that, God help us?

Lighting changes to place BOWEN and FELIX in the same pool of light. TRENT remains in a separate pool. GARRETT'S light goes out altogether.

FELIX

(Agitated.)  
Oh, my God!

TRENT

Felix, that's not how I intended--

FELIX

Fuck you!

TRENT

If you'd listen for a second--

BOWEN

(Silencing TRENT with a gesture.)  
Young man, may I interest you in a cemetery tour--St. Louis Number One? I understand you have a sentimental attachment to graveyards.

FELIX

Not any more.

BOWEN

I could show you the Varro family vault.

FELIX

(As TRENT approaches, and definitely for his benefit.)  
Mr. Varro, you've said some very unpleasant things to me, but I have to say you're the only forthright person in your family. Trent's father was at great pains to tell me you weren't a bunch of hillbillies, but after growing up in the big sinful city of Los Angeles, it took a trip to the South for me to actually *witness* father-son incest five minutes ago—

BOWEN

You shouldn't jump to—

FELIX

—Involving my *boyfriend!*

TRENT

He's not my father.

FELIX

Oh, well then, that's that, all's well. However could I have gotten that tragically mistaken impression?

TRENT

Not my biological father.

(FELIX just looks at him.)  
Garrett and I were lovers, then he adopted me for legal reasons.

FELIX

And I am?

TRENT

I'd *like* you...to be my lover as well.

FELIX

Doesn't that strike you as a wee bit greedy? You get—what?—money obviously—from Garrett, and your rocks off with me? I'm the valet, the pool boy?

TRENT

Garrett and I have a sexual relationship, too.

FELIX

Duh!! You could have told me before I cancelled appointments, lied to my boss, and dragged my tight little ass into this neogothic orgy.

TRENT

Would you have come?

FELIX

No way! Hello?!

BOWEN

Both Garrett and I agree that Trent should have been more forthcoming—he's made your visit infinitely more dramatic than necessary, as is his wont. But now that you're here, let us explain.

FELIX

You don't need to explain a thing. You're not sleeping with my boyfriend, your son is.

BOWEN and TRENT look at each other quizzically.

FELIX

Oh, God.

BOWEN

These days I'm sleeping with no one. However.

FELIX

What the fuck—?

TRENT

Bowen adopted Garrett just like Garrett adopted me. None of us were born Varros.

FELIX

Wait—you're *all* gay?

TRENT

Yeah.

BOWEN

Oh, Mary, thank God! My wrists were getting so stiff I thought I had arthritis!

FELIX

(After a moment.)

All that—homophobe shit was pretty elaborate.

TRENT

That—unfortunately—was not feigned.

BOWEN

Trent and I are at odds about her repressive political correctness. But Lady Hideous advised me to “tone down” my personality for your visit, so as not to scare you off.

FELIX

That was toned down?

TRENT

Practically comatose.

FELIX

But why were you so shocked when you saw Trent brought home a boy?

BOWEN

At first, my dear, simply because you're so goddamned good-looking. Most of Trent's dates look like specimens she drug outta someone's intestine. And then because Trent introduced us as her father and grandfather. I loathe lying to homosexuals. Heteros, on the other hand, don't deserve to hear the truth and wouldn't understand it if they did.

FELIX

I don't think I understand it.

TRENT

I should have told you, but I didn't want to risk you not coming.

FELIX

Anything would have been better than walking in on--

TRENT

I'm sorry--I thought--



FELIX

When I get back to LA, I'm changing my phone number, moving, and getting plastic surgery.

TRENT

But—

BOWEN

That's all perfectly reasonable.

TRENT

But—

BOWEN

But in the meantime, why waste a visit to America's most haunted city? I could show you the tomb of Marie Laveau, the voodoo priestess.

FELIX

No thanks, but where can I buy a doll?

BOWEN

Trent, you're a tad unpopular at the moment. Why don't you stay home and I'll play cruise director for the unhappy Felix this afternoon?

TRENT

Shit.

BOWEN

You can't control every experiment, Trent.

TRENT

Felix—

BOWEN

Trust me, my dear, I couldn't possibly fuck up the situation further. Could I?

Lights out on TRENT and up on LENDELL, the tour guide for the Ghosts of New Orleans Tour. After a few moments FELIX and BOWEN join him.

LENDELL

New Orleans has one of the highest murder rates in the country, second only to our nation's capital. Therefore, it's only natural that we have more hauntings than any other

city. Most buildings in New Orleans are hundreds of years old and have housed many generations—living and dead.

(Gesturing.)

Built in 1755 by a sugar cane grower, this residence has seen its share of tragedies. Slaves suffered here, several children and a few adults died of yellow fever, and at least two murders were committed. Paranormal investigators have identified seven troubled spirits: a man, a woman, four children, and something else.

FELIX

Something else?

LENDELL

The children are innocents, looking for their parents, for help, for love. The woman protects them from the man, who apparently wishes them harm. But they all fear something else, some kind of malevolent presence, which may have been responsible for the tragic history of this house.

(Smiles.)

It rarely manifests, so we should be safe today.

FELIX

How does it manifest?

LENDELL

When this house was first built, there was a bell tower. The bell was rung in times of war, during epidemics, emergencies. Burned down more than a hundred years ago, but they say the malevolent presence tolls the ghostly bell when tragedy looms for someone in the house.

(Cheerfully.)

Follow me to the attic—that's where we usually find the children.

(Disappears.)

FELIX

This is very cool. Thanks for insisting.

BOWEN

It's all ridiculous, but I got a little shiver, didn't you?

FELIX

So you like ghosts, too?

BOWEN

Of course. I very nearly *am* one.

FELIX

Don't you just love the idea of this secret world existing all around us, that most of us can't see? Seven ghosts here, Marie Laveau lurking there—imagine if we all had the

ability to tap into that. I believe we did, long ago, back in cave-man days, but evolved out of it.

BOWEN

For God's sake, don't spout that nonsense to Trent!

FELIX

I don't care what he thinks. I like my secret world. I want to see more of it.

BOWEN

We've made our own secret world, you know.

FELIX

What do you mean?

BOWEN

Our family. I don't suppose Trent has told you any of our tenets?

FELIX

Tenets? He told me *nada*.

