

JUDGMENT OF THE EYE

A play
by Simon Bowler Khan
(a work in progress)
8-2-24

This script is copyright protected and may not be reproduced, distributed, or disseminated
without the prior written permission of the author.

Contact: simonbowler@gmail.com

Characters:

Han Van Meegeren - Forger (late 40s) (Mee-Gur-en)	(1)
Jo Van Meegeren - Han's wife (early 40s)	(2)
Theo Van Wijngaarden - Art Dealer (30s) (Vin-Garden)	(3)
Ms. Bredius - Expert (60s) (Bree-dee-us)	(4)
Inspector Henrich Wooning - Allied Investigator (30s) (Woo-ning)	(4)
Lotte - a prostitute (30s)	(5)
Lt. Hess - Nazi officer (40s)	(3)
Judge - Female (40s)	(5)
Mr. Walters - reporter (30s)	(5)
Emma Laan (20s) - Bredius' secretary	(2)
The Man (30s)	(3)
<i>(various voices: Crowd, soldier)</i>	

Cast Doubling:

11 characters, 6 male, 5 female. With doubling, 5 actors, (3 male, 2 female)

Running Time: 90 mins (This play runs more quickly than plays of similar length).

Time: 1940s Genre: Drama

Production Sheets with Props List available on request.

Sets: An art studio, an office, an interrogation room, and a court.

Logline: At the end of World War II, an art forger must prove his paintings are fakes or be executed as a traitor.

Synopsis: Han Van Meegeren, a struggling Dutch artist, realizes his skill is forgeries and proceeds to sell millions of dollars of fake art. When Germany invades, he is compelled by the SS to sell paintings to Goering, and he makes millions more. At the end of the war, he is accused of selling national treasure to the enemy and is to be executed. He claims the paintings are fakes and to prove it he will paint another. He is given six to paint a new Vermeer or he will be hung. His story exposes the contradictions of how we perceive and value art, in a tale so absurd, and with a character so flawed, it can only be true.

Writer Bio: After graduating in Film and TV from the University of Westminster, London, Simon produced at BBC World Service Television, then produced documentaries for Channel 4 and The World Bank. He produced the mockumentary feature film 'Man of the Year' and worked as an entertainment radio journalist in Los Angeles. He returned to television and produced multiple shows for Channel 4, the BBC, ABC, PBS, Discovery, Oxygen, Bravo, and Friends of the Earth. He has written several award-winning plays.

Reviews:

"I didn't want it to end. Interesting concept, good dialogue, plot, and characters. The pacing was very good, each scene necessary. Very marketable." The Paragon Press

"Really solid Simon, really solid, this script is crazy strong." LivereadLA

"This is a very well-written play. The dialogue is sharp and features a deeply intriguing main character at its center... sets itself apart from the pack." Script Pipeline

"Beautiful work, well-written dialogue... engaging at all times ...intriguing, clever, and based on a true story. Who wouldn't love it?" Southwest Theater Productions

"Han is a complicated, charismatic protagonist that many actors will want to sink their teeth into." ScreenCraft

"It's a very good play. The ethical questions offered about art and honesty, the drive to create, what constitutes artistic "merit" provoke prolonged discussion. The writer's skill crafted a piece that is fascinating, illuminating, and breathtakingly human." Screencraft

Readings

The Overtime Theater San Antonio, The Writer Speaks Los Angeles, Shawnee Playhouse Ohio, Jocunda Theatre Brooklyn,

Awards

The Beverly Hills Theatre Guild Award, Broadway Bound Festival Winner, Sultan Padamsee Playwright Award Winner, Pharmacy Theatre New Writers Winner, Wishbone Theater Winner, Paragon Press Winner, Broad Horizons New Voices Finalist, Julie Harris Playwright Award - 3rd Place, the Red List #1 Historical Play, Screencraft Play Finalist, LiveRead/LA Finalist, Write LA Finalist, London Playwrights Award Shortlist, New Works of Merit Honorable Mention, Tru Voices Semifinalist, Garry Marshall New Works Semifinalist, Risk Theatre Modern Tragedy Semifinalist, Dayton Playhouse Future Fest Semifinalist, WriteMovies Semifinalist

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

At rise a hotel room, a table, two chairs, a window illuminated in a neon glow from a sign outside.

Mr. Walters (30s), wearing 1940s pants, a shirt, and jacket. He is with a young woman, Lotte (20s), provocatively dressed, wearing bright red lipstick, and smoking a cigarette.

They look at each other, sizing each other. Walters consults his notebook.

WALTERS

So that the was the first time you met?

LOTTE

Like I told you, he took me to his studio.

WALTERS

And?

LOTTE

He just wanted to paint me.

WALTERS

(sceptical) Really?

LOTTE

It was all above board.

WALTERS

Do you remember the name of the painting?

LOTTE

Uh uh. *(a beat)* Maybe something with a piano, no not a piano, a piano forty, whatever that is.

WALTERS

A pianoforte, it's a type of keyboard from the 17th century. Did you see the painting?

LOTTE

Uh uh, he was... private about his work.

WALTERS

Weren't you curious?

LOTTE

Look, miss, I'm telling you he wasn't no criminal.

WALTERS

(scribbles in his note pad) You had no idea what he was up to?

LOTTE

What's your angle?

WALTERS

I'm trying to get to the truth of the matter.

Lotte laughs.

WALTERS

What's funny?

LOTTE

Newspapers and truth don't necessarily go together. You know what I mean?

WALTERS

The Saturday Evening Post is not a regular newspaper. We are a magazine.

LOTTE

You mean like Life magazine?

WALTERS

Yes, similar. We don't run headlines, we like to go deeper into a story.

LOTTE

So, you believe him?

WALTERS

About what?

LOTTE

That's he's innocent.

WALTERS

I'm not here to judge. (*back to her notes*) And that was your first meeting?

SCENE TWO

A small living room, a window, a table with paint pots and brushes, a chair, a stool, and to the side, a radio, an easel and canvas.

On the walls various Dutch Golden Age classical paintings - *Portrait of a Gypsy Girl* by Franz Hals, several still lives of food, and *The Girl in the Pearl Earring* by Johannes Vermeer. Other paintings in a similar style are on the floor propped up against the walls.

The door opens. Enter Han (late 40s), thin, in a cheap suit, and Lotte, provocatively dressed and wearing bright red lipstick.

LOTTE

Do I look right? I mean, I ain't really a model.

HAN

You look perfect.

LOTTE

That's a real nice thing to say.

HAN

Does anyone know you're here?

LOTTE

Should they?

HAN

I require strict privacy.

LOTTE

Don't worry, Mister, I ain't got no pimp, I work alone, your secrets are safe with me.

HAN

(pours a glass of wine) Drink?

LOTTE

Whaddy a got?

HAN

Cheap wine, but it goes down.

LOTTE

Sure. Why not? *(looks around the studio)* So where d'ya want me?

HAN

There *(points)*, on the stool.

He pours the wine as she sits on the stool and poses, chest out, chin down, fingers on her knees, seductive Rita Hayworth.

LOTTE

Like this?

HAN

No, no, no, it's not for glamour. I'm making art.

LOTTE

Then whaddy a want me to do?

HAN

Look over to the window.

She turns, but lips still pouting and chest still out.

LOTTE

Better?

HAN

Yes, better. Breathe out. Try to be natural. Here. (*gives her the wine*) Down the hatch.

He drinks his in one shot. She is a little shocked.

LOTTE

I don't think you're 'sposed to glug it?

HAN

'Supposed to' - the most dangerous words in the language. Go ahead, it'll help you relax.

LOTTE

OK.

She downs her drink and looks around at the canvases.

LOTTE

You must be some kind of big shot painter.

HAN

(*laughs*) I had dreams, once.

LOTTE

Well, I think you're good. They're beautiful pictures.

HAN

Thank you. Which do you like in particular?

She points to a painting.

LOTTE

That one.

HAN

Why?

LOTTE

I dunno, I just do.

HAN

Well, what draws you to it?

LOTTE

She looks happy, you can see it in her eyes. Is it yours? I mean, did you paint it?

HAN

God no, it's by Frans Hals, one of the greatest portrait painters of all time.

LOTTE

So it's an original?

HAN

(laughs) I wish. No, just a copy.

LOTTE

It's still beautiful, I mean, I like it.

HAN

Of course, original or copy, it's inspiring.

She approaches him.

LOTTE

Hey Mister, you wanna make out? *(pushes her body into his)* I never did it with an artist. Usually truck drivers and sailors, you know what I mean?

HAN

(getting hot) I... I have to work.

LOTTE

(seductive) Relax.

She KISSES him.

LOTTE

All work makes Jack a dull boy.

He kisses her back, they smooch, then he pulls away.

HAN

We're not here for that.

LOTTE

Whatever you say. It's your party.

HAN

We're here to work. Perhaps some music.

He turns the radio on - Jazz.

HAN

Do you like Jazz?

LOTTE

Sure.

HAN

A much maligned and misunderstood innovation.

LOTTE

I like the swing of it.

HAN

Because it's by black people. If they were white, it'd be a different story.

She dances around him.

LOTTE

Maybe you wanna dance?

HAN

(sharp) No, no, just sit.

LOTTE

Ok, Ok, don't get cranky.

HAN

I'm sorry, my nerves are on edge.

He pours another glass of wine. She moves to the stool.

LOTTE

You said fifty guilders, right?

HAN

Yes, yes, that's right. Now sit down.

LOTTE

You want me here?

HAN

Yes, and look up to the left. *(he approaches)* Turn your body this way... *(he turns her chin)*

LOTTE

You got nice hands. An artist's hands.

HAN

Thank you. Turn your head back this way.

LOTTE

And you just want me to sit? I ain't doing anything, you know, perverted.

HAN

I'm just going to paint you for God's sake! Now smile.

She makes a cheesy grin.

HAN

No, no, you look distorted. A natural smile.

LOTTE

But it won't be real, I ain't no actress.

HAN

It doesn't have to be real!

LOTTE

OK, how about this?

She smiles a dreamy smile.

HAN

Much better.

He starts to paint.

LOTTE

Do think they'll take Holland?

HAN

Who?

LOTTE

The Germans.

HAN

Probably, Hitler's a damn psychopath.

LOTTE

Won't Britain stop them?

HAN

They just gave the Nazi's the Sudetenland. "Peace in our time", Chamberlain said. The Brits are fools, whereas you...*(regards her)*

LOTTE

Uh huh?

HAN

... are beautiful.

LOTTE

Shucks, Mister, you sure know how to flatter a girl.

HAN

Look up.

LOTTE

Sorry. *(a beat)* You know the Germans banned radios?

HAN

Doesn't surprise me. They don't want people listening to the BBC, just Goering's propaganda machine.

LOTTE

You think that stuff works?

HAN

Of course, that's why they do it.

LOTTE

But people ain't stupid.

HAN

You'd be surprised. *(a beat)* Remove the shawl.

She teasingly removes her shawl, baring her shoulders, and revealing a low-cut dress.

LOTTE

Like this?

HAN

And your straps.

LOTTE

(slides her straps off her shoulder seductively) Better?

HAN

Keep looking to the left... a little higher. There, good. Now sit perfectly still.

He continues painting. The door opens. Theo (30s), enters. He is rakish and a little nervy.

