

Sapiens

by Eric Schabla

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CHARACTERS

ALEX	Black American. 20s-30s
HUGO	Latinx American. 20s-40s
TOPHER	White American. 20s-40s
HARRIET	White American. 20s-30s
DR. HEARST	White American. 40s-60s.
SHAE	Black American. 20s-30s.
STEPHEN	White American. 20s-40s.
ROY	Black American. 20s-40s.

SETTING

A closed wing at a zoo.

TIME

Present.

Notes

" / " indicates overlapping dialogue.

" - " indicates an interruption.

No punctuation indicates a stream of continuous thought.

Dialogue and action that take place inside the upstage enclosure should be either heavily muffled or completely inaudible. The suggestion here is not that the enclosure has been intentionally soundproofed, but simply that the construction of the space makes it difficult or impossible for characters in the main playing area to hear anything coming from inside the enclosure.

"As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,
the movement of his powerful soft strides
is like a ritual dance around a center
in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.

Only at times, the curtain of the pupils
lifts, quietly -- An image enters in,
rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,
plunges into the heart and is gone."

The Panther, Rainer Maria Rilke

ACT I

SCENE I

(Separated by glass from the forestage is a large enclosure, typical of any mammal exhibit at a regional zoo. Downstage of the enclosure is the main playing space. The window that separates the two extends from the ceiling and stops at the floor of the enclosure, which is a couple feet higher than the floor of the main playing space. Inside the enclosure are various structures designed for monkeys including a few large branches, rope toys, etc... nothing that can't be rearranged. Droppings are also visible. The enclosure can be repurposed to house a variety of different animals. There is a single door in the enclosure - upstage center, painted the same color as the interior. Folding chairs are set on the main playing space in a horseshoe along with a table and some cheap coffee. Stage right is an exit door that also leads to a hall connecting the enclosure to the main playing space. Stage left is a heavy wooden door leading to Dr. Hearst's office. In a thrust space there is also the potential for a downstage vom entrance.)

(Lights up on Topher and Hugo stacking a few ten gallon buckets in the monkey enclosure. Their dialogue, as with all dialogue and action that takes place in the enclosure, is either completely inaudible or very muffled. After they finish stacking they exit through the US door and reenter a moment later through the SR door.)

HUGO

Is it bigger than a toaster oven?

TOPHER

Yes. Definitely. Nine left.

HUGO

Does it have legs?

Nope. Eight.

TOPHER

Hmm. Is it predatory?

HUGO

Ahhh...I'm going to say yes. Seven.

TOPHER

Oh come on, that's so unfair. You always do that.

HUGO

Do what?

TOPHER

Fuckin'...fuckin'...

HUGO

Equivocate?

TOPHER

Yes!

HUGO

You're right. I totally do. Ha.
Redo. Eight left.

TOPHER

Can it live in the ocean?

HUGO

Yes. Seven.

TOPHER

Okay. Living thing somehow not an animal or a plant or anything geological bigger than a toaster oven no legs maybe predatory can live in the ocean. Does it have a long lifespan?

HUGO

Relative to what?

TOPHER

Shit. Valid. HUGO

Can it live to be twenty or older?

Yes. Six. TOPHER

Can it live on land? HUGO

Oh yes it can. TOPHER

Aww damn. You sly minx. HUGO

Five. TOPHER

Is it a tortoise? Goddamnit. Legs. HUGO

Ha! Nope. Four. TOPHER

No legs no legs. HUGO

Oh my god. Is it a tsunami?

A swing and a miss. Three. TOPHER

Ugh. Am I getting warmer, at least? HUGO

You are and you aren't. Two. TOPHER

What? That doesn't count. HUGO

TOPHER

Yes it does. You know the rules.

HUGO

Ah fuck you fuck you fuck you.

Is it one of those really obscure parasites that only *you* would know about?

TOPHER

It is not and I resent the implication.

Colder. One left.

HUGO

Damn it. Fine. I give up.

TOPHER

Time.

HUGO

I think it's like a quarter after.

TOPHER

No, Hugo.

Time.

HUGO

Time?

TOPHER

Time. That's what I was thinking of.

Pretty good, right?

(Pause.)

HUGO

I didn't realize this was Lord of the Goddamn Rings.

TOPHER

What? How is that-

HUGO

That's like straight out of the Hobbit.

TOPHER

Honestly, I thought you'd get it in a half dozen guesses.

(Alex enters SR.)

HUGO

You always do weird conceptual ones.

TOPHER

How is that conceptual? It's not like I picked...early American history or like cubism or something-

ALEX

Excuse me.

TOPHER

I.
Who are?
Uh.
You can't.
This.

Yeah.

ALEX

I'm sorry?

TOPHER

Hugo.

HUGO

Dude. Seriously? You need to work on this. The *people* thing.

Miss, this is a private area. You really can't be back here.

ALEX

Oh. No, I-

HUGO

Trust me, I'm doing you a favor.

ALEX

I'm looking for Dr. Hearst.

TOPHER

Are you the new PhD?

HUGO

Oh. Oh my god. You must be, uh- sorry.
He'll be here in a few minutes. Have a seat.

TOPHER

Would you like some coffee?

ALEX

Oh. Sure. Thanks.
Aviarist?

HUGO

What?

ALEX

Are you the aviarist?

HUGO

The aviarist?

Oh. Yep.
Yes.

So the doc told you about me, huh?

ALEX

Not that I remember. But your waders are covered in crane feces and
you're wearing a falconer's glove.

TOPHER

The science of deduction.

(Enter Shae SR, engrossed by her phone.)

SHAE

Damn it.

Morning, Shae.

 HUGO

Hail to her imperial majesty.

 TOPHER

Hey, Toph.

 SHAE

Hugo.

 HUGO

Shae.

 SHAE

I broke my nine day streak. Duolingo is a fucking racket.

 TOPHER

Shae.

 SHAE

What? *(To Alex)* Who are you?

 Is she another- ? Look, I sent an email about this to all the parents. They're

penguins. You signed the waiver on the first day of camp. They're

 unpredictable and territorial as shit.

Oh. No.

 I'm not-

 I'm Alex. It's my first day.

 ALEX

Alex?

 You're the.

 Shit.

 Excuse me, Doctor. I apologize.

 I'm so sorry.

 SHAE

Shae. Shae Holcomb.

 ALEX

That's alright, you don't have to-

I'm not a doctor yet, actually, so-

SHAE

Oh, I thought Hearst said we were getting another doctor.

TOPHER

Research specialist PhD candidate.

SHAE

Oh right. Well, great.
Welcome. Hello.

About time we had another. You know.

HUGO

Another what?

SHAE

Another woman.

That's high achieving and all.

ALEX

Oh. Thanks. Yeah.
So, what do you do here?

SHAE

Me? Just a lowly keeper. But I'm looking to move up. Plenty of room at the top.

ALEX

Is this primate unit always empty?

HUGO

Nah, Dr. Hearst uses it for projects once in a while.

TOPHER

Private observation and research. He's a brilliant scientist.

HUGO

That's one way to put it.

ALEX

So the public isn't allowed in this wing?

TOPHER

Not unless they want a lecture from Hearst on scientific privilege and intellectual property.

HUGO

An old lady got confused and tried to come back here once.

SHAE

He told her he was doing "aggressive experiments on geriatric primates".

ALEX

Yikes.

TOPHER

He wouldn't hurt a fly.

SHAE

Of course not. But he can talk anyone into *anything*.

HUGO

Or out of anything.

I swear, if I didn't know better I'd say the guy was a lawyer.

Or an anthropologist, or a psychiatrist, or an English teacher...

TOPHER

The man is a bottomless well.

ALEX

Wow.

I've only talked to him on the phone but his publications are really impressive.

SHAE

Stephen and Roy aren't here yet, but they work with him all the time.

They say he used to just sit and read Tolstoy to this troupe of baboons for *hours* at a time. Maybe it was Dostoevsky.

HUGO

He's got a screw loose.

TOPHER

Everyone says that. Why does everyone say that? He's just deeply passionate.

HUGO

Is that why he never lets anyone in there?

(Hugo points out the SL door.)

That's his office.

(spookily) Or so we think.

TOPHER

He isn't the only one around here who needs solitude.

HUGO

Sometimes he'll just pop out of there. Like at random. When you never saw him go in in the first place.

He could be listening right now.

SHAE

He's not listening to us, Hugo.

TOPHER

Yeah, cool it, Orwell.

Don't mind him, Doctor. He's just paranoid that Hearst is going to catch him playing Gardenscapes.

ALEX

You don't have to call me that, I'm not a doctor.