BOWEN

When it's time for the youngest partner—in this case, Trent—to bring someone new into the fold, he knows he must find just the right kind of young man. Preferably one with no family, accomplished but not flashy—we don't want to call attention to ourselves—and with a great generosity of spirit.

FELIX

Someone willing to share.

BOWEN

And worth sharing.

(FELIX looks away.)

We've all had to give up a few things. Garrett would prefer to work on modernist architecture, but there's not much of that in New Orleans so he restores traditional homes and estates. Trent can roam a bit chasing worms and weevils, although that's hard on Garrett, who knows his place is here with me, the oldest living member.

FELIX

You guys have a ton of money—why not just hire some twink to take care of you?

BOWEN

Oh, how awfully shallow. Besides knowing that he'll inherit everything, Garrett's motivated by love. That's why he stays with me—a much greater comfort than some twenty year-old gold-digger.

FELIX

Now I'm a gold-digger?

BOWEN

If I thought you were, I wouldn't waste time on this conversation. Trent's not one either—he could give a fuck about the money, in fact—but he knows when Garrett becomes the oldest, Trent's place will be with him.

FELIX

You got it all worked out, in a creepy kinda way.

BOWEN

Tested by time. A secret world within a secret world.

FELIX

The gay world isn't secret any more.

BOWEN

You don't find it rather delicious that queens can walk down the street making eye contact with other fairies, completely communicating our desires, our essence, and hets have no idea?

FELIX

Men and women do that too—it's not just us.

BOWEN

They're so blatant about it! But homo dramas play out under their noses all the time. In a public men's room, a straight man comes in to take a dump, barely noticing the other men in cubicles and at urinals. He does his foul business, rudely stinking up the place, and departs. The second he's gone, everyone's back on their knees, straining against porcelain, shaking the walls of the stalls. And all of it communicated without a word.

FELIX

That's your generation, not mine. Secrecy's unhealthy, spreads disease.

BOWEN

I think you find us fascinating or you wouldn't still be here. Like your secret ghost world. In the harsh light of day, beauty disappears.

FELIX

I wanna kiss a guy in public, I do it. No big deal.

BOWEN

Good God—what's the fun in that?

FELIX

You tell me.

(Kisses BOWEN on the mouth, who is stunned.)

BOWEN

Don't trifle with me, boy.

FELIX

Lots of ways to be creepy.

LENDELL

(Appearing.)

Not creepy at all. They're very affectionate and rather sweet. Often they want to hold visitors' hands. Do you notice a cold spot around your fingers?

(Feels the air near FELIX'S hand.)

Yes, oh, definitely, that's probably the little girl. She's shy at first, but once she finds someone she likes, she doesn't want to let go. Do you feel it?

FELIX

Maybe a little coolness.

LENDELL

(Feeling near FELIX'S other hand.)

Here, too. The older boy stays with the girl, so he's taking your other hand.

FELIX

(Standing stiffly holding hands with invisible children.)

You think?

LENDELL

(Feeling the air near BOWEN.)

Why, Mr. Varro, they seem to like you, too.

BOWEN

(Batting at the air around his hands.)

Ugh! Go away! Little brats!

LENDELL

(Continues to feel the air.)

They're still here.

(Holds up a hand.)

I've got one, too. I think it's the woman. They're particularly needy today. This cold is very intense.

FELIX

I'm really feeling it.

BOWEN

Felix, stop.

FELIX

My hair's standing up. Is the man coming?

LENDELL

Maybe—

BOWEN

(Clasping himself for warmth.)

This is absurd!

LENDELL

Or perhaps it's—

FELIX, BOWEN, LENDELL

Something else?

An eerie bell peals. They all freeze and look up. Instant lighting change isolates BOWEN and plunges the other two into darkness.

BOWEN

When I was nineteen I decided if sex ever became impossible, I would kill myself. Now it has, and I haven't. Which is astonishing to me. All my life, I've been—voracious. Cautiously so, quietly so, but certainly so. I do apologize, Lady Hideous, for this medically mandated menopause. With Trent across the country, I'm sure you're missing sex as much as I am not. My gash has healed right up, airtight. But I cherish our conversations and hope you do as well. Try not to think about it. While these cunt hormones shrink my balls and restore my hair, I find I'd rather listen to Aaron Copeland or whip up an etouffee.

GARRETT

(Appearing, having changed from LENDELL.)

Or have a Sazerac.

BOWEN

Well, of course.

GARRETT

(Starting to mix a drink.)

Would you like one?

No, I'll be strong.

BOWEN

I won't.

GARRETT

I spent the afternoon with Felix.

BOWEN

I can't even look at him.

GARRETT

(Giggles.)

Wish I'd been there for your little tableau.

BOWEN

I'm sure you do.

GARRETT

He's overly earnest.

BOWEN

But?

GARRETT

And a little odd. All that ghost shit.

BOWEN

But?

GARRETT

I find I'm falling for him.

(GARRETT stares.)

In a perfectly appropriate way. Only the limp lust I'm permitted since my gelding. I think he's right for Trent. And for us. I intend to encourage them.

BOWEN

I can't.

GARRETT

Will you believe me when I say I understand?

BOWEN

I'm sure you do. This is very much after the fact, but I'd like to apologize.

GARRETT

For?  
 BOWEN

Trent.  
 GARRETT

What's he done now?  
 BOWEN

No, what I did—then. When I met him.  
 GARRETT

I did the same when I met you. Rudy understood.  
 BOWEN

Rudy was very good about it. You were very good about it.  
 GARRETT

We had to be.  
 BOWEN

I don't think I can be.  
 GARRETT

You're not losing a son, you're gaining a grandson.  
 BOWEN

Flippant!  
 GARRETT

Apologies. But I'm obligated to goad you into action. You're undoubtedly a better emissary than I—you're the competition.  
 (GARRETT looks unconvinced.)  
 Are you afraid he'll never touch you again?  
 BOWEN

Yes.  
 GARRETT

Lights up on TRENT seated at an ancient bar. Thumping dance music in the background, almost subliminal. Dancing upon the bar clumsily, but undeniably sexily, is TOD, played by the same actor as FELIX. He's wearing threadbare cut-off shorts and work boots. TRENT is looking at



the gravestone rubbing with his and  
FELIX'S names on it.