THEO

Sorry old chap, I had a meeting. *(sees Lotte)* Well, hello.

HAN

Theo, meet Lotte.

LOTTE

(pulls up her dress straps) Pleased to meet you.

THEO

(to Han) I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were... 'engaged'.

HAN

It's not like that. She's modelling for me!

THEO

(dubious) Right, of course she is. *(to Lotte)* Don't mind me.

LOTTE

I don't.

HAN

(to Lotte) Head up.

THEO

(to Han) So, how was it?

HAN

My exhibition? A disaster.

THEO

I'm sorry, old chap. I know it's an uphill battle.

HAN

No sales. None. Zip. Zilch. Not a guilder.

THEO

Have faith, old boy.

HAN

In what?

THEO

In yourself. You're a damn good painter. Keep going.

HAN

For what, if no one likes it?

THEO

Who showed up?

HAN

A few minor critics, who only talked about the coming war and nothing about my portraits and seascapes.

THEO

All good stuff.

HAN

They didn't take a blind bit of notice.

THEO

The experts wouldn't know good art if it bit them on the ass.

Lotte, bored, fidgets.

HAN

Lotte, stop moving. You must hold the position.

LOTTE

Like I said, I ain't done this before.

HAN

Lift your chin up a little. *(she finds the posture)* There. Now don't move.

Theo goes to the window, pulls back the curtain, and peers out.

HAN

What's wrong?

THEO

Nothing.

HAN

(suspicious) Theo?

THEO

Just checking I wasn't followed.

HAN

By who?

THEO

Must have been my imagination. Any one else show up?

HAN

Bredius. I almost had a heart attack.

THEO

(sheepish) I know.

HAN

What do you mean you know?

THEO

(embarrassed) I invited her.

HAN

Jesus Christ, Theo! Why?

THEO

A good word from Bredius would propel your career.

HAN

You should have warned me at least.

THEO

Sorry, old chap, I thought it'd make you nervous. So what did she say?

HAN

(mimics Bredius) "*Van Meegeren has every virtue...*"

THEO

Good. You see, she liked it.

HAN

"... except originality."

THEO

Bastard. She's a blind as a bat. Did she say anything else?

HAN

(mimics Bredius) "*Van Meegeren is mediocre at best*".

THEO

Ouch! I'm sorry, Han.

HAN

She's not alone. The Gazette said my paintings are the work of a competent hack.

THEO

Who cares about The Gazette? No one.

HAN

I'm broke, Theo! That was my last hope and now my reputation, the little I had, is shot to hell.

THEO

It's just a setback.

HAN

No, Theo, I'm tired of playing their game. I just want create works of beauty. Is that a crime?

THEO

Can't you do more of those portraits for those rich folks in France?

HAN

It's been a year since my last commission. No one wants to spend money on portraits, not with the Nazis stomping over Europe.

THEO

Then why not try your hand at Expressionism? It's all the rage.

HAN

I refuse to prostitute myself. (*glances at Lotte*) No offense.

LOTTE

None taken.

HAN

Lotte, who's your favorite artist?

LOTTE

(*gazing at the window*) What?

HAN

Who's your favorite artist?

LOTTE

I dunno.

HAN

There must be one you admire; Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Vermeer?

LOTTE

Yeah, I like Da Vinci. The Mona Lisa, right?

HAN

(to Theo) You see, people know the real thing when they see it.

THEO

Do they or is it learned?

HAN

It's a natural response, Theo, it's what defines us as human, our ability to make and recognize art.

THEO

Ah, yes, but Classical's a risky game, the galleries only want the new stuff.

HAN

And so we're doomed to live in a world of abstract patterns and Brutalists. Soon even our buildings will look like bloody boxes. I refuse to be a part of it.

THEO

We have to adapt.

HAN

You wouldn't understand, you're not an artist.

THEO

I paint too.

HAN

You dabble.

THEO

And I'm not bad, you said so yourself.

HAN

Lotte, head up. *(to Theo)* But you don't sell your work.

THEO

That makes two of us.

HAN

Touche. *(throws the brush down, frustrated)* Damn it! I've lost the flow. I'm sorry, Lotte, we'll have to postpone.

LOTTE

You want me to go?

HAN

I'm afraid so.

LOTTE

I'm still getting paid, right?

HAN

(checks his pocket, pulls out a few bills, frowns, turns to Theo) Couldn't lend me a hundred, could you?

THEO

Again?

HAN

(whispers) I'll pay you back.

Theo gives him several notes. Han gives them to Lotte.

HAN

Here.

LOTTE

A hundred?

THEO

(protesting) Han!

HAN

You girls have a hard life and are much despised.

LOTTE

Mister Van Meegeren, you're a real gentlemen.

She KISSES him on the cheek.

LOTTE

You know where to find me.

HAN

Be safe.

She heads for the door. Theo holds it open for her, flirting

THEO

Bye, Lotte.

LOTTE

(flirting back) Bye, Theo.

She scurries past him and exits.

THEO

She's cute.

HAN

Hands off. She's mine.

THEO

(surprised) Yours?

HAN

You know what I mean? There are plenty of other girls, but she, she has a certain quality.

THEO

Where'd you pick her up?

HAN

At the port.

THEO

Good God, could you scrape any lower?

HAN

(embarrassed) I know, but where else can I get 'real' looking models, and she stood out like a Michaelangelo angel.

Han cleans his brushes.

THEO

He copied a statue of Cupid and sold it to a dealer in Milan.

HAN

Who did?

THEO

Michelangelo, but he never went to jail and he got to keep the money.

HAN

Fascinating, but what's the point of this little anecdote?

THEO

There's a rumor circulating that a *Laughing Cavalier* is on the black market.

HAN

(intrigued) A Frans Hals?

THEO

Is there any other?

HAN

Well, it's obviously fake.

THEO

Why?

HAN

Because the original Hals in the Wallace Collection in London.

THEO

Or perhaps it's a study by Hals, but whatever, the important thing is I found a client who's willing to buy it sight unseen.

HAN

But you don't have anything to sell.

THEO

My contacts say no one has actually seen it.

HAN

(confused) So if the painting doesn't exist, how can you sell it?

THEO

You'll make one.

HAN

(dawning) You mean I should paint a *Cavalier*?

THEO

Why not?

Han stares at Theo, then laughs...

HAN

For a moment there, I thought you were serious.

THEO

You're the best classical painter in Holland, possibly in Europe, and you just said that you're broke.

HAN

I've no intention of going to jail.

THEO

It's a maximum two-year sentence.

HAN

Two years!

THEO

But more likely a few months, maybe a year, but look, we just do the one painting, cut the risk to almost nothing, just to tide us over.

HAN

This is ludicrous, they'll see its flaws.

THEO

Do you remember the recently discovered Rembrandt?

HAN

Yes, the one found in a basement.

THEO

The dealer sold it for a hundred thousand at Sothebys.

HAN

I read about it in *The Gazette*. Kicked up quite a controversy because it was unverified.

THEO

We'll say your Frans Hals was found damaged, discovered in a barn or a family heirloom, that kind of thing, with no chain provenance.

HAN

I don't know, Theo. It's a tall order.

THEO

Sixty thousand guilders tall?

HAN

(shocked) Sixty!

THEO

That's what he'll pay.

HAN

I mean, it's possible in theory.

THEO

You could stop teaching. Concentrate on your own work, finally.

HAN

I don't know. I mean, maybe, but do you have any idea how difficult it'll be?

THEO

I believe in you, Han.

HAN

To recreate a Hals, not just the technique, but the spirit.

THEO

Well, it was an idea. Never mind.

Han pours another drink.

HAN

I'd need period canvases.

THEO

So you're in?

HAN

And lapis lazuli.

THEO

Shouldn't be a problem.

HAN

And white lead, indigo, and cinnabar, and sable brushes.

THEO

Write me a list.

HAN

And charcoal and bone. That's what Hals used.

THEO

So you can do it?

HAN

It'll take time.

THEO

How long?

HAN

Six months minimum.

THEO

I don't know if he'll wait.

HAN

I'll have to prep the canvas, let the oils dry, which I could speed up by heating, perhaps, but yes, at least.

THEO

I'll talk to him.

HAN

So who is this mysterious buyer?

THEO

De Groot.

HAN

The collector?

THEO

Apparently he wants to 'complete' his collection.

HAN

Are you sure he won't sell it on? That's when there'll be real analysis.

THEO

Don't worry, he'll want to show it off to his friends, but just to make sure, I'll get it authenticated at the Muller Auction house.

HAN

Are you insane? They'll do a chemical test, surely?

THEO

Nope. I sold them a Ruisdael landscape last year. They do a visual assessment with their experts. That's it.

HAN

You're sure?

THEO

All done by eye. And we'll split it fifty-fifty.

HAN

I was thinking eighty/twenty, in my favor.

THEO

Eighty?

HAN

After all, I'll doing all the work.

THEO

And I have contacts to maintain, materials to buy, bribes, etcetera.

HAN

OK, twenty-five per cent, plus expenses.

THEO

Thirty.

HAN

Fine.

They shake hands.

THEO

So, we're in business?

HAN

I'll do my best.

THEO

You get this right, Han, it's our ticket to the big time.

HAN

But alas no one will know it's by me.

THEO

Who cares? We'll be rich. *(a beat)* Will Jo be all right with this? We can't have any loose threads.

HAN

She'll be fine.

THEO
You're sure?

HAN
She won't know anything.

THEO
So I'll tell him six months?

HAN
If Hitler doesn't start a bloody war.

THEO
Oh, I got you the stuff.

He gives Han an envelope.

HAN
Thank God.

THEO
There's a few in there. Should keep you going.

HAN
I've been going out of my mind.

Han empties the envelope.

THEO
It's not easy to get anymore. It's all being diverted to the army.

Han holds one of the contents up to the light - a syrette, a device for injecting liquid through a needle, similar to a syringe.

HAN
But you can still find it?

THEO
For now.

HAN

I'm afraid I'll have to owe you for this.

THEO

Consider it an advance.

SCENE THREE

The hotel room, desk, chairs, the window illuminated by a neon light outside.

Walters with Joanne Van Meegeren (40s), young for her age, pretty, always primped.

WALTERS

I'm Mister Walters, from the Saturday Evening Post, thank you for agreeing to talk to me, Mrs. Van Meegeren.

JO

Miss.

WALTERS

Oh, I thought...

JO

You didn't know we're divorced?

WALTERS

No, I didn't.

JO

A month ago.

WALTERS

I'm sorry.

JO

It wasn't like that.

WALTERS

Would you care to explain?

JO

He did it for me. It was his final sacrifice.

WALTERS

I don't get it?

JO

So I wouldn't be associated with his 'crimes'.

WALTERS

I see, but I understand he had certain... faults.

JO

We've all got our vices, Mister Walters, but Han's a good man.

WALTERS

I didn't say he wasn't.

JO

The newspapers slander him.

WALTERS

As a traitor?

JO

Mister Walters, I agreed to this interview on the understanding that you'd take me at my word.

WALTERS

But you knew?

JO

Knew what?

WALTERS

That he was doing forgeries.

JO

Do you know that I was an actress before the war?

WALTERS

(checks his notes) Yes, you were the lead in *The Other Woman* at The Royal Theater.