TOPHER

Hugo thinks the zoo is basically one big panopticon.

(Enter Harriet SR.)

HARRIET

Good morning, everybody!

ALL

(Lacking enthusiasm) Good morning, Harriet, hey, hi, hello, what's up, etc...

HARRIET

Oh my gosh, are you the new girl?

God, listen to me. New *hire*.

HUGO

Harriet, this is Alex.

HARRIET

It's *such* a pleasure to meet you, Doctor. We've all heard so many great things.

ALEX

That's really kind of you, but I don't have my Phd yet so you don't actually have to call me doctor.

None of you have to call me doctor.

HARRIET

Right, of course. My mistake. *Our* mistake. So what should we call you? Or, uh, how would you prefer to be addressed?

ALEX

Alex is fine.

HARRIET

Alex. What a beautiful name, is that short for Alexandra? I'm sorry I didn't mean to presume. You could just be called Alex. I mean I didn't mean to just, like, inadvertently gender you.

ALEX

That's okay. It is short for Alexandra.

HARRIET

Cool cool great. It's a pleasure to meet you, Alex.

Have you shown her around yet? Oh Jesus, sorry, I just totally assumed your pronouns.

ALEX

Oh no / that's okay.

HARRIET

Has no one even asked you your preference yet? Come on, you guys. Get it together.

ALEX

Oh. Uh.
She/her/hers I guess.

HARRIET

Nice! Me too. Not that it wouldn't be *nice* if you felt more comfortable with other pronouns.

HUGO

Dear god. Someone please stop her.

HARRIET

Excuse me for showing, like, the bare minimum of sensitivity.

(Roy and Stephen enter unnoticed through the upstage door inside the enclosure. During the following exchange Roy inspects the various monkey toys and writes notes on a pad. Stephen puts on a pair of elbow length rubber gloves and sifts through a pile of monkey feces with a small instrument. The two periodically share some dialogue.)

HARRIET-

This is supposed to be a safe and *inclusive* space.

ALEX

Please, I didn't / mean to-

HARRIET

I just think it's important that as we become more socially aware we, like, apply that progress to the workplace. That's all.

(Topher stifles laughter.)

HARRIET

Is something funny, Topher?

TOPHER

Your idealism just makes me genuinely giddy.

HARRIET

Screw you.

TOPHER

What? /No, I was being serious.

HARRIET

I'm trying to make our new colleague feel welcome / and you're over there snickering at me. I'm sorry, Alex.

TOPHER

Woah woah. Why are you jumping down my throat? Why does everyone always think I'm being insincere?

HARRIET

Because you're a white guy in his early thirties. Back me up, Shae.

SHAE

Switzerland.

(Stephen and Roy have now begun to enjoy the fact that the others are unaware of their presence. They come to the downstage edge of the enclosure and make obscene gestures against the glass.)

HARRIET

I apologize, Doc- Alex. All I'm saying is just because some of us *work* with primates doesn't mean we have to *behave* like them, Hugo.

HUGO

Did you just compare me to a monkey?

(Pause.)

HARRIET

Don't play that game.

HUGO

Game? What you say matters, Harriet.

HARRIET

What? Oh come on. / I didn't mean *that*.

HUGO

Hey hey, look who's backpedaling. That was a nasty, violent thing to say.

HARRIET

Come on.

Are you serious?

Hugo? You know I didn't mean it.

Okay. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry.

That's embarrassing.

My privilege is *definitely* showing.

(Pause. After a profound awkwardness sets in, Hugo breaks it.)

HUGO

Jesus Christ, it's too easy. White people are my favorite.

TOPHER

(As Robert Duvall from Apocalypse Now) He loves the smell of liberal guilt in the morning.

(Topher and Hugo high five.)

HARRIET

Hahaha.

Ha ha ha.

Ha.

You got me.

Well, at least we can all laugh about it.

(Stephen and Roy pretend to fling poop at each other.)

SHAE

So, *Alex*. Did you apply for a specific position here?

ALEX

I'll mostly be working on my thesis, actually.

TOPHER

What's it about?

ALEX

So far, it's about four paragraphs.

HARRIET

Hahaha.

ALEX

I don't want to bore anyone.

TOPHER

Are you kidding?

I mean, *I'd* love to hear about it.

ALEX

Well, the thrust of it will explore the intersection of evolution and taxonomy in the context of post-structuralism. That's the Reader's Digest version, anyway.

HUGO

Wow.

HARRIET

Fascinating.

That's fascinating.

SHAE

Compelling.

TOPHER

What, uh, exactly, does that mean?

ALEX

Good question. Seems like the more of it I write, the less I have an answer to that.

But basically I think our compulsion to anatomize the entirety of the animal kingdom might have as much to do with neutralizing an existential threat as it does with the revelation of larger natural truths.

HUGO

Are you one of these PETA anti-captivity people trying to change the system from the inside?

HARRIET

Hugo!

ALEX

It's okay. I'm going to have to defend this at some point.

Not in principle, no. But I do think we feel unconsciously threatened by the freedom animals experience. Think about it. You're a grizzly bear. Or an octopus. You've got limited self-awareness, few (if any) moral concerns and then there's the big one: no latent, suffocating fear of death.

(Pause. They examine the idea in collective silence. Roy bends Stephen over and the two imitate monkey sex.)

And I wonder if we try to mitigate that threat by knowing and categorizing. You name it, maybe it can't hurt you. Does that make any sense?

HUGO

Holy shit, we got a live one, Toph.

TOPHER

Wow.

SHAE

That is an idea.

TOPHER

Do you know Foucault?

HUGO

He's that new ostrich, right?

ALEX

Yes, I do actually.
French philosopher.

HUGO

Right, yep yep.

ALEX

He's been a big influence on my work.
Sorry, I'm just blabbing now.

TOPHER

Not at all. I'd love to hear more.

HUGO

So what animals in particular are you studying?

ALEX

Rare tigers, leopards and jaguars. Big cats in general.

HUGO

You came to the right place. You probably already know, but this was the first North American zoo to breed snow leopards in captivity.

TOPHER

Hearst was actually instrumental in-

HARRIET

(Turning toward the enclosure) Oh my god.

HUGO

Hello hello.

SHAE

Ha ha! Get it, Roy!

HARRIET

Doctor / sorry, *Alex*, I'm so sorry. This is just- you shouldn't have to see this.

HUGO

Ha haaa! Go, go, go!

ALEX

Well, at least it looks consensual.

(An intercom in the enclosure clicks on.)

VOICE

Millions of years of evolutionary mutation, the birth of great civilizations, and ages of exponential development have led us to this enlightened plateau in the progress of the species.

HUGO

I told you he was watching.

VOICE

To look at them, you might think, 'what use could possibly be made of two such puerile nincompoops?' This question is, in fact, the burden of all creatures of a higher order. What role might the subservient play in the great drama of the exceptional?

HUGO

Boom! Roasted!

SHAE

Did you know there was an intercom in there?

(Dr. Hearst enters from the SL door. He motions to Roy and Stephen who promptly exit the monkey enclosure.)

HEARST

A pliable will is a self rewarding virtue.

SHAE

Good morning, Dr. Hearst.

HEARST

Are we all met?

HUGO

Looks that way.

This is Alex.

HEARST

Finally. We meet face to face. It's a pleasure, Ms. Harding. Please excuse the theatrics. Sometimes public humiliation is the path of least resistance with those two.

ALEX

You can call me Alex. It's great to finally meet you, Doctor.

HEARST

Take seats.

(They sit in the horseshoe of chairs. Roy and Stephen enter SR and also take seats.)

HEARST

And now that our simian ancestors have joined us, we can begin the introductions.

STEPHEN

Hello.

ROY

Uh. Hi.

HEARST

What a day, what a day. It brings me great pleasure to introduce the newest member of our team, Ms. Alexandra Harding. Before we discuss her very exciting work, I'd like you to please introduce yourselves one at a time and state your area of expertise.

HARRIET

Doctor. *(She mouths the word 'pronouns')*

HEARST

Thank you, Harriet.

By all means, list your preferred pronouns.

Hugo.

HUGO

Uh. Hi, I'm Hugo. The Birdman.

Aviarist. Chief...aviarist.

He/him/his.

SHAE

Shae Holcomb. Fish and marine mammals.

I spend most of my time with penguins.

TOPHER

She has a gift.

SHAE

That's code for she got the job no one else wanted.

She/her/hers.

HARRIET

Harriet Claire Zunack. She/her/hers.

Dairy and livestock.

HEARST

She also manages our very robust petting zoo.

HUGO

Ironic for someone who thinks we should all be drinking milk from organic, cruelty-free, montessori cows.