BOWEN

Are you afraid they'll giggle about you when they're alone?

GARRETT

I wasn't, but thanks, now I am.

BOWEN

Are you afraid you'll be one generation nearer to St. Louis Number One?

GARRETT

You're still first in line. But yes, it does bump me closer behind you.

TRENT delicately attempts to put a five-dollar bill in TOD'S cut-offs. TOD grabs TRENT'S hand and grinds it into his crotch. TRENT does not resist.

BOWEN

Are you afraid they'll fall so much in love Trent will leave you—leave us—altogether and run off to LA never to return? Are you imagining your pathetic quest for a new Trent at your age? Imagining yourself completely ignored while everyone's fondling a stripper at the Corner Pocket?

(GARRETT says nothing.)

You see? I do understand. It could be worse. Imagine me trying to find a new you at my age? Come hold me, Grandpa. Great grandpa's paved the road before you with his tears.

Lights fade on BOWEN and GARRETT as they embrace. The dance music bumps up to full volume then changes tunes. TOD jumps off the bar.

TOD

(Grabbing TRENT by the hand.)

C'mon, baby! It's my break!

TOD drags TRENT outside to a wall. The music fades to a lower volume and crickets are heard.

TOD

(Pressing up against TRENT. Street lingo mixed with a heavy country accent.)  
Hot night.

TRENT

Pretty warm, yes. You, too. Hot, I mean.

TOD

What you doin' in the Corner Pocket? You the only guy in there under ninety. Tourist?

TRENT

No, I'm from here, sort of.

TOD

Got somewheres we can go?

TRENT

No, actually.

TOD

No biggie. I got a arrangement with my buddy at a motel on Rampart. Thirty-five dollars.

TRENT

Don't you have another set? Or dance, or whatever?

TOD

Not for 45 minutes, so we got almost a hour.

(TRENT hesitates.)

Aw, c'mon, you're not gonna get cheap on me now, are ya? Only thirty-five dollars.

(Grabs the cemetery rubbing.)

TRENT

Hey!

TOD

(Reading the rubbing.)

You Felix?

TRENT

Trent. Give it back.

TOD

You look like a Felix. Come and get it, Trent.

They start walking.

TOD

You party?

TRENT  
I...have sex, if that's what you mean. Can I have that back?

TOD  
No, *party*. Got any crystal?

TRENT  
Oh, no.

TOD  
G?

TRENT  
No, sorry.

TOD  
X?

TRENT  
Definitely not.

TOD  
S'okay, I got a little. Only twenty-five bucks.

TRENT  
That's all right. I'm not into it.

TOD  
Baby, I can't do it unless I'm tweaking.

TRENT  
Do what?

TOD  
You're not following me just to get this—  
(Waves the cemetery rubbing then shoves it in his pants.)  
—Are you?

TRENT  
(Caught.)  
No.

TOD  
Good—only twenty-five for the crystal, like I said.

TRENT  
But you already have it.

TOD  
Right.

TRENT  
So why don't you just give it—to yourself?

TOD  
Part of the whole, you know, experience, man. You paying for the whole burrito.

TRENT  
And how much total for the...burrito?

TOD  
Baby, you can add: twenty-five for the crystal, thirty-five for the room—

TRENT  
(Stops walking.)  
Where exactly is this motel?

TOD  
Rampart.

TRENT  
We're *on* Rampart.

TOD  
(Dragging TRENT.)  
'Nother couple blocks.

TRENT  
(Resumes walking.)  
I don't see it.

TOD  
Down there. Cheap-asses never fix their neon.

TRENT  
You know, this isn't the greatest neighborhood to be walking in. Maybe a taxi—

TOD  
It's cool. You with me.

TRENT

Okay, not to be tacky, but beyond the room and the drugs, how much is this gonna cost me?

TOD

Baby, don't be talkin' money on the street! Later for that.

TRENT

Yeah, but I wanna make sure I got enough.

TOD

You a cop?

TRENT

No!

TOD

Comin' up on a ATM.

TRENT

(Reaching for his wallet.)

No, I've got—I think I can—if you'll just tell me—

TOD

(Grabbing at TRENT'S wallet.)

Don't be diggin' in your wallet in public, man!

TRENT

(Shoves wallet back in his pocket, stops dead still.)

How much?

TOD

Baby, c'mon.

(TRENT holds his ground.)

Hundred. And that's giving it away. Okay? Now, c'mon.

(They start walking again.)

Not a good locale for contestin' the pricin' y' understand? 'Round here niggers sooner gut you than look at you.

(They walk in silence for a bit.)

TRENT

For this—*amount*—what do you do, exactly?

TOD

Baby!

TRENT

Is that a blow-job? A hand-job? Do I get to fuck you?

TOD

Fuck me? You gotta be kiddin'. I'm straight, man.

TRENT

(Stops.)  
Straight!?

TOD

Shut up, baby! You wanna get shot right here on Rampart?

TRENT

Okay, you're straight. Does that mean you fuck me?

TOD

For 'nother fifty I'll pound your tight little ass till it squeaks. Gimme some money and I get us some lube.

TRENT

Uh...you know, I'm tired of the math. Maybe we better just—

TOD

Naw, man, calm down. Make it thirty.

TRENT

I wasn't planning—

TOD

Okay, Jew me down—I'll fuck you for a hundred. Plus motel and—

TRENT

I'm gonna go. Sorry.

TOD

No tweaking required! How's that? Practically free!

TRENT

(Edging away.)  
Sorry to waste your time.

TOD

I gotta make something! Be fair.

TRENT

TOD

Sorry, sorry—good night.  
 (Starts to walk away.)

Baby!

TOD

Dragged me ‘cross the Quarter—! For nuthin’!  
 (Following.)  
 Better watch your ass, cocksucker.

TRENT speeds up. So does TOD. They disappear. Lights up on ROBERT in the middle of his spiel. He’s played by the same actor as BOWEN. He’s drinking a hurricane from a large plastic cup. It’s almost gone and so is he.