JO

It was a tremendous success, except the critics said I was unconvincing.

WALTERS

What do they know?

JO

Exactly.

WALTERS

And that's when you met Han?

JO

I'd just divorced and he, well, he swept me off my feet. At first things weren't easy, but we had each other and a future before us.

SCENE FOUR

The studio. Han painting. He stops, stands back, regards the work, smiles, and covers the painting with a sheet.

HAN

(calls out) Jo.

JO (OFF STAGE)

Yes, darling?

HAN

Can you come here?

JO (OFF STAGE)

Hold on.

Han cleans his paint brushes. Jo enters wearing a jacket and full make up.

HAN

Where are you going?

JO

To see my children. Carel's opposed, but I have to face them sometime.

HAN

They're in their twenties for God's sake. Isn't that all over?

JO

They still blame me for the divorce.

HAN

Because he conditioned them against you.

JO

And so I must 'uncondition' them.

HAN

Good luck with that.

JO

I have to try.

HAN

Of course you do, you're their mother.

JO

I miss them.

HAN

And Carel's being a cad.

JO

They'll come round.

HAN

Of course they will, and they'll finally see you for what you are.

JO

Han, you've been working for months without a break. Maybe go out and get some air?

HAN

I can't get the bloody eyes right.

JO

You'll make yourself sick.

HAN

Jo, there's something I have to tell you.

Jo puts lipstick on in a mirror by the door.

JO

Can't it wait?

HAN

Look. *(points to a canvas)*

JO

(checks her watch) Oh God, I'm already late. I'll take a look tomorrow.

HAN

Now!

JO

(taken aback) OK.

She walks around an easel to view a painting turned away from us.

JO

Oh my God.

HAN

Do you recognize it?

JO

I'm looking at a Frans Hals *Laughing Cavalier*.

HAN

Sort of.

JO

What do you mean 'sort of'?

I, well, I...

HAN

What?

JO

I painted it.

HAN

She looks from the painting to Han back to the painting.

That's what you've been doing all these months, locked away in here making a forgeries?

JO

Just this one.

HAN

Why didn't you tell me?

JO

I didn't know it'd even work.

HAN

Don't you trust me?

JO

Darling, I was trying to protect you. The less you know the better. So, what do you think?

HAN

She regards the painting.

It's...

JO

A failure?

HAN

No, you've got his posture.

JO

HAN
Good.

JO
And the smile, just as cheeky.

HAN
That was arduous.

JO
And the blacks, so rich. It all works. You're a genius, darling.

HAN
There's still the veneer to perfect.

Jo examines the painting surface.

JO
Looks good enough to me.

HAN
I can do better than good enough. I'm not a hack.

JO
Of course you're not. It's brilliant, honestly. *(a beat)* This must have been Theo's idea?

HAN
He did bring it up initially.

JO
I thought so. Han, what the hell have you gotten in to?

HAN
A buyer thinks it's an original and, well, it'll get us out of debt.

JO
But it's illegal.

HAN
Just this one, until I can get back on my feet. I'm sick of living hand to mouth, grovelling to dealers, and being cheated by galleries. I won the Delft Prize for God's sake.

He starts to breathe heavily, almost gasping.

JO

Han, calm down. *(she gives him his drink)* Here.

HAN

Thank you. *(he downs it in one and calms)* Sorry, dear.

JO

Just breathe.

Han takes a few deep breaths.

HAN

(exhales) You could go back to acting if you want.

JO

Oh, I don't know, that was the past.

HAN

I just want you to be happy, my dear.

JO

Well, if he's really willing to pay, and he doesn't know the difference, then I suppose it's all right.

HAN

Of course it is.

JO

You promise to be careful.

HAN

Yes, dear. Let's dance.

He turns the radio on. Jazz. He takes her hand and they dance.

HAN

You'll see, darling, things are about to change around here.

JO

You're very confident.

HAN

I know what I can do.

The hold each other, dancing to the jazz

JO

Catherine has a very reasonable house-cleaner, she comes once a week. Maybe now we could afford...

HAN

(interrupts) We can't have strangers in the studio.

JO

Ah, yes, of course.

They dance.

JO

Darling.

HAN

Yes?

JO

Do you really think I could go back to the stage?

HAN

Why not? You were excellent.

They dance a moment more.

JO

You're not just saying that?

HAN

Remember when I first saw you?

JO

At the party after the show?

HAN

You were in that red dress.

JO

And you kept staring.

HAN

You were so damn beautiful.

JO

And you kept flirting, despite my husband. I was so embarrassed.

HAN

I couldn't help it. I felt terrible for Carel, but you had stolen my heart.

JO

Oh, Han.

HAN

I hope you think you made the right decision?

JO

Darling, I love you and wouldn't change a thing.

HAN

And from hence forth, we'll no longer be poor.

JO

You really think so?

HAN

If Frans Hals could do it, why not me?

They hug and sway to the music.

SCENE FIVE

The hotel room. The table and chairs, and the neon lit window.

Walters with Theo. He checks his notes.

WALTERS

Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Win...

THEO

Wijngaarden. (*pronounced: Vin-garden*)

WALTERS

This shouldn't take long, I only have a few questions.

THEO

Is Han a big deal in America?

WALTERS

Only in the art world, but I intend to bring his story, your story, to the public.

THEO

You think it'll help?

WALTERS

It can't hurt. (*checks his notes*) You ran a magazine together, 'De Kempphaan'. Why did you stop?

THEO

We championed the classics, everyone wanted moderns, and we went bankrupt.

WALTERS

I'm sorry.

THEO

I was OK, but it really set Han back.

WALTERS

He'd just got married to Jo.

THEO

They were living in a tiny apartment in a rough part of town, but it forced us to be more resourceful.

WALTERS

How so?

THEO

Every one has him pegged for a criminal, right?

WALTERS

Isn't he?

THEO

There's more to it.

WALTERS

So you worked together on the paintings?

THEO

He did the painting, I was the salesman. (*leans in*) This is all off the record, right?

WALTERS

You have my word.

SCENE SIX

The studio. Jazz music on the radio. The studio is a complete mess of paints and easels, and on the sofa, Han, slouched, half conscious, his sleeve rolled up, a black rubber band around his arm.

An empty brandy bottle and syringe syringes on the table. A KNOCK at the door. Han grunts and slips back into a morphine dream. Another KNOCK.

HAN

Who is it?

THEO (OFF STAGE)

Me.

HAN
(slurs) Who?

THEO (OFF STAGE)
Theo!

HAN
Damn it. Hang on.

Han struggles up, straightens himself up as he opens the door.

HAN
It's two in the morning.

THEO
Sorry old chap, I was on my back from the club and saw your light on. I thought you might be working.

HAN
I was, am.

THEO
Burning the midnight oil, eh? Can I come in?

Han opens the door, Theo enters, carrying a bag.

HAN
So? What happened?

THEO
There's a slight problem.

HAN
What problem?

THEO
Your painting was declared a fake.

HAN
You said DeGroot would buy it, no questions.

THEO

He did, but Bredius said...

HAN

Bredius? What the hell was he doing there?

THEO

The sale of a Hals *Cavalier*, of course he'd be there.

HAN

And he declared it a fake?

THEO

He did.

HAN

Jesus Christ, Theo! We should get the hell out of Amsterdam.

THEO

Slow down. It's OK.

HAN

It's not OK. It's not OK at all.

THEO

Han, listen, when he was asked to designate it officially, he declined.

HAN

Why?

THEO

The Boijmans (*pronounced: Boy-mans*) wants to be seen as a major museum and Bredius is on the Board.

HAN

You think that's why she didn't mention it?

THEO

It's the art world, it's all about appearances.

HAN

So we're screwed?

THEO

No, no, as far deGroot's concerned, he got an original Frans Hals.

HAN

I don't understand. So, you did sell it?

THEO

The check's clearing, should be through in a few days.

HAN

Even though Bredius said it was fake.

THEO

DeGroot didn't believe her, or didn't want to.

HAN

How much?

THEO

Sixty thousand.

HAN

(agape) My God. I did it.

THEO

Yes, my friend, time to celebrate.

Theo pulls a bottle of champagne from his bag.

THEO

It's not very cold, but I'll get some glasses.

He goes off stage.

THEO (OFF STAGE)

DeGroot said it was the best Frans Hals he's ever seen.

HAN

(flattered) Really?

THEO (OFF STAGE)

He was besides himself, in fact, I think I even saw a tear in his eye.

HAN

Good God.

Theo returns with wine glasses, pulls the cork, and pours the champagne.

HAN

The bone blacks. Hals used the same techniques. Took me about thirty goes at it, it's all in the grinding it to fine powder. *(raises his glass)* A toast.

THEO

To you, the greatest painter since Frans Hals.

They clink glasses. Theo notices a book on the table and picks it up.

THEO

What's this?

HAN

Put that down please, Theo.

THEO

(reads the title) *The Techniques of Vermeer's Paintings* by Dr. Hannema.

HAN

(firm) I said put it down.

Theo picks up another book.

THEO

Baroque Painting by Dr. van Schenel.

Han snatches the book away.

THEO

What are you up to?

HAN
Nothing.

THEO
You're doing a Vermeer, aren't you?

HAN
No.

THEO
Yes you are.

He turn a large canvas around.

HAN
Stop!

THEO
What do we have here?

HAN
I'm just experimenting.

THEO
I don't recognize it.

HAN
It's *The Supper at Emmaus*, (*pr: Em-A-us*) just before Jesus reveals he's the risen Christ.

THEO
But Vermeer never painted an *Emmaus*. In fact, he did any religious work.

HAN
Until now.

THEO
What are you up to?

HAN

Listen to this. *(grabs a magazine and opens it to a dogged eared page and reads)*
“*Doctor Bredius recently discovered a lost Vermeer in London. Christ in the House of Mary and Martha.*”

THEO

Unearthed in a junk shop. What I wouldn't give to have found it.

HAN

(continues reading) “*Although Vermeer produced few religious paintings...*”

THEO

You see.

HAN

(continues reading) “*Bredius believes that Vermeer's missing years were spent copying Caravaggio.*”

THEO

Ridiculous. Vermeer's nothing like him.

HAN

Bredius has staked her reputation on it. *(continues reading)* “*The esteemed critic predicts that the paintings were collected by secret societies and will soon come to light.*”

THEO

He's really going out on a limb.

HAN

Which we can use.

THEO

I see where you're going.

HAN

He's laid it all out for us.

THEO

You're right. Who would question Bredius, the world's expert on Vermeer? It's brilliant. I love it, assuming we can trick him.

HAN

The main problem is how to age the paint, but I think I've found a solution. Can you find phenol formaldehyde?

THEO

Phenol what?

HAN

Formaldehyde.

THEO

Isn't that what they use to make Bakelite?

HAN

It helps the paint withstand the baking process.

THEO

Where the hell am I going to get that?

HAN

A good chemist or building supply perhaps? Anything below one hundred and ten degrees and the varnish won't harden properly, but above one fifty and it begins to melt. The bakelite might be the solution.

THEO

God, you're really into this.

HAN

Can you get it?

THEO

The Nazi's cut the supply lines, but I'm sure I could dig some up.

Han CLUTCHES at his chest and grimaces.

THEO

You OK, old chap?