HARRIET

Yes, Hugo, I happen to have a strong ethical objection to the dairy industry. The cow ought to be befriended and studied, not exploited.

HUGO

Powerful stuff.

TOPHER

Hi. Topher. House of reps.

Oh, sorry.

Reptile and Amphibian house.

SHAE

Plenty of invertebrates in both.

HEARST

(To Alex) Normally we endeavor to keep politics out of the workplace, but I allow the occasional topical pun.

TOPHER

Oh, and I actually respond to all pronouns.

(Short pause.)

SHAE

For real?

HARRIET

Really, Topher?

I mean, *really*?

TOPHER

Yes, Harriet. Really. Is that quite *alright* with you?

HARRIET

Sorry, I guess I've just never, ever heard anyone refer to you as anything other than he/him.

TOPHER

So, what, *you* get to decide how everyone refers to me?

HARRIET

Not necessarily, it just seems / odd, that's all.

HUGO

Why are you getting on his case? Isn't this basically the same thing as you pretending to be bisexual?

HARRIET

I *am* bisexual, Hugo.

HUGO

Remind me, who was the last girl you slept with?

HARRIET

You don't have to sleep with someone to- UGH. How are you still this insensitive / about sexual...?

HUGO

Go ahead. Swipe that LGBT card, girl.

HARRIET

I am a proud member of the LBTTQQAAP community.

TOPHER

Can we move on, please?

HEARST

I think that would be best.
Stephen.

STEPHEN

Hi, I'm Stephen. I don't care about pronouns but I prefer Stephen. Not Steve. Steve sounds like I drive eighteen wheelers. I'm a primate guy.

HEARST

You've made us all acutely aware of that.

ROY

Roy. You can call me, uh, Roy.
Do I...do I really have to say my pronouns?

HEARST

Please.

ROY

He/him/his, I guess.

HEARST

These gentlemen have been working with me for several years now.
Loyalty is perhaps their greatest virtue.

STEPHEN

Roy worked with Goodall before he started here.

ALEX

Wow. I'd like to hear more about that.

ROY

It was the best time of my life.

HEARST

I suppose that just leaves you.

ALEX

Hello, I'm Alexandra Harding. You can call me Alex. She/her/hers. I'm here to complete my doctorate.

HEARST

Ms. Harding will be working directly under me.

ALEX

But I'll be spending most of my time with big cats.

TOPHER

Why cats specifically? If you don't mind me asking.

ALEX

Well, apex predator taxonomies might be the most revealing because their position in the natural hierarchy most closely resembles our own.

HUGO

Does this mean we have to like...report to Alex?

HEARST

Alexandra is in pursuit of a terminal degree, a road some of you might consider taking. You will treat her with appropriate deference.

ALEX

Please, deference really isn't necessary.

HEARST

Over the next few weeks, we'll be housing a variety of research cats from our sister institutions. Feed shifts will remain the same, but to accommodate our new guests we'll need all hands on deck.

SHAE

What about our tour schedules?

TOPHER

Doctor. I don't, uh, do well with predatory mammals.

HEARST

Not to fear, Topher, in time you'll realize you can master anything that eats.

You will all, of course, receive the appropriate training.

These are very high value animals. We'll need to be at our absolute best.

ROY

Any cats in particular?

HEARST

Everyone will receive a full list soon. But all five of genus *Panthera* will be rotating through.

Our star player will be an adult male bengal tiger.

TOPHER

Really?

ROY

Excellent.

ALEX

This is all on a volunteer basis, by the way.

HEARST

But your help is highly encouraged.

ALEX

I'm sure you're all very busy.

HARRIET

I'm at your disposal, Alex.

TOPHER

Me too.

HUGO

Yeah, cool. Whatever.

HEARST

Oh, one other thing. How could I forget? We operate by a single principle here, Ms. Harding.

What do we say?

ALL

"Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent".

(Blackout.)

SCENE II

(Lights up on Hugo, Topher, Shae and Harriet overhauling the enclosure in preparation for the cats. By the end of the scene, it should be set for Scene III. There is now a whiteboard downstage with some taxonomic diagrams and scientific names written on it. Panthera pardus, Acinonyx jubatus, etc. Alex sits working at a small desk surrounded by boxes of books and papers. After a beat, Hearst enters.)

HEARST

Settle thy studies, Faustus.

ALEX

Sorry?

HEARST

O, Faustus, lay that damned book aside
And gaze not on it, lest it tempt thy soul.

ALEX

...can I help you with something?

HEARST

I'm sorry. Just a lame joke.

ALEX

I'll be honest, I don't think I ever made it all the way through that one.

HEARST

The intrepid scholar who trades his soul to the devil for forbidden
knowledge.

ALEX

That's me.

HEARST

I could never quite reconcile the two major versions.
Goethe's bored me to tears. But Marlowe's was electric. Violent and sexy
and transgressive.

ALEX

We all work on the shoulders of giants.

HEARST

Not all of us. You have the misfortune to be stuck with me. A pedantic old fool. (*ref. the enclosure*) When will you begin observation?

ALEX

We can start as soon as the cats get here. (*ref. the enclosure*) They should be done by tomorrow.

Your team has been so helpful.

HEARST

You mean, *your* team. It's good for them to learn from someone with real ambition.

ALEX

I'm just eager to get to work.

HEARST

Me too.
It's thrilling.

ALEX

I can't thank you enough, doctor.

HEARST

Not at all.
Are you a lover of poetry, Ms. Harding?

ALEX

I guess so, sure.
Mostly the books we read in school.
Shakespeare. Chaucer.
A little Maya Angelou. Silvia Plath.

HEARST

Poetry is very important. Especially for scientists.

ALEX

How so?

HEARST

You know, before I began studying biology I had every intention of becoming a novelist.

ALEX

Really?

HEARST

Oh yes.

ALEX

And what happened?

HEARST

I lacked the temperament. Plus I was never handsome enough to be on a book jacket.

ALEX

I don't believe that for a minute.

HEARST

Like so many, I was always taught the two are polar opposites. Science and creative work. Never the twain shall meet. In any case, when I began studying biology I realized just how much they have in common.

ALEX

I think most of my professors would say the arts are a distraction. They do sequester a lot of funding.

HEARST

I have no sympathy for idiots. We should round them all up and put them away. Fucking troglodytes.

(Restraining himself) Excuse me. A member of our board is also inclined that way.

ALEX

No, I uh.

I understand.

I appreciate art.

But I don't necessarily see its utility in my work, that's all.

HEARST

Failure is the binding principle of any discipline that seeks higher truth, don't you think?

ALEX

Failure? What about innovation or curiosity?

HEARST

(*ref. the research materials*) What is all this, Alex? What question confounds you? Whatever it is you'll know it's worth asking if the answer eludes you until the day you die.

You have texts, and taxonomies and testable theories. These are models of the natural world. *Models* of the truth. That's all they are or will ever be. Analogies that demand revision because, again and again, they fail to describe the world with perfect accuracy.

ALEX

I understand the concept of review, Doctor. "The more we study, the more we discover our ignorance."

HEATS

Keats? Very good.

ALEX

Shelley, actually.

HEARST

In any case, language could be considered a model of the inexpressible. I daresay Shelley would agree. Men of letters, men of science. The line gets blurred.

ALEX

Men?

HEARST

You misunderst-

ALEX

No. I see your point.

HEARST

Nietzsche said, "That for which we find words is something already dead in our hearts."

ALEX

That's comforting.

HEARST

And I say to you, that which we can prove to an absolute moral certainty is guaranteed to be trivial.

ALEX

So you don't believe anything important can ever really be proven? Even over the course of generations?

HEARST

All I'm suggesting is that this work is, at best, descriptive. It's a long and tired procession of successive failures that brings us any closer to the boundary of knowing.

ALEX

I guess that sort of takes the pressure off me.

HEARST

If you need permission, I'm giving it to you.

Fail.

There endeth the lecture.

ALEX

I'll do my best to...not succeed. Where did you say you were educated?

HEARST

A small college in eastern Europe. You wouldn't have heard of it. As a matter of fact, it no longer exists.

ALEX

And you came back to the states right after?

HEARST

No no. I spent a long time in Siberia.

ALEX

Siberia?

HEARST

The Koryak Mountains. When the wall fell in eighty-nine the western demand for luxury fur skyrocketed. If you were young and knew the land and the animals there was a great deal of money to be made in those days.

ALEX

You were a fur trapper?

HEARST

Hard to believe, I know.

ALEX

I thought that was something people only did in movies.