ROBERT

I hope ya’ll’ve enjoyed our little tour of gay New Orleans as much as I have. You’ve seen oppression, such as the firebombing of our most popular bar—  
 (Sucks on his straw.)  
 —And resistance in the form of havens lesbian and gay people have made for ourselves over time, such as Lafitte’s. I always like to conclude our tour here, in this quaint and—  
 (Burps or hiccoughs.)  
 —Charming little alley in the shadow of St. Louis Cathedral. I want to honor our lesbian and gay brothers and sisters of the past by calling on their spirits to join us here—  
 (Waves his hands in an invoking, welcoming gesture, almost spilling his drink.)  
 —Behind the church.

Lights up on TRENT and FELIX observing the tour with GARRETT between them.

ROBERT (Cont.)

I invite all men, women and those uncommitted to a gender to grace us with their gentle presence, filling this space with their love. Men loving men, women loving women, uncommitteds loving...whomever they wish to love. Do you feel it? Do you feel the love?

FELIX gives himself over to the experience, closing his eyes and raising his hands slightly in a tentative gesture of invocation. TRENT and GARRETT look at him and at each other.

ROBERT (Cont.)

(Starts getting teary-eyed.)

Next week and next year and on into the future, when I invite the spirits of our brothers and sisters, I'll be inviting you, too.

(Grabs their hands. They reluctantly form a circle.)

Please come. Please fill this alley with your love as we remember *your* life and *your* accomplishments and *your* suffering for daring to love.

(Raises his hands over his head to feel the air.)

They're here—I feel them—all around us, the alley is full of love. Can you feel it?

(Almost sobbing.)

So much love—I—pardon me—

GARRETT

Robert—

ROBERT

(Tears streaming down his face.)

I'm sorry, Garrett. I just get over—

(Hiccoughs or burps.)

—Whelmed—

GARRETT

(His arm around ROBERT, but rolling his eyes at TRENT.)

It's okay, Robert. We understand. It's very moving to think about.

ROBERT

Especially seeing you and Trent—

(Touches TRENT.)

It's been ages. You and your dad mean a lot to me, to this community—

FELIX

Thank you. This has been great.

ROBERT

I'm so encouraged when young queerlings take an interest. Gives me hope. Can you feel the spirits?

FELIX

Yes.

ROBERT

And will you come back when I call you, will your spirit return?

FELIX

Always.

ROBERT



(To GARRETT.)

Thank Bowen for me—people love seeing where Tennessee wrote, and Bowen gave me such good anecdotes about your house being a “specialty” bordello.

GARRETT

Speaking of Bowen, he’s expecting me, and Trent has to give a lecture at Tulane.

ROBERT

Of course, Garrett. Good to see you both. And so nice to meet you, young man.

FELIX

Nice to meet you.

TRENT

Bye, Robert.

GARRETT

Take care, Robert—you need us to walk you home?

ROBERT

No—I’m fine—the spirits will guide me!

ROBERT waves good-bye as the light goes out on him. TRENT, FELIX, and GARRETT start walking.

FELIX

Thank you—that was amazing!

GARRETT

He breaks down like that every time.

TRENT

‘Cause he always gives the tour liquored-up.

GARRETT

It’s embarrassing.

FELIX

I loved it. He’s very sincere and sweet.

TRENT

He’s gonna be all right staggering home? It’ll be dark soon.

GARRETT

He drags himself home drunk several times a week. It's his natural state. I'm more worried about Bowen.

TRENT

That's his natural state, too.

GARRETT

Don't speak of him like that.

TRENT

Sorry.

GARRETT

He's dealing with a lot right now. Claims he's bored. Tired of it all.

TRENT

That why you're worried?

GARRETT

That and this suspicious character hanging around outside the house late last night. I turned on all the outside lights and he finally left.

FELIX

Do you need us to come with you?

GARRETT

No, it's fine. I doubt he'll come back.

TRENT

Are you planning to come to the lecture?

FELIX

I like your lectures. It's you I have a problem with.

TRENT

Okay, but no heckling.

FELIX

Like I owe you a promise!

Lighting change puts TRENT alone at a lectern.

TRENT

We need our parasites. Over millions of years of co-evolution, our bodies and theirs are perfectly adapted to each other in a passionate love/hate relationship. We simply can't live without these tiny hustlers. We've tried, and the results—in some cases—have been disastrous. Until about the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost no one got colitis or Crohn's disease, conditions in which the body's immune system attacks the lining of the intestine. More than a million Americans suffer from these diseases today, but who are they? Primarily the upper to middle class: people who drink clean water, wash their food, and get good medical care. People without intestinal worms. Deprived of its traditional enemies, the immune system attacks its own body. In some cases, colitis and Crohn's disease have been cured by the re-introduction of parasites to their natural environment—us.

FELIX

(In the audience.)

Damn, that son of a bitch is good.

TRENT

Let's broaden, for a moment, our definition of parasites. Assuming they are necessary, co-dependent, symbiotic, who else might be a parasite?

(Glances toward FELIX.)

FELIX

Okay, where are you going?

TRENT

Am I, a gay man, a parasite of heterosexual society?

FELIX

Oh, my God!

TRENT

Like cowbirds, homosexuals trick heterosexuals into raising their young. If the main purpose of a species is to pass on its genes, we're an absolute detriment to *homo sapiens*. We deliberately seek the least fertile places to sow our seed.

FELIX

Queers as parasites? Holy shit!

TRENT

Yet gay genes continue from generation to generation. Why would this extinction-inducing trait thrive? Why are there still homosexuals? Surely not just to design a fabulous gown or a spectacular cathedral, although these are lovely collateral benefits.

FELIX

Clichés! Trent, no!

TRENT

Like other parasites, we must have evolved a purpose that serves the host species. I'll ask you to contemplate what that might be until tomorrow's lecture, but consider this: the incidence of homosexuality rises as a population grows. Thank you, and don't forget to feed your parasites! You might want to try to the pork tenderloin in the student union cafeteria—it smelled deliciously undercooked.

Lighting change as FELIX joins TRENT.

FELIX

I know it was my suggestion, but was that the best way--?

TRENT

Sorry if that was awkward. I never came out in a lecture before, and the dean looked pissed.

FELIX

(Gestures separation.)

Your work—and your life.

TRENT

(Gestures bringing them together, making a sound effect.)

Your fault.

FELIX

I'm still taking a different plane.

TRENT

Don't.

FELIX

Why do you want me so badly? You've only known me three days.