HAN

(shakes off the spasm) Yes, fine. Did you bring my medicine?

THEO

I could only get a few.

He gives Han an envelope. Han opens it hurriedly, pulls out a syrette, and holds it up to the light.

HAN

It doesn't look very pure.

THEO

It's the best I could get.

HAN

It's the wrong hue.

THEO

Look, if you don't want it...

HAN

No, no, I want it.

THEO

I don't see what you get from that stuff.

HAN

Oh Theo, you've never done it?

THEO

Not for me, old chap, but no judgment, each to his own.

HAN

As it courses through your veins all disappointments evaporate and everything becomes right with the world.

THEO

Sounds lovely, but go easy on it, eh?

HAN

Thank you, Theo, I'm in control, you just focus on getting the materials.

Lights down.

End of Act One.

ACT TWO

SCENE SEVEN

The hotel room, the table, two chairs, and the neon lit window.

Walters with Emma (20s), a prim secretary.

WALTERS

How long have you been Doctor Bredius's assistant?

EMMA

Five, er, no six years. I started with him just before the war.

WALTERS

Were you trained in art?

EMMA

Not formally, only what I picked up along the way.

WALTERS

What did you think?

EMMA

Of Theo?

WALTERS

Of the painting.

EMMA

Which one? There were dozens.

WALTERS

The Supper at Emmaus.

EMMA

I thought it was wonderful.

WALTERS

Because Doctor Bredius said so or was that your own opinion?

EMMA

I liked it.

WALTERS

You weren't persuaded by Doctor Bredius? She was your boss after all?

EMMA

No, I'm sure I liked it.

WALTERS

Did you ever meet Han Van Meegeren?

EMMA

You mean the seller? No, only Theo, his agent.

WALTERS

And you weren't suspicious?

EMMA

Why would I be? Doctor Bredius was over the moon. I'd never seen her so excited.

WALTERS

Would you say she's consistent? Even tempered?

EMMA

She never raised her voice.

WALTERS

I mean, was her judgment sound?

EMMA

You mean was she getting old and senile?

WALTERS

I'm just asking.

EMMA

Doctor Bredius was a consultant at the Dutch Museum and was director of The Mauritshuis. (*pronounced: Mar-it-shoos*) Gallery. Hers was the last word.

WALTERS

Did it surprise you that a lost Vermeer had been found?

EMMA

Of course, they're very rare.

SCENE EIGHT

Bredius' office, classical paintings on the walls. Bredius (60s), a rotund eccentric enters with Emma.

EMMA

The Minister of Culture just called.

BREDIUS

Oh God, what now?

EMMA

We have to speed up the inventory, he says they'll be here in a month.

BREDIUS

Tell him I'll have it to him in a few days, I'm moving as fast as I can.

EMMA

Yes, ma'am. (*a beat*) Do you really think the Germans will steal our art?

BREDIUS

It's not a matter of if, but when.

EMMA

But it seems so uncivilized.

BREDIUS

Reichsmarschall Goering says he wants to build a Library of Alexandria of art from the plundered works of Europe. The man's a lunatic.

EMMA

So shouldn't we be hiding our paintings?

BREDIUS

Where would be safe? They're about to take the entire country.

EMMA

Is there nothing we can do?

BREDIUS

Little and if I were you I'd leave Holland, Miss Laan.

EMMA

I can't leave my mother.

BREDIUS

Take her with you.

EMMA

She'd never go.. And you? Won't you get out?

BREDIUS

I must stay to the bitter end and at least try to protect our art.

A KNOCK at the door.

BREDIUS

Get that will you.

She answers the door to Theo, with a large painting wrapped in a sheet.

THEO

Madam Bredius, Theo Wijngaarden.

BREDIUS

Who?

THEO

I telephoned last week regarding a certain painting.

BREDIUS

Ah yes, you're late. You may leave, Miss Laan.

EMMA

Yes, ma'am.

As she passes Theo...

THEO

(flirting) Hello.

EMMA

Good afternoon, sir.

She exits.

THEO

My apologies, I had some difficulty getting through the traffic.

BREDIUS

Yes, yes, yes, let's see it.

THEO

Like I said in my letter, I'm not entirely sure what it is I've got here.

BREDIUS

Well let's have look then, shall we?

THEO

Perhaps your skilled eye could determine it's provenance?

Theo removes the sheet. Bredius gazes at it aghast.

BREDIUS

Oh my goodness! It's glorious.

THEO

I believe the subject is *The Supper at Emmaus* (*pr: Em-A-us*).

BREDIUS

Yes, yes, that makes sense. Jesus and the disciples, Luke and Cleopas. The raised hand, the mirrored gestures of the disciples. It would appear to be after Caravaggio.

THEO

You think it's genuine?

BREDIUS

(puts on her glasses, leans in and touches the surface) The varnish appears to be authentic, but it's paled and yellowed, probably due to being exposed to damp at some point. Where did you say you obtained it?

THEO

From a textile merchant in Paris, he was moving to Morocco.

Bredius examines the back of the painting.

BREDIUS

From the weave of stitching it appears to be...

THEO

Eighteenth century?

BREDIUS

Seventeenth.

She gets a small bottle from the desk, folds her handkerchief, wets it, and dabs the painting.

THEO

What are you doing, sir?

BREDIUS

Don't worry, it's alcohol, it evaporates. You say you have no chain of ownership?

THEO

No, ma'am, he was in quite a hurry.

BREDIUS

So it wasn't you who procured it?

THEO

No, ma'am, I'm only the intermediary. Han Van Meegeren is the seller.

BREDIUS

Van Meegeren? I know that name.

THEO

A local artist.

BREDIUS

Yes, I remember, he had that tedious exhibition a few years ago.

THEO

But he knows a good painting when he sees it.

BREDIUS

Yes, perhaps.

She examines the surface with a magnifying glass again.

BREDIUS

The surface is holding, the craquelure is consistent. (*presses the intercom button*) Miss Laan, cancel my next meeting. (*to Theo*) If it were a fake, you'd be liable, of course.

THEO

Should I assume you're not interested?

Theo starts to wrap the painting up.

BREDIUS

No, no, I didn't mean that.

THEO

But you think it's fake?

Bredius examines the painting again.

BREDIUS

Well, the blacks are extraordinary, and the almost impressionist realism. Would a hundred thousand be sufficient?

THEO

The Boijmans (*pr: Boy-mans*) recently paid one hundred and sixty for a Frans Hals, and this is quite possibly a Vermeer.

BREDIUS

Very well, three hundred.

THEO

Seven.

BREDIUS

(laughs) Young man, I represent the government of Holland and our means are limited. Five hundred thousand. That's my final offer. Take it or leave it.

THEO

I'm sure that'll be acceptable to my client.

BREDIUS

(writes a check) Should I make the check to Mister Van Meegeren?

THEO

To cash. What with the Germans coming, better we keep this out of sight, so to speak.

BREDIUS

Yes, yes, of course. *(signs the check)* And if you happen on any others you'll be sure to let me know first.

THEO

Of course.

BREDIUS

(hands the check) It's been a pleasure doing business, Mister Wijngaarden.

THEO

Yes, it has. Good afternoon, Doctor.

Theo exits. Bredius hits the intercom.

BREDIUS

Miss Laan, come in please.

Emma enters.

EMMA

Yes, ma'am?

BREDIUS

(re: the painting) Absolutely extraordinary, isn't it?

EMMA

(cautious) Yes, ma'am, it is.

BREDIUS

This painting will rewrite the history of art.

EMMA

You think it's real?

BREDIUS

I'd say without reservation it is by Johannes Vermeer of Delft.

EMMA

Oh, doctor, that's wonderful. What a discovery!

BREDIUS

The muted colors, the softness of the expressions. The chiaroscuro light.

EMMA

This couldn't come at a better time, sir. The people of Holland need some good news.

BREDIUS

You're absolutely right, Miss Laan, this will boost the nation's morale. And with the rest that will surely come to light, I'll be able to complete Vermeer's biography.

EMMA

Just think, if you hadn't discovered it, it may have been buried for another three hundred years.

BREDIUS

But we must keep this between us, until I can get it placed in the national collection. The publicity would attract all sorts of attention.

EMMA

I understand.

BREDIUS

What are you doing for lunch, Miss Laan?

EMMA

I brought a sandwich.

BREDIUS

Never mind that, we'll go to the club to celebrate, but first I need you to book a security van to transport it.

EMMA

Yes, sir.

She exits. Bredius gazes at the painting.

BREDIUS

Quite, quite wonderful.

SCENE NINE

Han's studio. Night. It is bigger and more plushly decorated. Han and Jo enter, he in a black suit, brogue leather shoes, and silk handkerchief, her in a stylish 1940's dress.

JO

She kept looking at me oddly.

HAN

You're imagining it.

JO

I could feel her watching us.

HAN

It's only been a month since the war, we're all still in shock, it's only natural to be a little paranoid.

JO

There you are with that psychology stuff. I know what I felt.

HAN

The Commissioner's wife thinks you're very charming.

Jo goes to a mirror on the wall and checks her make up.

JO

Oh Han, why didn't you tell me my make up smudged.

HAN

I'm sorry, dear, I didn't notice.

JO

Because you were fawning over that young slutty heiress.

HAN

It's not as if you didn't have eyes on her boyfriend.

JO

No I didn't.

HAN

Jo, I know that look. It's how you snared me.

JO

You make me sound like some kind of fox.

He snuggles up to her.

HAN

Because you are, darling, the foxiest fox I know.

JO

Well, you have to admit he is rather dashing.

HAN

Perhaps we could have them both over for a little foursome, if they're open to it.

JO

Han, you kinky devil.

HAN

You like it too. Well you did last time. Why not spice things up a notch?

JO

Are you getting bored of me?

HAN

No, I just thought we could have a bit of fun. I mean we can have anything we want.

JO

You're lusting for her, aren't you?

He kisses her neck as she looks in the mirror and wipes the smudge away.

HAN

You know it's only you I love.

JO

(worried) She asked about the houses.

HAN

The heiress?

JO

No, the commissioner's wife.

HAN

(concerned) What did you say?

JO

I told her the lottery story.

HAN

Good. Stick to that and we'll be fine.

JO

Maybe you should stop.

HAN

Painting?

JO

Perhaps it's time to do your own work.

HAN

They are my own, just not with my name on them, but they are loved; *The Drinkers, The Last Supper, The Cardplayers, The Head of Christ, The Blessing of Jacob*, and they've made us rich beyond our dreams.

JO

Sometimes I think you love those paintings more than me.

HAN

I'm sorry, I don't mean to sound...

JO

Obsessed.

HAN

Is it a crime, when so many people love my works?

JO

They are forgeries.

HAN

But they're beautiful, and no one wants the truth, it's too ugly. We're rich beyond our dreams. Let's enjoy it.

JO

You've have a good run, but at some point, they'll become suspicious.

HAN

It's all a matter of perception bias.

JO

Perception what?

HAN

Do you think you'd have seen Vermeer's brilliance the first time you saw his work?

JO

Yes, it's self-evident.

HAN

Even if you'd never heard of him?

JO

Yes.

HAN

When no one recognized his genius for three hundred years.

JO

Well...

HAN

Not the dealers or collectors or even other painters.

JO

I suppose you're right.