HEARST

It wasn't all that interesting.
You wouldn't believe how bored you can be.
But the backcountry was breathtaking.

ALEX

Quite a place to spend your youth.

HEARST

It may as well be another lifetime.

ALEX

I don't remember this from your CV.

HEARST

Well, I don't disclose *everything* in my publications. Ha. I like to maintain an air of mystery.

ALEX

I feel lucky to have looked behind the curtain.

HEARST

I'm really not so complicated. Merely growing old. Like I said, I've led many lives.

ALEX

Is that where you came up with that saying? Your time in Siberia?

HEARST

Saying?

ALEX

Yeah, I wrote it down actually. *(Looks through her notebook)* "Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge, exists without my consent."

HEARST

Oh no, I didn't write that. It's from a novel. I use it as a motivational tool. To encourage curiosity, and so forth. I find mantras are effective for small groups.

ALEX

I have to say, considering our work, the sentiment seems a little...questionable.

HEARST

Oh? Well. There's still time.

(Pause.)

Do you have everything you need?

ALEX

Uh. Yes.

Yes. Thank you.

HEARST

You're very impressive, Alex. I asked you here because you're standing at the threshold of something. All that's left is to walk through the door.

ALEX

I...I'll try.

HEARST

Go forward, Faustus, in that famous art
Wherein all nature's treasure is contained
Be thou on earth as Jove is in the sky,
Lord and commander of these elements.

(Exit Hearst through the SL door. Enter Hugo and Topher SR.)

HUGO

I think we're just about done in there.

TOPHER

Yessir. It's starting to look like a real cathouse, eh Hugo?

HUGO

I can't believe we're still friends.

TOPHER

You'd be lost without me.

ALEX

Thanks, guys. I really appreciate your help.

HUGO

Listen, I don't know what you're up to later. But sometimes the three of us, uh, me and Shae and Toph. Sometimes we hang out and, uh, I don't want to assume or anything. Like I don't know if you'd be into this or whatnot but-

TOPHER

We trip together. On acid.

ALEX

Oh.

HUGO

Damn dude, just come right out with it.

TOPHER

What? I'm a libertarian.

HUGO

We usually just wind up listening to some vinyl.

TOPHER

We're all adults. I don't think the state should dictate what we put in our bodies.

ALEX

Yeah, I think I'll pass for now. But thank you.

HUGO

Suit yourself.

Listen, I have to take off. I'll see you tonight, Toph?

TOPHER

Can't wait.

HUGO

Later, Alex. Same time tomorrow?

ALEX

Sure, if you're up for it.

(Exit Hugo SR.)

TOPHER

He's the best, isn't he?

ALEX

Uh. Yeah.

Sure.

He's growing on me.

TOPHER

We've been working together for almost five years.

ALEX

Oh. I didn't realize that.

TOPHER

You really should trip with us sometime.

Brilliant people get the most out of it.

ALEX

Right. Haha. Uh. Thanks.

Yeah, maybe I will.

TOPHER

People think it's an escape. Or some kind of palliative. But it's so much more.

The clarity.

Color and light.

I've never been more honest with myself.

ALEX

Uh huh.

TOPHER

And I should know. I have a lot of trouble with that.

Ha.

Ha.

ALEX

Mmm.

TOPHER

I'm not bothering you, am I?

ALEX

No.

Nope.

Not at all.

TOPHER

Alex, can I ask you something personal?

ALEX

Uh-

TOPHER

Have you ever been in love before?

ALEX

What?

TOPHER

Goddamn it. I'm sorry I'm sorry.

Sorry.

Um. ALEX

I really don't do this. With anyone. TOPHER

Oh. ALEX

I've never really talked-
You just seem so... TOPHER

Look, I'm sorry, I can't. ALEX

What? TOPHER

It's nothing personal, I'm just really / not in a position to... ALEX

Wait. TOPHER

To be attached. / Like that. ALEX

No. TOPHER

Or to be dating. / Or anything. ALEX

No no. Dear god, I didn't mean *you*.
Gross. TOPHER

What? ALEX

TOPHER

I mean, not *gross*. I just. Don't really think that I...row on that side of the boat.

ALEX

...

(Pause.)

TOPHER

What a nice chat that was good evening to you, colleague.

(Topher goes to exit SR.)

ALEX

Wait, Topher.

Yes. I have.

TOPHER

Can you help me?

(Ref. Shae and Harriet in the enclosure) It's alright, they can't hear us.

ALEX

Look, I'm not a great person to ask about this-

TOPHER

What was it like?

ALEX

What was it like.

TOPHER

Yeah.

ALEX

He turned out to be a dick.

More than a dick.

A monster.

He turned out to be a monster.

TOPHER

I'm really sorry to hear that.

ALEX
It was bad.

TOPHER
Oh.

ALEX
Very, very bad.

TOPHER
Jeez.

ALEX
Ugh. I'm sitting here talking like I'm the first person in human history with baggage. You don't want to hear this.

TOPHER
Yes, Alex. I really do.

ALEX
Why?

TOPHER
Because I'm confused. Really, really. Profoundly confused.

ALEX
What are you confused about?

TOPHER
There are these...these labels that are supposed to make us more enlightened, supposed to include more of us. What do you eat? Who do you sleep with? How do you *identify*? Take up more space take up less space. But the more of them we manufacture the less I have a single fucking clue about...about how I...

ALEX
How you fit?

TOPHER
Yes.

ALEX
And you think I can help you. With that.

TOPHER

Yes.

ALEX

Okay.

TOPHER

I need to know. If I *know*.
Or what it feels like to be *sure*.

ALEX

Okay.

TOPHER

To have the.
That conviction.
About another person.

ALEX

Well, I can only speak to my experience.

TOPHER

I'm sorry. This is a *huge* imposition.
We don't have to do this now.
Or here. Or ever. Or anywhere.

ALEX

You know how we have these phrases, these cliches? Butterflies in my stomach, swept off my feet, I'm crazy about her.

They all seem misleading to me now.
They imply something desperate. Frenetic.

But that man walked up to me for the first time and I felt suddenly calm.
My hands steadied. I had never breathed so deeply in my life. Like I had been wearing something heavy and the second I was aware of the weight it slid off my body.

Sometimes I regret that. The unburdening. Because it disarms you.
Ironically the lighter you are, the more you become still. There's less resistance. Less to fight against, maybe. Until it's just you and that other being and then this third presence that envelops both of you.

(Beat.)

TOPHER

"Young though she is, the stuff of her life is a great cargo."

ALEX

What?

TOPHER

My dad used to say it to my sister.

I can't remember who wrote it.

ALEX

What is it with you people and poetry?

TOPHER

Thank you, Alex.

ALEX

For what?

TOPHER

Thank you.

(Topher exits SR. Alex watches him leave and goes back to work at her desk. Harriet exits through the upstage door in the enclosure leaving Shae alone. There is a beat before Shae comes DS to the window and looks at Alex as she works. Long beat.)

(Stephen and Roy enter SR causing Shae to exit through the upstage door in the enclosure. Roy is holding a heavy manila envelope.)

ROY

Oh. Excuse us.

STEPHEN

We didn't realize you'd still be here.

ALEX

Not a problem. I'm just about done anyway.

(Pause.)

ALEX

I'm sorry. Did you need me to leave?

STEPHEN

Oh no, of course not.

ROY

No. That's alright.

(Stephen and Roy cross to the SL door and Roy gives three sharp knocks one at a time with a brief pause in between each. A short beat. The door opens and they go in. Lights fade.)

ACT I

SCENE III

(Two weeks later. Lights up on the desk now covered in papers and open books. The diagrams and writing on the whiteboard have become a nearly illegible jumble of notes, lists and arrows. Photographs of different cats are pinned on a piece of corkboard at the top. There should be at least one bengal tiger. Shae scrubs the enclosure at the instruction of Dr. Hearst who stands nearby, directing her. Harriet enters the main playing space SR listening to music and grooving. Hard. Hearst exits through the upstage door. Shae finishes her work and exits the enclosure, entering SR a moment later. Shae picks up a broom and begins sweeping the floor DS of the desk.)

HARRIET

So. Guess what.

SHAE

What?

HARRIET

Guess.

SHAE

No.

HARRIET

I did it.

SHAE

You did what?

HARRIET

And...wow.

Just wow.

I mean, it's like so. Good.

SHAE

What's so good?

HARRIET

Like. I Cannot. Believe. How good.

SHAE

Harriet, what the hell are you talking about?

HARRIET

I listened to it! The whole album. Several times, actually.

SHAE

Oh.

HARRIET

I mean.

Thank you.

Because just...like...wow.

SHAE

Yeah.