TRENT

This isn't the first time I've tried this, you know. I'm not a kid—you're well aware of that. I've seen enough guys to know what I want.

FELIX

You've drug other guys to New Orleans and tested them in the fires of hell?

TRENT

You're the first to make it this far.

FELIX

But, why me? And why'd you hide so much?

TRENT

When I was up-front with other guys, all they saw was the family money.

FELIX

That was my first sign to run away.

TRENT

And my first sign to chase you. You don't care about the money, you resent the money. I hate it, too. Always have.

FELIX

It's like prostitution! You've been sent out to purchase the next generation.

TRENT

I know you can't be bought. That's what I love about you.

FELIX

Please don't say that. It's flippant.

(TRENT smiles.)

What?

TRENT

That's a Garrett word.

FELIX

You still love him, don't you?

TRENT

Yes.

FELIX

So you can't really *love* me.

TRENT

If I was cagey, I'd say no of course not, not yet, how could I possibly on such short acquaintance, you can't hurry love, you just have to wait, it's a game of give and take. But you see what happens when I'm cagey.

FELIX

Things get fucked up. Bad. So...what you're saying is...?

TRENT

I'd like you to be my...son.

FELIX

You know, this would be a real easy decision either way except for one thing. Totally easy for me to just jump on a plane and tell all my friends in LA how freaky folks are in New Orleans. Or just as easy for me to say okay nothing wrong with being taken care of the rest of my life so I'd have time to collect ghost stories and write books. Even if it means surrendering my nubile form to a couple of older gentlemen every once in a while—I'm assuming that's expected, yes?

TRENT

It helps.

FELIX

It's like Frenching the dead! Don't you find this whole arrangement completely bizarre? You figured out how to cheat the world, how to sidestep hetero hegemony, but I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. For Rod Serling to pop in and render poetic justice for your hubris.

TRENT

Felix, it's not without its bumps, but this has worked for a very long time.

FELIX

How long?

TRENT

It's not just me, Garrett, and Bowen. Before that there was Rudy—

FELIX

This has been going on for what—generations?

TRENT

Kinda like a dynasty.

FELIX

But you don't have to do this any more. This—dynasty—is a reactionary survival mechanism for a world that no longer exists. A tiny world you can control where everybody knows everybody else, for safety's sake. An old world where survival meant secrecy. Bowen actually likes sneaking around in the dark like some kind of ghost. Nowadays silence equals death, dude, to quote your generation. I come from a big world, an open world. I don't want to make my world small again.

TRENT

Help us open our world then, if that's the problem.

FELIX

None of that's the problem.

TRENT

What is?

FELIX

I'm old enough to know what I want, too.

TRENT

Which is?

FELIX

You. Alone. I don't want to share.

Lights fade on FELIX and TRENT as BOWEN calls out plaintively as the lights on him slowly rise. He's wearing his robe and fixing a drink.

BOWEN

*Flores! Flores para los pendejos!* The most godawful production of *Streetcar Named Desire* I've ever seen! I doubt you're rushing off to buy tickets, but I won't allow you to even consider it.

(Drinks.)

The director had an inspired idea: a black Blanche. He even renamed the character: Noir Dubois. A long program note about casting against type. Directors who write program notes should write their own goddamn plays.

(Drinks.)

I'm sorry, terribly sorry—that's not at all what I wanted to talk about. I mostly just want to apologize. Don't interrupt, please, or it'll never come out. At the end of one's life, one thinks about tidying things up. We live a rather tidy life as it is, except for a few dangling threads, some uncatalogued remnants. I won't say I feel guilty for abducting you from Arizona, but I do realize what you've given up. I took you away from the Taliesen community, a brotherhood, practically a cult, and initiated you into another. You loved modern design, clean lines, and I brought you—rococo. Complicated, overdone, messy. Ancient houses covered in vines, warped, teetering drunkenly on the verge of collapse, and you're the savior. You sneak in an I-beam here, pour a foundation there, the old plantation is propped up ready for the tourists, and the kudzu never even rustled.

(Drinks.)

I am...immensely grateful. Have I ever said so? Immensely. I'm partial to beauty, and beauty's what you do, what you *are*. It's my weakness—and don't say "one of many"

BOWEN (Cont.)

because all my other flaws stem from this one—I sacrifice everything for beauty. Our family, our dynasty, is our most beautiful creation, well, not our creation, but ours to preserve, to conserve, to renovate. I am aware of your sacrifice. I am aware of your beauty. Why else do you suppose I call you Lady Hideous? What else can I do in the face of such beauty?

Lights up on TOD, listening impatiently.  
He holds an empty glass.

TOD

Baby, I know I'm hot—guys tell me every damn day.

BOWEN

Shhh!

TOD

And I ain't never been to no Arizona!

BOWEN

Please!

TOD

You about done? Gonna suck me off or what?

BOWEN

(Sighs.)  
I'm done.

TOD

(Unbuttoning trousers.)  
I had plenty of time before you ate it up talking.

BOWEN

Button up, please.

TOD

Huh?

BOWEN

No need to drop trou.

TOD

After all that—?

BOWEN

You've been very helpful. Thank you for your kind attention.

TOD

I got no idea what you said.

BOWEN



That's fine. Scamper back to your hole.

TOD

Soon's you pay up.

BOWEN

Pay up?

TOD

Charge is the same, sucking or no.

BOWEN

Oh my, did you think—?

TOD

Old man, don't play that.

BOWEN

I invited you in for a glass of cherry limeade. Cool you off and make your mouth all sweet.

TOD

A hundred dollars—I told you!

BOWEN

I'm sorry if I misunderstood.

TOD

(Throws the glass to the floor, breaking it.)  
Understand this!

BOWEN

My Philippe Starck!

TOD

(Forcing a shard of glass to BOWEN'S throat.)  
Gonna break a lot more than glass if you don't pay up!

BOWEN

It's okay—it was from Target.

TOD

I know you got it. All this—  
(Gestures around the room.)  
—Art and shit—

BOWEN

Would you settle for a small Paul Cadmus drawing?

Sound of a key in the door. BOWEN and TOD react to the sound.

TOD

Motherfuck!