HAN

The same with Caravaggio and Van Gogh, and Bach and Mozart, all but forgotten, until they were 're-discovered'.

JO

You've been reading too many of those psychology books.

HAN

No, this bias thing is real. For example, to the German's Hitler is a savior, but to us he's a monster.

A siren SCREAMS off stage.

HAN

Air raid. Quickly, get under the table.

She scrambles under, he follows. The compressing scream of a FALLING BOMB off stage.

JO

(terrified) Han!

HAN

Hold on to me, darling.

He hugs her tightly. The SCREAM of the FALLING BOMB.

JO

Oh my God! They started the invasion.

HAN

(hugs her) Don't worry, we'll, we'll be fine.

The SCREAM almost at impact.

JO

Hold me, Han.

Outside the window a FLASH OF LIGHT and A MASSIVE EXPLOSION.

Han and Jo HUG under the shaking table.

A low-pitched SIREN WAILS off-stage.

HAN

That's the all clear.

He gets out from under the table, goes to the window, and looks out.

HAN

Oh my God. The city center's on fire.

JO

(panicked) We... we... we have to leave.

HAN

(reassuring) Don't worry, it's over now.

JO

(hysterical) It's just beginning. We're being invaded!

HAN

Darling, calm down.

JO

Don't tell me to bloody calm down.

He reach out to her, she tentatively take his hand.

HAN

You can come out now.

She cautiously crawls out and stands.

JO

(almost in tears) I'm sorry.

HAN

I'm scared too.

JO

No, it's not the bombs. You're always painting. I hardly see you anymore.

HAN

Yes, I get it, I've been too focussed.

JO

It's like those damn paintings are driving us apart.

HAN

I ignored you. I see that now. Things are going to be different.

The door opens. Theo enters covered in dust and clutching an envelope.

THEO

The bastards almost got me.

HAN

Are you all right?

THEO

A little shaken. I was two blocks from where the bombs landed. Are you OK?

HAN

We're fine. How many bombs?

THEO

A dozen, maybe more. They flattened the entire center.

JO

Han! We have to get away.

HAN

Darling, everything's fine, it's over for now.

JO

Stop saying that!

HAN

You're over-reacting.

JO

(frustrated) Urgh!

THEO

Han, I er, brought the materials.

JO

He doesn't need them. He's stopping. Isn't that right, darling?

HAN

Well, hang on a moment, dear.

JO

But Han, you just said...

THEO

Ahr! *(clutches his bleeding hand)* Do you have a bandage?

JO

Theo, you're wounded!

THEO

Just a graze.

JO

Stay there.

She exits.

THEO

(to Han) What was all that about? You're giving up?

HAN

No, no, the bombing upset her, that's all. Did you see Bredius?

THEO

Worked like a charm.

HAN

She bought it?

THEO

She said *The Last Supper* is undoubtedly another Vermeer, better even than *The Emmaus*.

HAN

She didn't mention the glaze?

THEO

She didn't mention anything. In fact, she's more sure than ever. One million six hundred thousand sure. (*waves the envelope*)

HAN

Show me.

Han takes the envelope, tears it open, pulls out a check, and reads it.

HAN

Oh my God!

THEO

The most expensive painting ever sold, or that we know about.

HAN

Where are we going to cash it?

THEO

There's a banker I know, Aloys Miedel. He'll take twenty percent.

HAN

(*horrified*) Twenty?

THEO

Untraceable cash. No questions asked. It's the best deal we'll get.

HAN

Can we trust him?

THEO

As much as we can trust anyone.

HAN

Fine.

Jo enters with a bandage and a bottle of antiseptic.

JO

What's fine? We're about to be taken over by the Nazis.

HAN

I'm sure the authorities will come to some sort of agreement.

Jo takes Theo's hand and dabs the blood.

JO

You mean they'll become collaborators, like the Vichy government in France?

HAN

Look.

He shows her the check.

JO

What is it?

She ties a bandage around Theo's bloody hand.

HAN

A check for *The Last Supper*.

JO

But you already sold *The Last Supper*, to that van Beuningen fellow.

HAN

(sheepish) I did another.

Another? JO

Why not? HAN

She takes the check and reads.

Oh my God! JO

Do you still think I should stop painting? HAN

Lights down.

SCENE TEN

Han's new studio, bigger than before, with a chandelier, a Rococo sofa, a table covered in paint pots and brushes, and a large painting on an easel turned away from us. There are two doors, one is the front door, the other leads further into the house.

Han enters from an interior door, pale, distraught.

(calls out) Jo? HAN

What? JO (OFF STAGE)

Where are you? HAN

Upstairs, in the ballroom. JO (OFF STAGE)

Can you come down? HAN

Can't it wait?
JO (OFF STAGE)

Jo, please.
HAN

Give me a second.
JO (OFF STAGE)

Han paces, worried. He goes to the window, sneaks a look out through the curtain. Jo enters in a very expensive silk night gown.

What is it?
JO

The Cohens. They're gone!
HAN

Who?
JO

The Cohens, our neighbors.
HAN

How do you know?
JO

HAN
I was coming back from the club and passed their house and saw the door wide open. I called out, but no one replied, so I went in.

JO
Han, you can't just go into other people's homes.

HAN
They were all gone. The children, the nanny, everyone. It was like they just disappeared.

JO
Maybe they got out, like we probably should.

HAN

No, no, that's not what it looked like.

JO

You're imagining things.

HAN

Everything's left as it was. The table laid for dinner. The children's toys are out. I think they were taken.

JO

They're not criminals.

HAN

But they're Jews .I can't just pretend it's not happening.

JO

I know, darling, it's ghastly, but we have to take care of ourselves.

HAN

We can't just be spectators. Those Nazis are fucking monsters.

JO

Of course they are, but what can we do?

A sharp KNOCKING at the door.

JO

(nervous) Who's that?

HAN

Have a look.

JO

(goes to the window and peeks out, whispers) It's a German.

HAN

What does he want?

JO

I don't know.

HAN
Fuck!

JO
Han!

HAN
I'm sorry, darling. Let me handle it.

KNOCKING at the front door.

HAN
(calls out) I'm coming. *(whispers to Jo)* Cover the paintings.

She covers the paintings with sheets. He goes to the front door and answers to Lt. Hess (30s), trim, oily, in a black uniform.

LT. HESS
Guten abend. You are Herr Van Meegeren?

HAN
(cautious) Yes.

LT. HESS
Lieutenant Hess of the Schutzstaffel. *(puts his hand out to shake)*

HAN
The SS? *(ignores Hess' hand)*

LT. HESS
May I come in?

HAN
Is that necessary?

LT. HESS
I'm afraid it is.

Lt. Hess enters and walks around examining the paintings. Han and Jo exchange worried looks.

LT. HESS

An impressive studio, Mr. Van Meegeren.

HAN

Thank you, Lieutenant. How can I help?

LT. HESS

We believe The Resistance is using the art trade to smuggle information to the Allies.

HAN

I really know nothing about it.

LT. HESS

It's being funded by Jews and Communists. They must be eradicated.

HAN

But Holland and Germany have a compact that protects our citizens.

LT. HESS

The Aryan citizens perhaps, but Europe has become a melting pot of races. It must be purified. *(to Jo)* Don't you agree?

JO

It's a little stuffy in here and I have things to do. *(heads for the door)* Good day, Lieutenant.

LT. HESS

(bows) Guten tag, Frau Van Meegeren.

JO

Don't be long, Han.

HAN

I won't.

She exits. Hess looks at the paintings.

LT. HESS

It's a pleasure to meet a man with cultivated taste. The galleries are obsessed with nothing but abstraction now days.

HAN

You oppose modern art?

LT. HESS

We call it art '*Entartet*'.

HAN

Sorry?

LT. HESS

(translates) Degenerate art.

HAN

(laughs) I'm not sure I'd go that far. I mean, it's not my cup of tea, but 'degenerate'?

LT. HESS

Then you must be educated to see more clearly. We need art that extols the virtues of blood and soil and the Aryan ubermensch.

HAN

(ill at ease) Yes, I see.

LT. HESS

(looking at the paintings.) Your collection is exemplary in this. You uphold the image of the white Christian ideal.

HAN

(laughs, uncomfortable) Thank you, Lieutenant.

LT. HESS

Quite remarkable.

HAN

I only possess a few minor works.

LT. HESS

I was thinking of those Vermeer paintings that came to light recently. It was you who sold them?

HAN

(stunned, then chuckles) You mistake me, Lieutenant.

LT. HESS

I don't think so.

HAN

I'm merely a second-rate collector. Bredius is the woman you should talk to.

LT. HESS

She refuses to cooperate.

HAN

(worried) You talked to her?

LT. HESS

She's very patriotic. One has to admire that.

HAN

Well, I'm sorry, Lieutenant, if you'll excuse me, I have to get back to work.

LT. HESS

Herr Miedel said you have remarkable sources.

HAN

(caught off guard) Aloys Miedel?'

LT. HESS

So you know him?

HAN

(cautious) We're acquainted.

LT. HESS

With a little pressure he was quite forthcoming. He said you discovered some of the Vermeers.

HAN

I was luck enough to come across a few.

LT. HESS

Sixteen, that I know of.

HAN

It was supposed to be in secret, you understand I'm sure.

LT. HESS

Yes, and if you were able to find another Vermeer, my client's willing to pay generously.

HAN

Your client?

LT. HESS

You'll have the honor of serving the highest rank of the Nazi government.

HAN

Obviously, I'd be delighted to help, but I can't guarantee anything.

LT. HESS

Herr Goering doesn't like to be disappointed.

HAN

(afraid) Reichmarshall Goering?

LT. HESS

None other. *(Han laughs nervously)* What's funny?

HAN

Vermeers don't just grow on trees you know?

LT. HESS

So you refuse to assist the Reich?

HAN

I'm not saying that, but...

LT. HESS

Your wife's maiden name is Oerlemans *(pr: Earl-mans)*. A Jewish name, is it not?

HAN

(indignant) It's traditional Dutch and it means from the town of Oerle. *(pr: Earl)*

LT. HESS

There are rumors she's given money to the Resistance.

HAN

(laughs) That's impossible, Lieutenant.

LT. HESS

(deadly serious) You think this is funny?

HAN

(stumbling) God no, I only meant it can't possibly be.

LT. HESS

Are you with her every moment?

HAN

Well, I, I control our finances.

LT. HESS

Perhaps we should take your wife into custody...

HAN

Now hold on, Lieutenant.

LT. HESS

... until her ethnicity can be determined.

HAN

Let's not get ahead of ourselves.

LT. HESS

And if she proves to be a Jew, we will be send her to Auschwitz for processing.

HAN

I remember there's a painting I came across recently.

LT. HESS

I thought there might be.

HAN

Christ and the Scribes.

LT. HESS

By Vermeer?

HAN

Could be, but honestly, I'm no expert.

LT. HESS

Our experts will make the determination. When can I see it?

HAN

It'll take some time to track down.

LT. HESS

How long?

HAN

Well, er, hard to say.

LT. HESS

Try.

HAN

Yes, er, six months, maybe longer.

LT. HESS

Reichsmarschall Goering will not wait, so my men are at your disposal.

HAN

No, no, that won't be necessary, Lieutenant.

LT. HESS

So you will locate it?