HARRIET

Mind blowing.

SHAE

Yep.

HARRIET

No words.

SHAE

Mhm.

HARRIET

And so like...*important.*

SHAE

Harriet-

HARRIET

Do you think he really...did those things? To *her*?

SHAE

I don't know.

HARRIET

(*Confidentially*) And Becky with the good hair?

SHAE

Yeah.

HARRIET

Or is it *gold* hair? Either way, Beyoncé has really outdone herself.

SHAE

Mmm.

HARRIET

Is something wrong?

SHAE

What? No, I'm just tired.

HARRIET

Oh. Yeah, me too.

(*Beat.*)

SHAE

I mean, I'm happy to be helping out but like...

HARRIET

Right.

SHAE

No one is happier to help than me. And I think the work she's doing is...

HARRIET

Great.

SHAE

Great. It's *great*.
Meaningful.

HARRIET

But...

SHAE

How much longer is this going to go on, you know? I have shit to do like everyone else.

HARRIET

It seems like she's making progress.

SHAE

I'm working double shifts.

HARRIET

Dr. Hearst spends a lot of time with her.

SHAE

Taking care of these things is no picnic, you know?

HARRIET

Weren't *you* working with him for a while? One on one?

SHAE

Hearst?

Yeah. He said he could fast-track me to research.

HARRIET

Really? Even though you don't have...?

SHAE

What? A master's?

HARRIET

No. I didn't mean...No.

I mean, maybe you're...

Yeah.

SHAE

Forget it. Doesn't matter.

(Short beat.)

HARRIET

I didn't mean- sorry.

Anyway, I think Alex just needs a little longer.

SHAE
I'm starting to stink.

HARRIET
You don't stink.

SHAE
I smell like catpiss.

HARRIET
I haven't noticed.

SHAE
That's 'cus you do too. (*Ref. The enclosure*) We've all been spending way too much time in there.

HARRIET
They are beautiful though, aren't they?

SHAE
Whatever.

(*Enter Alex SR.*)

ALEX
Benji needs breakfast a little early today.

SHAE
(*Under her breath*) Good morning to you, too.

HARRIET
Oooo, I love Benji! Sweet Benji.

SHAE
Which one is he again?

ALEX
The male bengal tiger. I need him fed before we move him back in for observation this morning.

SHAE
Why's that?

ALEX

He just stares at me through the glass otherwise.
I guess he knows I control the meals.

HARRIET

What a smart leetle kitty.

ALEX

Anyway, if you two can take care of that, it'd be a huge help.

HARRIET

Sure thing. We're on it. Right Shae?

SHAE

Uhuh.

ALEX

Thanks.

(Shae exits SR.)

ALEX

Have you seen Roy or Stephen around this morning?

HARRIET

No, I haven't. I actually don't think I've seen them for like a week.

ALEX

They don't talk much, do they?

HARRIET

If it makes you feel any better, I don't think I've had like one single conversation with Stephen. Ever.

Roy can be really sweet. But like you said- he's so quiet. It's nothing personal, I promise. They're actually just like two big goofballs.

ALEX

What exactly do they do for Dr. Hearst?

HARRIET

Well, I know they used to be his research assistants. But now, it seems like...

I don't mean to sound condescending or offensive or anything.

ALEX

What?

HARRIET

It seems like they're basically just his errand boys at this point.

ALEX

What makes you say that?

HARRIET

Well, I've *literally* seen them deliver his mail.

ALEX

Huh.

HARRIET

What?

ALEX

No, it's just that I've seen them coming and going from his office a lot since I started. Usually with some mail.

Except it looks like the same piece every time. Just an envelope.

HARRIET

Yeah. Like I feel bad for them? But this is what happens when you work for an old white guy.

ALEX

Right.

HARRIET

You wind up just brewing coffee and delivering mail from AARP and listening to like weird stories about "the injins".

(Pause.)

(Hugo enters the enclosure followed closely by Topher. They are both carrying ten gallon buckets.)

HARRIET

Oh crap. I should probably go catch up with Shae.

ALEX

Good idea.

HARRIET

Hey, good talk. We're all really glad you're here.

(Exit Harriet SR. Alex sits and begins looking over some notes. Topher and Hugo are now on opposite sides of the enclosure. There is an exchange in which Topher says something, Hugo stops working and turns around, says something back. The two stand facing each other across the room. Pause. Topher poises to speak again but before he can Alex rises from the chair, knocks on the glass and motions for Topher to come out.)

ALEX

Topher. Two minutes.

(Topher exits through the US door and enters from SR a few moments later.)

Hey, sorry to interrupt. Can I run something by you?

(Topher nods.)

Have a seat.

Is everything okay?

TOPHER

Yep.

ALEX

Okay.

So, I think I might have found something.

I just need another set of eyes.

You sure you're okay?

TOPHER

Yes, Alex, I'm fine.

You found something?

(During the following exchange Alex indicates specific research materials to illustrate her points.)

ALEX

Right. So.

I've been pouring over the spot where most taxonomies diverge into Cats and Dogs.

TOPHER

Canidae and *Felidae*, right?

ALEX

Exactly.

ALEX

In about half the versions of the tree, *Canidae* has 41 species in total. Now these trees *exclude* related species like hyenas or mongooses and make them part of a totally different family.

TOPHER

I guess I always thought of hyenas as big cats.

ALEX

They're subdivided according to only about *half* the trees. The idea is that evolutionary divergence makes them too distantly related to be included with the other cats.

TOPHER

Okay. What about the other ones?

ALEX

The other trees expand that same family to *include* civets, hyenas, mongooses, fossae and a bunch of others.

TOPHER

What the hell is a civet?

ALEX

Doesn't matter. Stay with me.

That means these could contain as many as *four* times the number of species of *Felidae* as the other trees.

TOPHER

But how can that half just decide to group them together when the other half didn't?

ALEX

It's weird, right?

It just comes down to the criteria. One half basically disregards evolutionary relationships and groups them based on physical appearance.

TOPHER

But wouldn't that make the distinctions between species pretty... subjective?

ALEX

Exactly. I've been watching these cats for two weeks and you could argue the differences in their locomotion alone call for taxonomic revision. Lions hunt in packs, they move totally differently when stalking than tigers, who hunt alone. Those two are different from leopards who hunt mostly in trees.

TOPHER

But that's more about behavior, right? Social dynamics. Not about the way they look.

ALEX

The point is, if Joe Schmo scientist is just arbitrarily *choosing* a criterion to classify an animal...

It means there's been almost no attempt to standardize these practices over time.

TOPHER

Wait wait wait. Maybe this is just an issue with this particular family. With *Felidae*.

ALEX

I thought so too. But it shows up everywhere- (*she points to stacks of books, charts, etc.*) bird groups, reptiles...

TOPHER

Fuck.

ALEX

Think about the implications with something like bacteria. They reproduce asexually into hundreds, thousands of individuated organisms.

TOPHER

How do you decide where one species ends and another begins?

ALEX

Or what constitutes difference even within a single species.

TOPHER

Hang on...

ALEX

Am I crazy?

TOPHER

I...

ALEX

If you were to somehow create a new system and reduce the amount of evolutionary divergence in families to a minimum, I estimate 75-90% of current mammal groupings would need to be amended.

TOPHER

Jesus.

Wait, but the shifts would be incremental, right? A species here, a species there.

We're not talking about burning down the entire house?

ALEX

At first, yes. But there's a domino effect. Move one brick, you have to move another and another and another. Move enough bricks and eventually...

TOPHER

You've got a totally different house.

Alex. Do you realize what you're saying? I mean, if you're right about this, then-

ALEX

The order that we impose on all of it, the *concept* of classification, it's...

TOPHER

Precarious.

ALEX

At best.

TOPHER

In need of revision.

ALEX

Drastically so. *Constant* revision.

But that doesn't mean it's irrelevant. On the contrary, it's more consequential than we ever thought.

TOPHER

Have you told Hearst?

ALEX

No. I wanted to make sure this was worthwhile.

TOPHER

Are you serious?

Look, if you want to impress him. I...

Let's just say I think you'll get the job done.

(Enter Harriet and Shae from SR.)

HARRIET

Oh my god oh my god oh my god.

SHAE

We're fucked.

What's going on?

ALEX

We can't find Benji.

HARRIET

(*Beat.*)

What do you mean you can't find him?

ALEX

He's not fucking there.

SHAE

What?

ALEX

We fed him last night before we went home.

HARRIET

And we went out to bring him in and he's not there.

SHAE

In here?

ALEX

No, out *there*.

SHAE

No, I mean you *fed* him in here?