Lights out simultaneously with the sound of the sinister bell. It tolls several times in darkness, then the lights come up on TRENT dressed in mourning clothes. He stands almost motionless as the bell tolls, holding back emotion. The bell stops and suddenly a jazz band strikes up a lively tune: it's a New Orleans jazz funeral. After a few moments of music, TRENT begins to smile, perhaps to laugh. FELIX shows up, also in mourning attire.

FELIX

You okay?

TRENT

Think so.

FELIX

Why're you laughing?

TRENT

I have no idea.

(Glances at FELIX.)

Overnight tailoring worked out.

FELIX

I always look good in black.

TRENT

Yes, you do. Thanks for staying.

FELIX

Pretty fancy funeral.

TRENT

New Orleans is good with death.

FELIX

Pricey, I mean. Other people don't rate funerals like this.

TRENT

We're an old family. That means something here.

FELIX

Even this kind of family?

TRENT

Especially this kind.

(Pause.)

I'll tell you why I was laughing.

FELIX

Why?

TRENT

I keep thinking about angler fish.

FELIX

Angler fish?

TRENT

They live at the bottom of the ocean, in the dark, completely adapted to the cold and enormous pressure. They're jet black, but the female—about—

(Gestures—size of a cantaloupe.)

—Yea big—has this little phosphorescent light she dangles out in from of her—

(Demonstrates.)

—To lure prey.

FELIX

What makes you think of that?

TRENT

The male—this big—

(Gestures—size of a jelly bean.)

—When he finds a female down there in the dark, doesn't want to lose her, so he bites onto her—

(Demonstrates on his face.)

—And hangs on for the rest of his life. Eventually their circulatory systems merge and he's absorbed into her body until he's nothing but a pimple, really.

FELIX

Or a parasite?

TRENT

In the broadest sense.

FELIX

Or the two halves of the soul—

TRENT

But I never thought about what happens when one of them dies. Do they both die, like Siamese twins?

FELIX

She's the bigger half, so she'd probably survive his death, but he's so small--

TRENT

He probably wouldn't make it if she died.

FELIX

(Seeing someone in the distance.)  
Oh, here comes—

TRENT

Don't—

FELIX

Shouldn't we—?

TRENT

No. I think he's all right.

BOWEN

(Entering with true dignity, in mourning. Completely sober.)  
Garrett had a lot of clients.

TRENT

Friends.

BOWEN

I wonder whether he would find a jazz funeral acceptable.

TRENT

Why are you late?

BOWEN

Police.

FELIX  
Any idea...who...?

BOWEN  
No.

TRENT  
Just another queer with his throat slit.

BOWEN  
Don't use that word.

TRENT  
Like you should talk!

BOWEN  
Garrett hated that word. Said it was like being kicked in the stomach.

TRENT  
No idea at all?

FELIX  
You never saw the guy?

BOWEN  
An intruder, a burglar—I told them, I told you. I heard noises, locked myself in my room—

TRENT  
And you saw *nothing*?

BOWEN  
Trent, I just went through this with the police. I am by no means brave.

TRENT  
Sorry.  
(Suppresses a sob.)

FELIX  
Trent, it's okay, go ahead. You don't have to be a scientist all the time.

BOWEN  
Garrett would prefer that we not.

FELIX  
Not cry?

BOWEN  
Not here. Not in front of everyone.

TRENT  
He wasn't—ready.

FELIX  
You afraid people will guess?

BOWEN  
It's our business.

FELIX  
A son can't cry at his father's funeral—?

BOWEN  
You can do that at home.

FELIX  
A father can't cry at his son's—?

TRENT  
You—were ready.

BOWEN  
Please stop.

FELIX  
They all know! Nudge, nudge, wink, wink—they *know*.

BOWEN  
But I don't *know* they know.

TRENT  
And you saw *nothing*!

FELIX  
Who are you protecting?

BOWEN  
The family, young man.

FELIX  
What kind of family can't cry at a funeral?

BOWEN

I didn't expect Garrett to cry at my funeral. I didn't cry at Rudy's. Rudy didn't at Hammet's funeral. Hammet didn't cry when Anton passed. Anton didn't when Cyrus was killed, yes, murdered here in our number two in the nation homicide city. Cyrus didn't cry for Aaron. Aaron didn't cry for Beauchamp. Beauchamp didn't cry for Jean-Paul. Jean-Paul didn't cry for Etienne—

FELIX

(Overlapping.)

Wait—

BOWEN

Etienne didn't cry for Cesar. Cesar didn't cry for Claude—

FELIX

How many generations—?

BOWEN

Claude didn't cry for Philippe. Philippe didn't cry for Marcel—

FELIX

Stop, please—

BOWEN

Marcel didn't cry for—

FELIX

(Urgently but not too loud.)

Stop!

(BOWEN stops.)

How many generations of men...didn't cry? Altogether? How far back?

BOWEN

I've never counted, really.

FELIX

To the French Revolution?

BOWEN

Oh, before, that's why we came—that was Cesar—

TRENT

Claude.

BOWEN

I get them mixed up.

FELIX  
 Further? The Sun King?

BOWEN  
 Well established at that point. Vineyards, mostly.

FELIX  
 Agincourt?

BOWEN  
 We were Italian then. Right, Trent?

TRENT  
 Lombards, actually.

FELIX  
 Petrarch?

TRENT  
 Further.

FELIX  
 Constantine?

BOWEN  
 You're getting warmer.

FELIX  
 Come on, guys, Homer?

BOWEN  
 Now you've overshot.

TRENT  
 Varro is a Roman name.

FELIX  
 Rome—Roman? Roman Empire Roman?

BOWEN  
 The Republic, actually.

TRENT  
 Roman law allowed adult adoption—



FELIX

You expect me to believe that for more than two thousand years—

BOWEN

You don't have to believe it. We believe it.

TRENT

It's all written down. We have an archive.

FELIX

No tears...for two thousand years—that's what you're protecting—

BOWEN

That's how we've survived a hostile environment. We adapted.

(Silence for a moment as FELIX absorbs this.)

Shall we go?

FELIX

Yeah, Trent, maybe we should go.

TRENT

Okay, let's go—

BOWEN

Yes—home—you can cry there if you like.

TRENT

I don't want to.

BOWEN

Cry? Good.

TRENT

I don't want to go back.

BOWEN

Felix, will you drive?