HAN

If I can, and that's if, would the Reichsmarschall be willing to trade?

LT. HESS

Trade?

HAN

Minor Dutch works, to complete my collection.

LT. HESS

That's your price?

HAN

Two hundred paintings for me and one million guilders to the seller.

LT. HESS

What works would you want?

HAN

Terbrugghen (*pronounced 'Ter-broo-ghun'*), Ruysch, (*pronounced 'Rausch'*) Van Goyen, (*pronounced 'Goy-un'*) that sort of thing.

LT. HESS

How do you know we have them?

HAN

You took Paris and Copehagen, you must have most of their works in your possession.

LT. HESS

You're an audacious man. I admire that.

HAN

Do we have a deal, Lieutenant?

LT. HESS

Very well. Contact Herr Miedel, he'll be our broker. Auf weidersehen.

Hess exits the outer door. Han paces, goes to the window, and peeks out. Jo enters from the inside door.

JO

What did he want?

HAN

Paintings.

JO

You're not going to cooperate, are you?

HAN

I wasn't cooperating.

JO

It sure sounded like it.

HAN

I was negotiating.

JO

There's a line, Han.

HAN

Yes, there is. He said you gave money to the Resistance.

JO

(embarrassed) Well...

HAN

(rising anger) Did you?

JO

Only once. I know I should have told you, but I thought you'd be angry.

HAN

Those bastards need to be taken down.

JO

But you're still negotiating?

HAN

I know it doesn't look good.

JO

You're not doing anything silly, are you?

HAN

Darling, I have a plan. You have to trust me

End of Act Two.

ACT THREE

SCENE ELEVEN

Han's studio furnished. Han, in a his usual dapper suit, painting at his easel.

KNOCKING at the front door.

HAN

Who the hell?

The KNOCKING again, rapid.

HAN

Damn it!

He puts the paintbrush down and answers the door to -

HAN

Theo! What are you doing? We agreed to never meet here.

Theo, in a coat and hiding under a large hat.

THEO

I know, I'm sorry, old chap, I had to, they're on to me.

HAN

(looks out the door) Who are?

THEO

The Resistance. They've been watching me since the victory celebrations.

HAN

Christ! Do they know?

THEO

They must suspect.

Han looks out the door, up and down the street.

HAN

You'd better come in.

Theo enters. Han closes the door and locks it.

HAN

You're sure you're being followed?

THEO

Look across the street.

Han peeks out the window.

THEO

The black sedan.

HAN

Shit.

THEO

I don't know how they got on to me.

HAN

We were careful, well, I was, anyway.

THEO

This isn't my fault.

HAN

Well it's not mine.

THE

What if they turn me over to the Allies?

HAN

Don't panic, the war's over, no one cares anymore.

THEO

They're actively looking for collaborators.

HAN

We're not collaborators, we just sold art.

THEO

They're saying it's a capital crime, colluding with the enemy.

HAN

Nonsense.

THEO

They're going house to house, sector by sector.

HAN

We just have to stick to our story and we'll be above suspicion.

THEO

Any deals you made with the Germans was entirely your business.

HAN

Now look here, Theo, you were paid handsomely.

THEO

But you made most of the money.

HAN

If you're questioned, you cannot mention my name.

THEO

That's why you have to help me get out.

HAN

You haven't, have you? Mentioned my name.

THEO

No. I swear, but the borders are closed, I can't get out.

HAN

I'm sorry, but I can't get involved. You have money, you'll be fine.

THEO

The Nazis took my house and possessions. I'm bloody broke.

HAN

Hold on a minute.

He goes to the table and takes a metal box.

THEO

What are you going to do?

HAN

I don't know. *(gives the box to Theo)* Here, fifty thousand. Get as far away as you can.

THEO

You should leave while you can, and thank you, old chap.

HAN

Good luck, Theo.

They hug and Theo exits. Han closes the door, thinks a moment, moves the chair aside.

HAN

(calls out) JO! *(a beat)* JO!

He runs off stage.

A moment later Jo enters from the interior door in a night gown. Han returns carrying a briefcase and a crowbar, and goes to the table.

JO

What's going on?

HAN

Help me.

They lift the table off the carpet.

JO

Who were you talking to?

HAN
Theo.

JO
You said you'd never meet here again.

HAN
(interrupts) The authorities are on to him.

JO
So why did he come here?

HAN
He needed help.

JO
(alarmed) Do they know about us?

HAN
I don't think so, but he's leaving Holland.

JO
Oh God, Han, I knew this would happen. Didn't I say?

He lifts the carpet and reveals a trapdoor in the floor.

JO
What are you doing?

He tries to lift the door, but it's stuck.

HAN
Pass me the crowbar.

JO
Han, you promised to look after me.

HAN
I am.

She pass the crowbar and he pries open the hatch.

HAN

Grab it and pull. *(she helps him pull up the trapdoor)* Pull!

JO

I'm trying.

HAN

Harder.

They heave the trapdoor open and look into the recess.

JO

Holy Jesus! How much is it?

HAN

Three million.

JO

(angry) In our house?

HAN

Where else could I put it? The banks were suspicious as it was.

He pulls out wads of money.

JO

Han, slow down.

HAN

Come on, help me fill the suitcase.

JO

This... this is all too fast. I need a moment to think.

HAN

We can talk about it later.

JO

Where we are going? We can bluff our way through the mountain pass, there'll be less patrols.

JO

And if we can't?

HAN

We'll bribe them and when things calm down we'll come back for the rest.

JO

How much more is there?

HAN

Another million or so in the basement.

A rapid KNOCKING at the door. They both freeze.

JO

(whispers) Who's that?

HAN

(whispers) Ignore it.

He continues packing money into the case. The KNOCKING again.

JO

I should answer.

INSPECTOR (OFF STAGE)

Mr. Van Meegeren, I know you're in there.

HAN

Shit!

JO

Han, we have to answer.

HAN

Fine.

He closes the briefcase and closes the trapdoor. Jo opens the front door.

INSPECTOR

(presents his credentials) Good afternoon. I'm Inspector Wooning.

JO

How can I help you?

INSPECTOR

You are Mrs. Van Meegeren?

JO

That's right.

INSPECTOR

May I speak to your husband?

JO

(awkward) Er, yes, of course. *(turns to Han)* Han, it's an Inspector.

Han rolls the carpet back over the trap door and throws a sheet over the canvas.

Jo and the Inspector enter.

HAN

(turns) Good afternoon.

INSPECTOR

Inspector Wooning with the Department of Special Crimes; money laundering, fraud, tax evasion.

JO

Are we in trouble, Inspector?

INSPECTOR

Do you mind if I speak to your husband alone?

JO

Of course.

Jo and Han exchange a worried look, not lost on the Inspector.

HAN

Don't worry, darling, I'm sure it's nothing.

Jo exits. The Inspector looks around the studio and notices the suitcase.

INSPECTOR

Going somewhere?

HAN

Oh no, that's where I keep my old oil tubes.

INSPECTOR

Huh. *(continues looking around)* I hear you built an ice rink in your basement.

HAN

(cheerful) Yes, a bit of an indulgence.

INSPECTOR

And yet you've sold little of your work.

HAN

I've sold a few.

INSPECTOR

A half dozen landscapes perhaps.

HAN

(proudly) And the sketch of Princess Juliana's deer, which was exhibited at court, no less.

INSPECTOR

Which is now a postcard in seaside shops, hardly a gold mine.

HAN

Yes, well, I've earned considerable sums for my portraits.

INSPECTOR

How much did you get, a thousand each?

HAN

(indignant) A little more than that.

INSPECTOR

Maybe ten thousand, even twenty would hardly explain the properties you own.

HAN

I was also fortunate enough to win the lotto.

INSPECTOR

You're a lucky man. When?

HAN

Before the war. I believe the records were destroyed by the bombs.

INSPECTOR

How convenient.

HAN

And I've made some profitable sales from my collection, but my clients prefer anonymity, *(laughs)* you know the French and their taxes. What's this all about, Inspector?

INSPECTOR

You sold a Vermeer, *Christ and the Adulteress*.

HAN

Ah, yes, *(considers his answer)* I was an intermediary. May I ask why you're interested?

INSPECTOR

It was found among Field Marshal Goering's stolen art.

HAN

Good God!

INSPECTOR

The bill of sale says it was obtained from you, Mr. Van Meegeren.

HAN

Yes, as I said I was an intermediary.

INSPECTOR

You're under suspicion for selling national treasure to the Nazis.

HAN

Now look here, inspector, if I give Commissioner Jansen a call, I'm sure we can clear up this misunderstanding.

INSPECTOR

He's been fired for collaborating with the enemy.

HAN

(deflated) Oh, how unfortunate.

INSPECTOR

You will come with me to the station for questioning.

HAN

I think I need to talk to my lawyer.

INSPECTOR

You're not under arrest, but I can return with an arrest and search warrant.

HAN

No, no, that won't be necessary. I'll come along, but whatever it is you think I've done, it's not what it appears.

Jo enters, sees Han being escorted out.

JO

What's going on?

INSPECTOR

I'm taking your husband for questioning.

JO

Han?

HAN

It's all right, darling. I'll get it sorted out in no time.

INSPECTOR

(to Jo) Please don't leave the city until further notice.

JO

Am I under suspicion?

INSPECTOR

(regards a painting then Jo) The woman in the painting.

HAN

What about her?

INSPECTOR

She looks familiar.

HAN

Does she?

INSPECTOR

(to Jo) You wouldn't know anything about it?

JO

I'm afraid not.

HAN

Darling, put a call in to our lawyer, just in case.

The Inspector and Han exit.

Jo goes to the door, makes sure it's bolted.

She goes the window, peeks through the curtain, then goes to the phone, and dials.

JO

Haught and Sons Legal Firm?... I'd like to speak with Mr. Jansen... Hello, Mr. Jansen, this is Joanne Van Meegeren... yes, that's right, Han's wife... I think I may be in trouble. I can't tell you over the telephone... No, money's not a problem. I'll pay cash if necessary Thank you, I'll be there tomorrow at ten.

SCENE TWELVE

Prison bars in the middle of the stage. On one side is the cell, in which Han paces.

A Man enters from the shadows dressed in a cape and a wide brimmed hat and 17th century shoes and watches Han from the side of stage.

HAN

Ah, the Sphinx of Delft himself. I've been expecting you.

The Man walks around the cell, looking in at Han.

HAN

Yes I took risks, but without risk how can we escape mediocrity? You taught me that.

The Man appears to walk through the cell bars and he sits on the cot, listening.

HAN

You came here to find out the truth, didn't you? Ha! Truth! What does that even mean? For me the only truth is beauty. You faced it too, didn't you? You became a Catholic, but you had no interest in religion, it was your mother-in-law's wealth you needed, how else could you keep painting and you had to paint, didn't you? It wasn't the hotel or the art dealing or your eleven children that drove you, it was your art alone that you were true to.

Jo enters from the other side of stage.

JO

Han?

The Man dissolves into the shadows.

JO

(softly) Han?

HAN

(looks up) Oh, Jo, thank God.

JO

Who were you talking to?

HAN

No one.

JO

How are you holding up?

HAN

I haven't slept for days. (*shows his hand*) I can't stop shaking.

JO

Are you eating?