ALEX

No, we fed him out there.

SHAE

Well, did he evaporate? He's a six hundred pound tiger.

TOPHER

Oh shit.

ALEX

What do we do what do we do.

HARRIET

ALEX
 Jesus Christ.

HARRIET
 Oh my god. I'm getting pukey.

SHAE
 The door to his holding house wasn't open.

HARRIET
 What are we going to do?

ALEX
 Wait wait. The door wasn't open? Just now?

SHAE
 No.

TOPHER
 No, it *was* open?

SHAE
 No, it *wasn't*.

HARRIET
 What are we gonna do what are we gonna do.

ALEX
 All you had to do was feed him and bring him in, you fucking idiots.

(Short pause.)

SHAE
 It's not our fault.

ALEX
 Oh no? Whose fault is it? You must have left the latch undone.

SHAE
 Someone...someone must've...*stolen* him.

TOPHER
Stolen him?

ALEX

Don't waste my fucking time.

TOPHER

(With rising fury) No, wait. I want you to say that you think some hooded intruder came in the middle of the night with a fucking burlap sack and quietly *absconded* with the King of the Goddamn Jungle.

HARRIET

Isn't the lion considered King of the Jungle?

TOPHER

FUCK YOU HARRIET.

ALEX

Do you have any idea what you've done? I mean. This could be it. All my research, wasted. Not to mention our jobs and reputations.

SHAE

You're worried about your *research*!?

ALEX

We have to tell Hearst.

HARRIET

Tell Hearst? No no no no no no. Are you out / of your mind?

TOPHER

Wait wait.
Shut up.
Shhh.

SHAE

What?

HARRIET

What is it?

TOPHER

Do you hear that?

HARRIET

Oh / my god.

Is it him? SHAE

Who? TOPHER

Doctor Hearst or Benji? HARRIET

It can't be Benji. / Can it? SHAE

The door. TOPHER

Oh shit. SHAE

(Enter Hugo SR.)

Heyya cats. How's it hangin'? HUGO

(Pause.)
Everything okay?

We can't find Benji. SHAE

What do you mean you can't find him? HUGO

He's gone. We left him in his temporary unit last night and now he's not there. HARRIET

I think we just need to bite the bullet and tell Hearst. ALEX

(Short pause.)

Goodbye. HUGO

(Exit Hugo SR.)

HARRIET

(Crying) He's going to fire us.

SHAE

Goddamn it, you better keep it together, girl.

ALEX

Okay.

If he got out this morning he can't have gone that far. He's probably just wandering around in another enclosure. Get the hell out of here and go look for him.

HARRIET

Go look for him? He eats the flesh of living things.

ALEX

Call one of the guys from control. Tell him to bring a tranq rifle. I'll talk to Hearst.

TOPHER

You shouldn't have to do that alone.

ALEX

He has to know.

Go.

Get out of here and find him.

(They all exit SR, leaving Alex alone. Long beat. The following should happen quickly. She sits at her desk, furious. Rises. Goes to the SR exit. Stops. Turns around, crosses slowly to Hearst's door. She stops. Collects herself. And does a "shave-and-a-haircut" knock. Hearst enters SR.)

HEARST

I heard.

ALEX

You did?

HEARST
Yes. Early this morning.

ALEX
Doctor-

HEARST
Don't.

ALEX
Look-

HEARST
A full grown male bengal tiger.

ALEX
I...

HEARST
They won't find him.

(Doctor Hearst crosses and sits in Alex's chair. Pause.)

ALEX
I take full responsibility.

HEARST
We scoured the grounds.
He's gone.

(Hearst groans weakly and slumps over, as if in pain. It is like watching an angry mourner. Maybe he cries. After a long, uncomfortable beat of this, Hearst's pain intensifies. Alex slowly approaches him.)

ALEX
Doctor.
I am so, so sorry.
We can fix this.

(She tentatively puts a hand on his back. He turns and buries his head in her stomach. She embraces him. It is a

moment of strange liaison. Beat. Shae and Harriet enter through the US door in the enclosure. Lights fade.)

ACT I

SCENE IV

(Later that night. Lights up on Alex sitting at her desk trying to focus on work. Hugo is leaning against the enclosure glass counting out tabs of LSD. Shae is pacing near the SR door. Topher is sitting downstage in a folding chair. Long beat.)

SHAE

Put that shit away, Hugo. No one's in the mood.

HUGO

This is exactly what we all need right now.

TOPHER

If Hearst sees you with that-

HUGO

He wouldn't even know what it is. Besides, we're all probably gonna get fired anyway.

(Short beat.)

ALEX

It's getting late.

TOPHER

He should be back any minute.

SHAE

I don't know how much longer I can stay.

TOPHER

We have to wait for him.

SHAE

I have a dog.

(Short beat.)

ALEX

Let's just give it a few more minutes.

We're fucked. SHAE

Shae. TOPHER

We are. SHAE

Calm down, Shae. HUGO

Not helping. TOPHER

He'll come back and he'll have more information and we'll talk. We'll just talk. ALEX

Talk? SHAE

Yeah. ALEX

He's going to skin us alive. SHAE

It's not *only* our fault. ALEX

Easy for you to say. SHAE

What does that mean? ALEX

We're not all as close to Hearst as you. SHAE

Excuse me? ALEX

SHAE
Don't act all innocent.

TOPHER
Shae.

ALEX
I have no clue what you're talking about.

SHAE
Bullshit.

TOPHER
Shae, back off.

SHAE
Don't defend her.

ALEX
I'm not going to dignify this with a response.

SHAE
Snobby bitch.

ALEX
What did you say?

TOPHER
Woah woah, Shae, what the hell is the matter with you?

ALEX
Shut up, Topher. I can handle myself.

SHAE
Oh *yes* she can.

ALEX
I've never seen someone so fucking poisoned by envy.

SHAE
You don't know me. You don't know shit about me.

ALEX
I know you're not worth the time it would take to embarrass you.

SHAE

And I know you're more than just his little protégé.

(Enter Harriet from SR with a tray of five coffees from Starbucks.)

ALEX

Why do girls like you always assume everyone else has to sleep with their boss to get ahead?

SHAE

Girls like me?
FUCK. YOU.

HARRIET

I hope I got everybody's order right.

HUGO

Here, let me get those for you.

(Hugo crosses to Harriet and takes the coffee. During the following exchange he takes the cups downstage, sets them out on a small table and drops two tabs of acid into Alex and Shae's coffee respectively.)

TOPHER

Everyone just take a few deep breaths.

HUGO

Toph's right. Everybody drink some java and chill the fuck out.

SHAE

I'm good.
I'm over it.
I said what I needed to say.

ALEX

This is not over.
This is not fucking over.

HARRIET

So...is everyone going to Venmo me, or...?

ALEX

Did you hear what I said?

SHAE

Fuck you.

TOPHER

Alex.
Go sit down.

ALEX

Shae.

TOPHER

Sit down. Do you hear me?
Please.

HUGO

Alright. (*Reading the receipt, setting the coffees aside.*) Let's see. Tall pumpkin spice latte for Harriet. Grande black coffee for Topher. Americano for *moi*. Venti black coffee for Alex and tall pumpkin chai with a shot of espresso for Shae.

HARRIET

Actually, I had that one. The pumpkin chai with espresso.

HUGO

Oh.
Really?
Shit.

HARRIET

Yeah. (*Crossing to the table, taking her drink*) You had the pumpkin spice latte, right Shae?

SHAE

Yeah, yeah. Here.

HARRIET

Mmmm. Mine smells so good.

HUGO

Enjoy.

TOPHER

(Crossing to the table) Is this one mine?

HUGO

Yep.

HUGO

Alex? Black coffee?

ALEX

I'm not thirsty.

HUGO

Are you sure?

ALEX

Yes.

HUGO

Okay. I will. Leave it here.

(Enter Roy SR.)

HARRIET

Roy.

ROY

Hi, everyone.

SHAE

What's going on?

TOPHER

Is there any news?

ROY

Dr. Hearst wanted me to let you know he's not coming back in tonight.

ALEX

Where is he?

ROY

Damage control.

SHAE

Have they found Benji yet?

ROY

It's out of our hands.

ALEX

So what are we supposed to do?

ROY

Go home. Get some rest.
You look like you could use it.

TOPHER

What about our jobs? Are we fired?

ROY

I really don't know. Hearst told me to tell you he'll be back in tomorrow morning.

HUGO

Well that clears things up.

HARRIET

Can you call him or something? Obviously you have like *access* to him.

ROY

Look. He was very clear. All I know is I'm supposed to come here, take some pictures of some insurance documents for him and tell you he'll be in *tomorrow morning*.