TRENT

I want to go to Los Angeles.

Lighting change so that TRENT is alone at a lectern.

TRENT

One of the most important life principles—if you're a parasite—is that of optimal virulence. Just how much can you take from the host—how much food, how much blood—before you kill it? Killing the host often means the parasite dies as well. If tapeworms ate all our food, if hookworms sucked all our blood, we'd die and so would they. Self-regulation is important for all species, not just parasites. There is, however, one species notable for its lack of self-regulation: *homo sapiens*. We're close to fishing out the oceans, polluting all potable water, and destroying the forests and plankton that provide the very air we breathe. The earth is our host, and we are its parasite—a parasite that has far exceeded optimal virulence. Nature tries to fight back. Lurking unknown in the African jungle until forty years ago, AIDS has killed or afflicted more than 58 million worldwide. Overcrowded parts of the world have always been vulnerable to epidemics like cholera, yellow fever and the Black Death. I'm sure Mother Nature has worse viruses up her sleeve, ready to regulate her most destructive children. Social ills also increase in overcrowded conditions—suicide, infanticide, child abuse, and patricide—

(Pauses for a moment to take a deep breath.)

—All terribly—unfortunate—but remarkably effective means of reducing the surplus population. Violence is in our blood—the omnivorous diet that fueled our remarkable brain size also programmed us to kill—and when there are too many of us, we—kill ourselves. But evolution is smarter than we are, and has provided us with some less horrific forms of regulation. In my last lecture I mentioned that the incidence of homosexuality rises as populations become overcrowded. Homosexuals are--we are--an evolutionary advantage to our species, a non-violent alternative to—to—

(Pause.)

I'm sorry. I'm—uh—I'm going to have to cut this short. You see, my fa—my, my *lover*, Garrett Varro, was murdered three days ago, so the topic hits a little close to home, and—

(Takes a moment to compose himself.)

Evolution of species takes place imperceptibly over eons. But social evolution can happen in a relative blink of an eye. Homosexuality only got a name a hundred years ago. It only became a movement between fifty and sixty years ago with the Mattachine Society. It only came out of the closet forty years ago with the Stonewall riots. It only garnered national sympathy almost thirty years ago with the advent of AIDS. What did your father think of homosexuality? Your father's father? Society is slowly figuring it out—our counter-evolutionary and anti-reproductive trait keeps popping up in our genes for a reason. We are not an accident, a fluke—we help the species survive. Today's lecture was supposed to be about parasites. It seems I've gotten off track. Perhaps not. Perhaps all of us—all human beings—are truly parasites.

(Singing to the tune of *People*.)

And parasites, parasites who need parasites  
Are the luckiest parasites in the world!

Instant lighting change puts TRENT alone  
with FELIX.

TRENT

I figured it out. He's protecting someone.

FELIX

Bowen is?

TRENT

Someone gay. There's no way he could have avoided witnessing—but he's holding back, I can tell he's holding back. He's not just protecting the family by staying in the closet, he's refusing to turn in a gay murderer.

FELIX

Who killed his lover, his son?

TRENT

I think he hates straight people—the police—even more.

FELIX

Hates straight people?

BOWEN appears.

TRENT AND BOWEN

Don't you?

FELIX

No! Don't you think—

(A glance to TRENT.)

—You owe Garrett a measure of justice?

BOWEN

Justice! Whenever in the world has there been justice? There is only retribution answering retribution, with the vanquisher declaring justice.

TRENT

If you know—

BOWEN

I don't.

FELIX

If you *knew*—

TRENT

Anything.

FELIX

Anything.

BOWEN says nothing.

TRENT

If it's someone gay—

(BOWEN says nothing.)

If you're protecting someone gay, or if you're embarrassed—

BOWEN

Embarrassed! Garrett's been killed—what's embarrassment to that?

TRENT

I know you sometimes have—young men—come to visit. Garrett knew, I knew, no big deal. If it was one of those—

BOWEN

What in the world good would it do? Retribution—another life destroyed—

TRENT

Whoever killed Garrett could—

FELIX

—Do something similar—

TRENT

—To someone else.

FELIX

Not retribution—prevention.

BOWEN

I'm sorry. I don't know.

TRENT

Mendacity! I think you do.

(Glances at FELIX.)

And if I thought that you'd—hide—

FELIX

Trent's prepared—

TRENT

Felix—! I can—

FELIX

Okay, okay.

TRENT

I couldn't stay, Bowen. I'm sorry, but I couldn't. Felix says I can stay with him in California—

BOWEN

The day we're honoring Garrett's memory, you'd let us go extinct?

TRENT

No—extinct—I'm sure—

FELIX

Yes. Yes, he would.

BOWEN

My premonition's come true.

TRENT

Would there really be anything left to die out?

BOWEN

Me.

TRENT

You can find someone to take care of you. You're in remission. The money always—

BOWEN

I don't want *that*, Trent. The Varros are more than an abstraction. More than cheerful long-term care. I want you.

TRENT

Then...please...tell me...

BOWEN

Please don't ask me. Garrett takes care of these things—

TRENT

Garrett's not here!

BOWEN

You don't want to know.

TRENT

Yes, I do! More than anything! For Garrett's sake—if you care about him—

BOWEN

It won't bring Garrett back! Leave it alone!

TRENT  
 No! I won't!

BOWEN  
 No good—just...more grief—

FELIX  
 They can't hurt you if you don't have secrets—

BOWEN  
 It's not my secret.

TRENT  
 Then tell me.

After a moment, BOWEN produces the cemetery rubbing. TRENT stares at the rubbing a moment, then completely breaks down, perhaps physically collapsing with a moan. The mysterious bell tolls several times in the darkness. Lights up to reveal TRENT and FELIX in bed, with FELIX holding TRENT in his arms.

TRENT  
 I'm sorry.

FELIX  
 Shhhh.

TRENT  
 He didn't want you to know.

FELIX  
 He didn't want *you* to know.

TRENT  
 He's always been kind. In secret.

FELIX  
 Shhhh.

TRENT  
 I can leave tomorrow. Is that all right?

FELIX  
I'd stay in New Orleans if you wanted me to.

TRENT  
Nothing to stay for.

FELIX  
Doesn't Bowen need--?

TRENT  
He's a survivor--a female angler fish.