HAN

I can't keep anything down, it's like my body's revolting against me. I'm at my wits end.

JO

Oh darling, you have to stay strong.

HAN

Did you talk to the lawyers?

JO

I did, but they won't represent us.

HAN

Why not?

JO

They say we're 'undesirables'.

HAN

Hypocrites, they did plenty of deals with the Nazis. Did they say how long the police can keep me?

JO

Apparently, under the Allied Agreement they can detain you indefinitely.

HAN
You can't be serious?

JO
Han, I'm sorry.

HAN
(sighs) How are you doing?

JO
People whisper behind my back, reporters hound me everywhere, it's horrid, but I talked to the American journalist?

HAN
Why?

JO
She's the only one who believes in you.

HAN
The press treat me like some kind of monster. The London Times calls me a scoundrel, Le Monde calls me despicable, and The Gazette calls for my execution.

JO
I know, but why don't you talk to her? She wants to do a full article, photos, background, the whole thing, from your point of view.

HAN
So she can profit from my misfortune?

JO
To tell your story. You could make all of this stop.

HAN
But then all I've worked for will become worthless.

JO
Come clean, darling, please.

HAN
My paintings will be laughed at.

JO

They're going to find out eventually.

HAN

My name will be ruined.

JO

So, when this is over we could move to France and start again.

HAN

Oh, Jo, I'd like that very much.

She puts her hands through the bars. He puts them on his face and she tenderly cradles him.

HAN

It's not fair. You don't deserve any of this.

CROWD (OFF STAGE)

HANG HIM!

SOLDIER (OFF STAGE)

Get back!

CROWD (OFF STAGE)

HANG HIM! TRAITOR!

SOLDIER (OFF STAGE)

He is a government prisoner! Get back or I'll shoot.

A stone SMASHES through the window and HITS Jo. She falls.

SOLDIER (OFF STAGE)

Get back!

OFF STAGE - a rifle SHOT, the crowd SCREAMS and SHOUTS as they disperse.

Han picks up Jo.

HAN
Are you all right?

JO
Yes, yes, I'm OK.

HAN
Oh my God, you're bleeding.

Her eyebrow is cut and bloody. He wipes it tenderly with his handkerchief.

JO
Han, you have to tell them.

The Inspector enters.

INSPECTOR
Miss Van Meegeren, you will have to leave now.

HAN
Have a heart, Inspector.

INSPECTOR
Court order.

JO
Please, just a few minutes more.

INSPECTOR
I'm sorry.

JO
(to Han) We'll talk again soon. Be brave.

HAN
You too.

Jo leaves. The Inspector approaches Han and waves a paper.

INSPECTOR

Mr. Van Meegeren, you have been formerly charged with collaboration and fraud.

HAN

But, but I have a medical condition.

INSPECTOR

You mean your addiction? Yes, I know about your morphine use.

HAN

It's a prescription I tell you.

INSPECTOR

I talked to your doctor. You have no prescription, so it was purchased illegally.

HAN

It was the war! What else was I supposed to do?

INSPECTOR

You are a drug addict, Mr. Van Meegeren, and you are a Nazi sympathizer.

HAN

No, I hate them as much as anyone.

INSPECTOR

The trial begins next week. *(turns to leave)*

HAN

Wait!

INSPECTOR

(turns back) Yes?

HAN

I have a confession to make.

INSPECTOR

So, you admit your guilt?

HAN

If the painting's by Vermeer...

INSPECTOR
Which it is.

HAN
... then I'm a traitor.

INSPECTOR
Which you are.

HAN
But what if it isn't?

INSPECTOR
It's been authenticated by three galleries.

HAN
What if they're wrong? What if it's a fake?

INSPECTOR
You'll say anything to save your neck. I'll see you in court.

The Inspector exits.

HAN
(shouts after him) Inspector?

Han breathes heavily, panting.

HAN
WAIT!

His breathing sporadic, going into hyperventilation.

HAN
Inspector... INSPECTOR!

The inspector returns.

INSPECTOR
Yes?

HAN

I painted it.

INSPECTOR

(laughs) Is that your defense?

HAN

And I painted others. Dozens. Mostly Vermeer, some Frans Hals.

INSPECTOR

The withdrawal from your drugs has effected your mind.

HAN

(desperate) Give me three months.

INSPECTOR

For what?

HAN

I'll paint a new Vermeer.

INSPECTOR

Ridiculous.

HAN

From scratch. I will prove it. You'll see, I'm not a villain. Let me prove my innocence.

INSPECTOR

And if you fail?

HAN

I'll admit to your charges.

INSPECTOR

(ponders, then...) You've got four weeks.

HAN

That's too little.

INSPECTOR

Not a day more.

HAN

But it took Vermeer months, sometimes years to complete a painting.

INSPECTOR

And you'll be under twenty-four house arrest.

The Inspector exits.

HAN

It's impossible. *(a beat)* Inspector?

Han slumps on to the cell cot.

End of Act Three.

ACT FOUR

SCENE THIRTEEN

A court room. A female Judge center stage. The Inspector and Jo on benches to each side. Han on the stand.

The walls are hung with paintings; *Christ with Scribes, Lady Reading a Letter, The Supper at Emmaus, The Last Supper, The Blessing of Jacob, Christ with the Adulteress etc.*

Spectators watch from a side bench.

JUDGE

This court is now in session for the case of the State verses Han Van Meegeren. The defendant has been accused of treason and forgery, he requested to paint this (*points*) '*Christ and the Scribes*', to prove his innocence. Inspector, you may begin.

INSPECTOR

Ladies and gentlemen, we have suffered war, invasion, persecution, and mass murder, but we have prevailed. This man who stands before you, colluded and collaborated with those oppressors.

HAN

Nonsense, I didn't collude, I ripped them off, because my paintings were forgeries.

INSPECTOR

So how do you explain this? (*shows Han an art book*) *The Art of Han Van Meegeren*, from your exhibition in Germany.

HAN

That was before the war. I went to the Munich Olympics with my wife.

INSPECTOR

And the inscription? (*opens the book and reads*) "To My Beloved Furher", signed Han Van Meegeren.

HAN

I signed my name on dozens of copies, anyone could have added the dedication.

INSPECTOR

But not anyone had contact with Hitler or Goering.

HAN

Give me a pen and the book.

The Inspector gives them to him and he scribbles his autograph.

HAN

Compare the hand writing.

The Inspector gives the book to the Judge, who frowns.

JUDGE

I must say they do look very different, so this evidence is moot. I'm confused, Inspector, are the paintings forgeries or not?

INSPECTOR

You honor, Mr. Rawlings, scientific adviser to the National Gallery in London, has concluded they are all forgeries.

JUDGE

Every one?

INSPECTOR

Yes, your honor, all thirty paintings.

JUDGE

But The National Gallery is the same institution that verified them as being genuine.

INSPECTOR

It is.

JUDGE

How did this happen?

INSPECTOR

I'd like to refer you to item sixteen, a deposition from one of the experts, a Mr. de Groot. *(reads from a report)* "It is unbelievable that it fooled me.

But we all slid downwards, from the Emmaus to the Last Supper to the Blessing of Jacob. When I look at them now, I do not understand how it could possibly have happened."

JUDGE

This is all very unorthodox. Is Mr. de Groot here?

INSPECTOR

He refused to appear.

JUDGE

Why?

HAN

For shame.

JUDGE

Mr. Van Meegeren, quiet. *(to Inspector)* So he will not be testifying?

INSPECTOR

No, your honor.

JUDGE

Very well. So, Mr. Van Meegeren, these are not real paintings?

HAN

Real, your honor?

JUDGE

I mean originals. You face the grave likelihood of jail time, do you wish to have the court appoint you a trial lawyer?

HAN

I will represent my self.

JUDGE

Do you have experience in law?

HAN

No, but I have the truth, and I'm perfectly capable of telling my own story.

JUDGE

A lawyer could help reduce your sentence if you're found guilty.

HAN

But I'm not guilty.

JUDGE

But you admit to the charges?

HAN

I do.

JUDGE

You admit you painted all these paintings?

HAN

Yes, and proud of it too.

JUDGE

And also, that you sold them at a very high price?

HAN

I could hardly have done otherwise. Had I sold them low, it would have been obvious they were fake!

The spectators laugh.

JUDGE

Silence in the court!

HAN

May I ask what you think of *Christ and The Scribes*?

JUDGE

(peers at the painting) It's quite good.

HAN

Quite?

JUDGE

Well, yes, very good.

HAN

Thank you, your honor. It's the moment when Jesus castigates the 'experts' for their ignorance.

INSPECTOR

This is a blatant attempt to distract us from the crimes he committed.

JUDGE

I'm intrigued, Mr. Van Meegeren. Go on.

HAN

Whatever your opinion of my art, I'm obviously no collaborator, but am I even really a forger?

JUDGE

You've admitted it twice now.

HAN

Everyone adored them; scholars, dealers, artists, and especially the public, all fell under my spell.

INSPECTOR

This is beside the point.

HAN

How can it not be the point?

JUDGE

Explain yourself.

HAN

Does it matter if people think they're by Vermeer? Does that preclude them from being beautiful? Obviously not, and with my paintings I have ripped back the veil of the critics' ignorance.

INSPECTOR

Your honor, they are not on trial.

HAN

But they are as guilty as I.

INSPECTOR

(protests) Your honor!

JUDGE

(to Han) Go on.

HAN

You're perplexed how this happened. Some say it must have been a type of mass hysteria, but that's nonsense. You probably saw my works? Perhaps at the Rijk's exhibit, *'The Masters of European Art'*.

JUDGE

I did, and my husband and I adored them.

HAN

Bredius, the so-called 'emminent' art critic, said they are, "*works of exceptional beauty... the finest Vermeers... perhaps the finest Baroque paintings in the genre.*"

INSPECTOR

Your honor, may I question the accused?

JUDGE

Proceed.

INSPECTOR

Isn't it true that after winning the Delft Art Prize you forged and resold your own painting?

HAN

How could it be a forgery if it was my own work?

INSPECTOR

During the war you continued producing fake art.

HAN

Each one took me a year or more to perfect. It was a labor of love.

INSPECTOR

And despite being wealthy, or maybe because of it, you thought you were above the law.

HAN

I came to the condition in which I was no longer master of myself. I became without will, powerless. I was forced to continue.

INSPECTOR

And you made a great profit.

HAN

I had to. I'd been maliciously damaged by the critics, so I could no longer exhibit.

INSPECTOR

As were many of your colleagues, but they didn't become criminals.

HAN

And they didn't create great art, but to be honest the millions I earned brought me nothing but trouble and unhappiness.

INSPECTOR

(sardonic) So you're the victim?

HAN

In a sense, yes, the victim of my own success. I decided to carry on, not to make more money, but to use the technique I had perfected to make something... divine. If that's a crime, then you must arrest all artists.

INSPECTOR

(to Judge) This is false modesty.

HAN

I'm hiding nothing, your honor. I admit I've fifty properties in Holland and France, including houses, nightclubs, and even a hotel.

INSPECTOR

(to Judge) You see? It wasn't art he aspired to, it was money he and his partner coveted.

JUDGE

Who is this partner?

INSPECTOR

Theo Wijngaarden.

JUDGE

Where is he?

INSPECTOR

(embarrassed) He left the country and we believe he's now doing forgeries, specifically *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*.