Now, if you'll excuse me.

(Roy crosses SL to Doctor Hearst's office, unlocks it and enters, closing the door behind him.)

SHAE

I've got a really bad feeling about this.

HUGO

About what? Nothing happened. He didn't tell us anything.

SHAE

About tomorrow morning. He's gonna be here. What's gonna happen tomorrow morning?

HUGO

What do you think he's doing in there?

ALEX

Insurance documents.

HUGO

C'mon, really?

(Ray exits Dr. Hearst's office, locking the door behind him.)

ROY

Go home. You don't need to be here anymore.

(Roy exits SR. Long pause.)

HUGO

Is it just me or should we take this fucking golden opportunity to go in there?

HARRIET

It's just you.

SHAE

Noooo way. I'm going home.

HUGO

Come on. What is it, like 9 o'clock? No one else is here. I guarantee it.

TOPHER

I *really* don't think this is a good idea.
In light of...everything.

ALEX

I'll go.

HARRIET

What?

HUGO

Hey hey, now we're talkin'.

TOPHER

Alex-

ALEX

Hugo's right. Tomorrow might be it for us anyway.
It might be...I don't know. A last hurrah?

TOPHER

It's probably just office stuff.

HARRIET

How would you even get in, Hugo?

TOPHER

Not that it matters, because *none of us* are going in there.

ALEX

Break the lock?

TOPHER

Woah woah.

SHAE

Oh great, add that to the list of charges.

HUGO

Yeah, too risky.

TOPHER

What the hell is happening? Are we planning a bank heist?

HUGO

Oh my god.
There's a master key in the custodial office.

TOPHER

What? How do you know that?

HUGO

Remember that chick.

Lisa.

SHAE

Oh my god. The chick with the...

TOPHER

I still can't believe you had intercourse with a custodian.

HUGO

We'll be in and out in ten minutes. He'll never know we were there.

SHAE

I'm not doing it.

HUGO

Shae. How many times. *How many times* have we wanted to see what's behind that door? This might be our last chance.

SHAE

It's probably nothing. Just an office.

HUGO

Well, I'm going. So you can either join me. Or be a pussy.

HARRIET

That's extremely offensive, Hugo. But you know what? Fine. Challenge accepted.

TOPHER

Are you kidding me, Harriet?
You, of all people...

HARRIET

I can be...daring.
Adventurous.

HUGO

Oh. Um. Speaking of adventures. Uh.
I may or may not have but definitely did accidentally lace your coffee with LSD.

HARRIET

Okay, Hugo.

HUGO

No.

No.

I'm serious. I was trying to bomb *their* drinks, you know, to calm them down. To take the edge off.

But, uh, remember how I got yours and Shae's mixed up?

Ha.

(Pause.)

HARRIET

You put LSD. Like *in* my coffee.

HUGO

It was a mistake...?

SHAE

You tried to ninja-dose me? What the fuck is wrong with you? I can't decide if I'm horrified or really, really impressed.

ALEX

Jesus. Who does something like that? That is not okay, Hugo.

HUGO

Take it easy, you didn't even touch yours.

HARRIET

(On the verge of tears)

You guys.

Am I going to die?

HUGO

No no no. You're gonna be fine.
Normally I'd say we should all trip.
But I think this is a special case.

HARRIET

Oh my god. It's starting.

HUGO

It's been in your system for like 5 minutes.
Breathe. Let it work its magic.

ALEX

Go get the key. I'll stay with her.

(Exit Hugo SR.)

SHAE

Toph?

Let's get out of here.

TOPHER

(Watches Hugo go.) Acchhhh.

Son of a bitch.

I'm staying.

SHAE

What if he's got alarms wired or something?

Shit, what if he's in there right now?

TOPHER

A condemned man fears no censure.

(Lights fade.)

-INTERMISSION-

ACT II

SCENE I

(Lights up on Dr. Hearst's office. The room is clean and meticulously organized. Upstage is a large desk with a high-back swivel chair. A large manila envelope is on the desk. Next to the desk is a filing cabinet. The walls and surfaces are covered with pieces of crypto-taxidermy. Various animal parts put together like the pieces of a grotesque puzzle. A buck head in a wedding dress, a squirrel with bird feet, a turtle with eagles' wings, etc. Alex, Hugo, Harriet, Shae and Topher stand together staring up at the trophies. A long, long beat.)

HUGO

Well.

SHAE

Shit.

HUGO

This is...

TOPHER

Rather sobering.

HUGO

Yikes.

SHAE

What the actual-

HUGO

Fuck.

ALEX

What.

Are we looking at.

SHAE

I *really* don't like this.

TOPHER

I think it's called crypto-taxidermy.

HUGO

Why do you know that?

TOPHER

I read about it somewhere.

SHAE

I told you this was a bad idea.

HUGO

Do you think this is like...

SHAE

I don't feel good.

HUGO

...a sexual thing?

TOPHER

What?

ALEX

Gross.

TOPHER

Maybe it's just...

SHAE

I seriously feel sick.

TOPHER

A hobby. People have hobbies.

HUGO

A hobby?

TOPHER

I'm just saying. People work with wood, collect stamps.
Basketweaving.

HUGO

Yeah, bro. This is definitely in the basketweaving family.

ALEX

Do you think this is legal?

SHAE

Legal wouldn't make it any less fucked up.

TOPHER

I don't see any endangered species or anything. I mean, I don't think there's any law...

SHAE

Law? What about *natural* law?

TOPHER

Well, if we're gonna go there, you could argue penicillin violates natural law.

HUGO

Dude. Not a valid comparison.

TOPHER

All I'm saying is it's the twenty first century. People do weird, inexplicable things. They go to sex parties, refuse to vaccinate their children. They buy almond milk.

ALEX

Hugo's right. I don't think it's a hobby.
It looks more like a compulsion.

(Beat.)

HARRIET

Am I dead.
Am I among the deceased.

HUGO

Oh god. Here she goes.

SHAE

Harriet. Harriet.

Is she okay?

HUGO

She'll be fine, just keep an eye on her.

SHAE

Look, I think we got what we came for. We saw...this.
We should just go.

HUGO

Sack up, Shae. We're here, we might as well poke around a little. Maybe he's got like a pelican head on a cheetah or something.

ALEX

He never mentioned this to any of you?

SHAE

Oh yeah we talked about it all the time. That one was my idea.

What if he comes back? Do you have any goddamn idea what he'll do?

HUGO

Nope.

SHAE

Neither do I.

HUGO

Relax, Roy said he's not coming back tonight.

SHAE

What if he's wrong?

(Alex takes out her phone and starts taking pictures.)

What? What are you doing?

ALEX

I've never seen anything like this.

SHAE

What are you gonna do with the photos?

ALEX

I don't know, maybe I can use them for something. From a scientific standpoint this is weirdly compelling.

SHAE

Compelling?

ALEX

He's rearranging and manipulating...everything.
It's sort of. Awesome.
In the real sense of the word.

TOPHER

It's probably considered art in some circles.

ALEX

There is something beautiful about it, don't you think? It makes you forget what any of these things looked like in the first place.

SHAE

Something is wrong with you.

ALEX

(Still engrossed) It all seems so...fluid.

TOPHER

It's also not a bad, you know. Insurance policy. The photos.

HUGO

What?

TOPHER

I mean, if he's so desperate for no one to be in here. Maybe a couple of pictures give us some leverage. Given the current situation.

SHAE

Wait what?

HUGO

Holy shit. You salty Sally.

HARRIET

Behold. The hall of presidents.

HUGO

You know, I actually prefer her this way.

HARRIET

Thank you, delegate from Chile.

HUGO

I can't wait to tell her she said that.
What's on his desk, Alex?

ALEX

Uh. Not much...
Just some papers and books and stuff.

HUGO

Anything interesting?

ALEX

Um. There's a calendar...
Some feed orders.

SHAE

What the hell are you doing? You think he won't notice his stuff isn't in the right order?

(Alex picks up a paper from the desktop.)

ALEX

(Reads) Item: Black Angus Top Round - 150lbs.
Looks like that's just for one cat.
Seems excessive for a week.

TOPHER

Screw it.

(Topher crosses to the desk.)

SHAE

Don't do it, Toph.
Don't open that drawer.

TOPHER

It's just a couple books.

*Ansel Adams' Basic Techniques of Photography.
A Brief Introduction to International Trade Law.*

Wait there's a cd.
Oh my god.

*(Topher holds up a cd case. Enya's PAINT THE SKY
WITH STARS.)*

HUGO

This motherfucker listens to Enya!?