FELIX  
If you thought he truly needed you, would you stay?

TRENT  
Without question. But truth ain't his strong suit. So, regarding LA--if you still want—?

FELIX  
Yes, I want. I'll take care of the tickets.

TRENT  
Stubborn old bastard! Why's he make it so hard?

FELIX  
Oh, my God!

TRENT  
Your God what?

FELIX  
I just realized why I love you.

TRENT  
Why?

FELIX  
Because you love *them* so much.

A knock at the door. FELIX pulls the sheet up over them more securely.

FELIX  
Come in.

BOWEN

(Coming in.)  
I'm sorry—you're not—?

FELIX

Not exactly in the mood.

BOWEN

No, of course not.

(After a moment.)  
They got him. Right at the Corner Pocket—dancing. Like today was any other day.

FELIX

Is he really that stupid?

BOWEN AND TRENT

Yes.

Silence for a moment.

TRENT

Bowen, how can I—?

BOWEN

No—quiet—

TRENT

Please—I mean—thank you. You tried—I couldn't figure out why you wouldn't tell--

BOWEN

Shhhh.

Uncomfortable pause.

BOWEN

The...uh...young man in the attic wanted me to—  
(Brandishes paper.)

TRENT

Something new?

BOWEN

Just finished. For you.

FELIX

(Starts to get up.)  
Oh, well, I can—



BOWEN

No, it's for both of you, please stay. He'd like you to.

FELIX

The young man in the attic?

BOWEN

Yes. He's dedicated it to Garrett.

(After FELIX relaxes back into TRENT'S arms. BOWEN reads.)

I saw darkness upon the face of the waters

You gave me light

A firmament in the midst of the waters

You called it heaven

You gathered the waters together

Let the dry land appear

Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed

The teeming, fecund earth

A miracle in the void

And finally

Man in his own image

Reflection of a god

Who didn't like the world

And so built his own

Silence for a moment.

BOWEN

I liked our world.

(Starts to cry.)

TRENT

(Sitting up in the bed, concerned.)

Bowen—

BOWEN

And y'all are our apocalypse.

TRENT

It's my fault Garrett died-- that idiot hustler followed *me* home--but I can't change that now!

BOWEN

You could stay.

TRENT

We've lost what held our world together.

BOWEN

Stay with me! I told you the truth when you demanded it! Exposed in the harshest light--

FELIX

(Jumping out of the bed, putting his arms around BOWEN.)  
You can always build another world.

BOWEN

(Losing control.)  
Garrett—built.

FELIX

(Guiding BOWEN to the bed.)  
He can still.

TRENT

For God's sake, Felix—

BOWEN

(Overlapping.)  
Don't start with that phantom crap.

TRENT

(Overlapping.)  
Enough of that new agey—shaman stuff—

FELIX

If Garrett created your world, he's gotta have that Father, Son and Holy Ghost thing going on.

BOWEN

Young man, that's just a poem.

GARRETT appears, unseen. BOWEN does not notice when GARRETT takes his hand. TRENT does not notice when GARRETT takes his hand.

FELIX

(Sees GARRETT although the others do not.)  
Oh, my God!

TRENT

What?

FELIX  
Don't you—can't you—?

TRENT  
Today's not the day for this seeing things—

FELIX  
I always wanted to see—

BOWEN  
(Looking where FELIX is looking, not seeing GARRETT.)  
You're an odd and even eerie young person.

FELIX  
—And understand—

BOWEN  
Trent, you can't go to LA with him till he's had an exorcism.

FELIX  
I think I understand what ghosts are.

BOWEN  
I don't believe in ghosts.

TRENT  
Felix, you know I don't.

FELIX  
But you believe in history, don't you?

TRENT  
I guess so.

BOWEN  
Of course.

FELIX  
And history's what holds us together.

GARRETT leans in to kiss FELIX, who  
hesitates a fraction of a second, then accepts  
the kiss.

TRENT

That and secrets.

FELIX

(Gently pulling out of the kiss.)  
Why don't we keep those in the archive?

FELIX continues staring at GARRETT.

BOWEN

(To TRENT.)  
Which is your responsibility now.

TRENT

Can you adapt to the light?

BOWEN

An honest attempt.

TRENT

(After a moment.)  
All right.

BOWEN

Thank you, Felix.

TRENT

Felix, what are you doing?

FELIX

I'm sorry. Are...are your hands cold?

TRENT

One of them.

BOWEN

(Rubbing one hand with the other, not knowing he's caressing GARRETT'S.)  
A little.

FELIX

Then get closer. We need to keep each other warm.

TRENT

Get closer? I'm already uncomfortable.

FELIX

Sometimes warmth is.

BOWEN  
Oh, stop.

TRENT  
Felix--

FELIX  
Closer.

TRENT  
Ow...sorry...and how long do we have to sit like this?

FELIX  
As long as we need to.

FELIX starts slightly when he notices one of BOWEN'S hands caressing him in a very familiar way.

BOWEN  
(Fully recovered from his tears.)  
None of that goddamned sentimentality! That's why we have poems, so we have a place to put all those finer feelings that are so inconvenient and impractical in daily life—

As BOWEN speaks, FELIX looks to TRENT, who notices BOWEN'S caress of FELIX as well. TRENT just shrugs and grins sheepishly. FELIX relaxes and grins as well, accepting BOWEN'S touch.

BOWEN (Cont.)  
Young people romanticize everything. Every song on the radio absolutely reeks of profundity--you get a lotta truly erroneous information from love songs on the radio.

GARRETT slowly draws his hands together, binding BOWEN and TRENT tightly to FELIX.

BOWEN (Cont.)  
Not one about sebaceous cysts, trimming each others' ear hairs and farting in bed. Most certainly the striking difference between the old and the young. Well, that and sex. You think love will save you, when of course you have no idea in the world what love is. And don't look to your elders to tell you because we don't know either.

They are all tightly bound together in GARRETT'S embrace, happy but unconsciously so. GARRETT'S hand is on BOWEN'S shoulder.

BOWEN (Cont.)

Life doesn't get any less confusing as you near the end, but you find yourself grateful for any little feeling, even a little pain. Speaking of which, move your elbow, goddammit, you're jabbing the hell outta me. Shit.

THE END