JUDGE

Do you have evidence?

INSPECTOR

Only circumstantial.

JUDGE

Then he's a moot point. I'd like to hear from Bredius. Is she available?

INSPECTOR

No, your honor.

JUDGE

(frustrated) Why not?

INSPECTOR

Madam Bredius says she cannot make the journey to Amsterdam because she lives in Monaco.

HAN

To avoid taxes on the paintings she bought from me. She's the criminal.

JUDGE

(snaps) Be quiet, sir.

INSPECTOR

The accused states that he has done us a service by 'exposing' our gullibility, but that is the con man's defence.

HAN

I never said they were Vermeers. I left that to the experts.

INSPECTOR

He claims he's a misunderstood genius who wished to prove himself a master, but he's in fact a common forger who sought nothing but profit at other's expense.

JUDGE

And what of the accused's wife?

INSPECTOR

Ex-wife, your honor.

JUDGE

But I thought...

Jo stands up.

JO

We were divorced last week.

JUDGE

Oh, I see. I'm very sorry.

JO

It's all right, your honor.

She sits.

INSPECTOR

We contend that she was aware of his activities and failed to report them, so is guilty as an accessory.

JUDGE

(to Jo) Do you wish to make a statement?

JO

(stands) Your honor, Han is a patriot, he would never betray his country. He's no more a collaborator than any person here. And in addition, he duped Goering out of two hundred Dutch paintings. He's not a criminal, he's a hero.

JUDGE

Did you have direct knowledge of his activities, and remember you're under oath, but you're not obliged to answer.

JO

I willingly answer and I swear on the holy Bible I had no knowledge of any part of it.

INSPECTOR

That's blatantly wrong, your honor, she's clearly the model for many of the figures. Just look at the paintings.

JUDGE

(peers at Jo, then at the paintings around the room) There is a remarkable similarity, but it's a matter of conjecture, and there's been too much of that already. *(to Jo)* You may sit.

HAN

May I speak?

JUDGE

Go ahead.

HAN

I'm accused of forgery, but I've shown that to be false, and I'm accused of treason for selling to the Nazis. I admit it.

The spectators BOO.

HAN

But to what purpose?

JUDGE

I don't understand?

HAN

Hitler plundered thousands of pieces of art from across Europe. I secured the return of two hundred Dutch paintings which are now safely back in our national galleries.

The spectators APPLAUD.

JUDGE

Would members of the public please refrain from clapping.

HAN

I rescued works that would've been lost forever and in so doing made a fool of the Nazis.

The spectators CHEER.

JUDGE

(bangs her gavel) Quiet in this court. *(to Han)* Sit down! *(to us, the jury)* Given that there are no experts we shall conclude. I can only look to the facts of the case, which are; the paintings have been declared forgeries and they are by the same artist who painted this, *Christ and the Scribes*. It's the court's decision the accused is guilty of fraud with the intent to deceive, cheat, and profit. Therefore, all his assets are hereby seized...

HAN

(protesting) Your Honor!

JUDGE

(presses on) ... and his bank accounts frozen.

HAN

You leave me penniless.

JUDGE

That's the idea, Mr. Van Meegeren, and you shall never again sell art, yours or any others.

HAN

But your honor, it's my life.

JUDGE

Current law sets a maximum of two years prison, but considering that you secured stolen national art, I hereby sentence you to twelve months, to begin at the start of the next year. Until January, you are on bail and shall remain within the city limits. As to the accused's ex-wife, without further evidence, we accept her innocence. This court is now dismissed.

The judge bangs her gavel.

SCENE FOURTEEN

The studio empty except for a few boxes. A painting on an easel turned away from us, and a few small paintings on the floor against the wall.

Han in a dressing gown, hair dishevelled, painting with slow deliberation. A KNOCK at the door.

HAN

Hold on.

He puts the brush down and goes to the door and opens it to Lotte, in a dress suit, hair up, nice shoes - transformed.

HAN

(surprised) Lotte!

LOTTE

Hi, Mister Van Meegeren.

HAN

(delighted) My my, look at you. You look fantastic.

LOTTE

I just wanted to say thank you for getting me the job.

HAN

Oh good, they took you on.

LOTTE

I start today.

HAN

Won't you come in? I don't get many visitors these days.

LOTTE

Well, OK, just for a minute. Don't wanna be late on my first day.

She enters and looks around at the empty studio.

LOTTE

Jeez, everything's gone!

HAN

"Confiscated in the national interest". Bastards took my last penny.

LOTTE

But you're gonna be OK, right? You can still paint.

HAN

Except now my work is worthless.

LOTTE

But they're still good paintings. *Emmaus*, *The Scribes*, all of them.

HAN

Thank you, my dear, but the nature of art these days is the perception of a piece, matters more than the piece itself. Talking of which, I hear the gallery's doing a Mondrian show.

LOTTE

His Paris years, 1913 to 1938, when he went abstract.

HAN

Not quite my cup of tea, all those lines and boxes. Art should be beautiful, at least.

LOTTE

Mondriam said, "Art is the path to being spiritual".

HAN

Did he?

LOTTE

And that, "Art should be above reality, or it has no value for man."

HAN

(he regards her and smiles) I can see that you're going to do very well in this business.

LOTTE

You really think?

HAN

Keep telling those stories and you'll be fine.

LOTTE

And as long as they don't find about my 'previous employment'. I mean, you didn't say anything at the trial, did you?

HAN

Of course not, I didn't mention your name, and don't worry, your secret's safe with me.

LOTTE

(gazes at a small painting on the floor against the wall.) That's really pretty.

HAN

It's after Rachel Ruysch *(pronounced 'RASH-el ROA-sh')*

LOTTE

A woman?

HAN

One of best of her period.

LOTTE

(tentative) It is a forgery?

HAN

(laughs) No, no, it's one of mine, just in her style. *(picks up the painting and gives it to Lotte)* Here, take it.

LOTTE

Oh, I couldn't.

HAN

As a gift, from me, please. *(laughs)* I'm forbidden to sell them anyway.

LOTTE

Thank you, this'll be worth something in twenty years. You'll see.

HAN

I doubt it.

LOTTE

But your famous, Mister Van Meegeren.

HAN

Pleases, call me Han.

She KISSES him.

LOTTE

I gotta run, I don't wanna be late.

HAN

Take care of yourself, Lotte.

As she turns to exit, she BUMPS into Jo, entering in a coat and hat.

LOTTE

Hello, Miss.

JO

Hello. (*regards her*)

HAN

You remember, Lotte dear, my model for *Lady Reading A Letter* and *Lady Playing A Lute*.

JO

Yes, yes, I remember now.

HAN

Lotte's just landed a job at the Stedelijk (*pronounced: Stee-del-ick*) gallery.

JO

(*to Lotte*) Good for you.

LOTTE

Now the war's over, the art market's going to explode. You'll see. (*to Han*) Thank you for the painting, Han. (*to Jo*) Good afternoon, mam.

JO

Good luck.

Lotte exits. Han goes back to his painting.

JO

Did you see *The Gazette*?

HAN

I don't read the newspapers anymore, too much misinformation.

JO

(smiles) You were voted the second most popular person in Holland.

HAN

Good God, really?

JO

After the queen

HAN

(laughs) One day they see me as a criminal, the next as a... who knows what.

JO

They're even talking about putting you on a postage stamp.

HAN

My face or my paintings?

JO

Does it matter?

HAN

I'd rather be remembered for my art than my crimes.

JO

But justice prevailed.

HAN

I suppose it did, I mean we got away with it, didn't we?

JO

(laughs) You showed them their folly.

HAN

I must thank Mister Walters, for his article. He told the story from my point of view, pretty much.

JO

It certainly helped sway public opinion.

HAN

Is he still at the hotel?

JO

No, he had to rush back to America. Apparently, there's been reports of a, what did they call it, an "unidentified - flying - object".

HAN

An alien?

JO

Who knows?

HAN

Good grief, what will people believe next? Can I offer you a drink?

JO

Sure, but I'm catching the eleven o'clock train to Paris.

HAN

Seeing the children? Good for you.

He pours two glasses.

JO

And I suppose you didn't hear about Reichmarschall Goering?

HAN

No.

JO

When he learned your painting wasn't a real Vermeer, he fell sick, *(laughs)* and then he committed suicide.

HAN

(passes her a glass) Good riddance, the man was an evil shit.

He turns the radio on, jazz, and dances over to her.

HAN

Do you remember the exhibition? “Four Hundred Years of European Art”.

JO

How could I forget?

He takes her hand to dance, she is reluctant.

HAN

It was more than I could’ve imagined in my wildest dreams. Come on, darling, dance with me.

She softens and starts to dance.

HAN

Titians, Da Vincis, Goyas, and the centerpiece, my *Supper at Emmaus*.

He twirls her around as they slow waltz.

HAN

They carpeted the room so people could contemplate it in silence. I did that, Jo, I created something truly great.

JO

Yes, you did, Han. Eventually they’ll realize.

He GRABS his chest.

JO

What’s wrong?

HAN

Nothing. I’m fine.

She turns the radio off.

JO

You have to see a doctor.

HAN
I did.

JO
What did they say?

HAN
Angina pectoris. Heart disease.

JO
Oh Han, how serious is it?

HAN
I've got a few months, maybe a year.

JO
I'm so sorry.

She hugs him.

JO
Isn't there anything they can do?

HAN
No, it's terminal. Jo, I put some of the money in an account in your name. The court won't be able to confiscate it now that we're divorced, so it's yours free and clear.

JO
Thank you.

HAN
It's not a lot, but enough to set you up.

JO
Are you going to be all right, alone?

HAN
I'm not alone. I have my painting.

She regards the art work.

JO

It's beautiful.

HAN

It's rather good, isn't it?

JO

Your best yet. I have to go now.

HAN

I know. Thank you for coming.

She heads to the door.

HAN

Jo? (*she turns back*) Be well.

Tears well as she exits. Han goes to his painting and picks up a brush and starts to paint.

The Man in the 17th century hat enters side of stage, in the shadows.

HAN

There you are. Five and a half hours for the entire trial. It's a joke. They wanted to get rid of me as quickly as possible. Consider who wasn't there? No Bredius, no Hoodenjik (*pronounced 'Ho-dan-itch'*)-, or the agents and dealers, not Van Beuningen (*pronounced 'Van Bo-Knee-Nen'*), Decoen (*pronounced 'De-Kurn'*) or de Groot. The entire thing was a charade. You had it the same, didn't you? Obstacles and fools. War. The French, the Spanish, even the English invaded. The art market collapsed and you were left high dry, and so you borrowed, as did I, in a way.

Han pours himself a drink.

HAN

We did what we had to, to get by, and we showed the world something beautiful, but I admit I was standing on your shoulders, and by deception, so, to tell the truth, it was never satisfying enough, perhaps that's why I couldn't stop.

The Man circles Han, listening attentively.

HAN

How did you cope? No one recognizing your talent. Running a hotel to keep a roof over your head. Weren't you humiliated? I used to think so, but I see now that you found peace in your room, didn't you? Perhaps I can too?

He turns the radio on. Jazz.

He sways to the music and goes to the painting as the lights fade to a spotlight on Han and the canvas...

... and then to black.

End of play.