TOPHER

No wonder he keeps the door locked.

Hey, this looks cool.

*(Holding up the book) The Healer Within: Foundations of Traditional Chinese
Medicine.*

HARRIET

To feel the Chi the monkey must first cleanse his meridian.

(Beat.)

TOPHER

Are we *certain* she's going to be okay?

(Hugo approaches a taxidermy piece on the filing cabinet.)

HUGO

What. Are. You.

ALEX

Topher. Look at this.

TOPHER

Let me see.

ALEX

*(Reads) Dear Dr. Hearst, we would like to extend our heartfelt thanks for your
annual donation of \$350 to the National Young Arts Foundation. Donations like
yours continue to help children of all ages discover-*

TOPHER

Wow.
What a guy.

HUGO

I didn't understand him before. Now I don't have a fucking clue.

TOPHER

It does seem a little. Incongruous.

SHAE

He donates to some charities. What's wrong with that?

HUGO

He donates to a children's charity and I'm standing next to an otter with four duck feet stapled to its body.

SHAE

So he donates to charity and he's got a weird ass hobby that he hides from people. We all have shit like that. Contradictions.

HARRIET

(Sincerely moved) I see you all.
As if for the first time.
You're so beautiful.

HUGO

Do you think she'll journal about this later?

ALEX

(Ref: the taxidermy) Roy and Stephen have to know about this, right?

SHAE

Okay so he hides his weird hobby from *some* people. Mystery solved. Now let's go, please.

HARRIET

I will never be the same.
We will never be the same.

TOPHER

Hang on.

(Topher picks up the manila envelope.)

SHAE

Do. Not. Fucking. Think about it.

ALEX

Wait, is it sealed?

TOPHER

Yeah. There's no address, though.
Feels...really heavy.

HUGO

Woah woah. Yeah.
She's probably right. If we open that he'll know for sure someone was in here.

HARRIET

Open it! Open it!

SHAE

What the hell? Shut up, Harriet!

HARRIET

*(Sings) Sorry, I ain't sorry
Sorry, I ain't sorry
I ain't sorry, nigga, nah*

SHAE

Nope. Nope. I'm done.
This white girl is a liability.
Put the envelope down, Toph.

ALEX

Hang on. Maybe there's a way to reseal it. See if there's a letter opener in one of those drawers.

HUGO

Okay okay. You guys, seriously. Shae's right.
I think this might be. You know. Too far.

TOPHER

Are you kidding me? What happened to *sack up, Shae?*

HUGO

Topher. Dude. Look at me.
I don't feel good about this.

TOPHER

What's the difference? You said it yourself, we're all going to get fired anyway.

HUGO

It's his mail. You're tampering with his mail.

SHAE

It's probably just bills or invoices or some boring shit like that.

HUGO

She's right. We have no reason to think there's anything interesting in there.

TOPHER

Let's find out for sure.

HUGO

Do you wanna add criminal mail theft charges to a gross incompetence lawsuit?

TOPHER

Criminal mail theft? What's wrong with you? Why are you being like this?

HUGO

Topher. I *cannot* be charged with a federal crime. Do you hear me?

TOPHER

Oh come on, don't be so dramatic.

HUGO

It will be really, *really* bad for me.

TOPHER

What does that mean?

HUGO

You know what it means.

TOPHER

I have no clue, actually.

HUGO

I don't wanna go into it, okay?

TOPHER

So that's it? You got your cheap transgressive thrill and now / you're just calling it off?

HUGO

Hey. Asshole.

I've served time in prison. Hearst knows.

(Beat.)

TOPHER

Oh.

SHAE

Really?

HUGO

Yes. As in. Formerly incarcerated.

SHAE

No way.

I mean, look. It's all good.

TOPHER

Wait. As in...?

HUGO

Yes.

TOPHER

Hugo.

HUGO

Just put it down, Topher.

TOPHER

Jesus, man.

I didn't...know.

SHAE

Why didn't you ever tell us?

HUGO

Hearst agreed to keep it a secret when he hired me. I guess the cat's out of the bag.

HARRIET

(In a cartoony jailbird voice) So what are you in for, kid?

SHAE

Please shut up, Harriet.

HARRIET

*(Sings) I fought the law
And the law won /
Robbin' people with a six gun
I fought the law
And the law won
I needed money 'cus I had none
I fought the law
And the law won*

TOPHER

Nope. Not funny, / Harriet.

SHAE

She's tripping balls, / she doesn't even know what she's saying.

ALEX

Do you want me to take her outside / or something?

TOPHER

Harriet. Look at me.
Shut. The fuck up.

HUGO

Hey. It's done. It's in the past.
And I really don't wanna to talk about it right now.
Or ever, to be honest.

TOPHER

Of course. I'm just so, *so* sorry.

HUGO

All good, man. It's-

TOPHER

No. Hey. Seriously.
 It's not okay.
 I should never have-
 I don't- *we* don't think of you any differently.
 I promise.
 We love you, Hugo.
 I love you. I *love* you.
 I love you. Man.

(*Long beat.*)

HARRIET

GAAAAYYYYYYY.

SHAE

Alright. That's it. This bitch needs to go.

HARRIET

This *bitch*?
 (*ref. Shae*) Who 'dis bitch?

TOPHER

Oh my god.

SHAE

Okay, you know what?
 You're going to LSD jail.

HARRIET

When will I be eligible for parole?

TOPHER

Please remove this woman before I cut her tongue out with this letter opener.

HARRIET

(Sings quietly)
I'm stuck in Folsom Prison
And time keeps draggin' on...

(Exit Shae and Harriet. Long beat.)

HUGO

So I guess this was pretty messed up, huh?

ALEX

Yeah.

TOPHER

I. Um.

HUGO

Yeah. Yeah, for sure.
Love you too, bro.

TOPHER

...

HUGO

Okay. I will. See you all tomorrow.
Goodnight.

TOPHER

(As Hugo exits, almost inaudible) I'm sorry.

(Pause.)

ALEX

Are you okay?

TOPHER

Me? Yeah.
Yep.
Totally.
Good.

ALEX

You sure?

Um. TOPHER

... ALEX

I have to go. TOPHER

(Exit Topher. Alex steps back and takes in the office. She slowly approaches the desk, looks to the door. She picks up the manila envelope and tears it open. Lights fade.)

ACT II

SCENE II

(Early the next morning. Lights up on Alex sitting at her desk with several documents from the envelope. She has not slept. After a while she checks her phone. Harriet pokes her head in through the US enclosure door and sees Alex. She shuts the door. Beat. Harriet enters SR, startling Alex who then scrambles to conceal the documents.)

ALEX

Jesus.

HARRIET

Sorry.

ALEX

Have you seen Dr. Hearst?

HARRIET

No.

ALEX

Are you sure?

HARRIET

Yeah.

Are you okay?

ALEX

I'm uh. Fine.

Did you get home safe last night?

HARRIET

Yeah.

I don't remember a whole lot, though.

That's like criminal, right? I should sue him or something.

ALEX

Uh. Yeah. Yeah.

HARRIET

Seriously, men always get away with stuff like this. Drugs, sex. Anything that's remotely consent based is just like beyond their capacity to understand.

Are you sure you're okay?

ALEX

I mean. Yeah.

Considering.

HARRIET

Right, Benji. You know, it's funny.

I slept so well last night. Like a drunk baby. Ha.

I mean, I would never *ever* do that again. The drugs.

But did we...what exactly did we do last night?

ALEX

Oh. Um.

Not much really.

HARRIET

I lost most of it. I got home and realized how tired I was.

God, I'm so pissed at Hugo.

ALEX

Yeah.

HARRIET

I remember standing...somewhere. I looked down and there was grass.

Clay. Like being on the plains or something.

ALEX

Really?

HARRIET

I felt safe, though. And I looked out and saw...

ALEX

Saw what?

HARRIET

I. Uhh. I don't remember. But I wasn't afraid. I wasn't afraid of anything.

ALEX

Sounds really nice.

HARRIET

And I felt like this warm sense of wonder. It was sort of euphoric, actually.

ALEX

Wow.

HARRIET

But it was still a huge violation of my trust and Hugo can go to hell.

Did I like *do* or *say* anything that I should know about?

ALEX

...

Nope.

It was all pretty.

On brand.

HARRIET

Oh good. I mean like I figured as much, just wanted to make sure.
How was your night?

ALEX

Oh.

Fine.

Good.

(Long beat.)

HARRIET

So I guess this is it, huh? Judgement Day.

ALEX

Yes.

(Hugo enters SR.)

HUGO

What's up, fools.

HARRIET

Hi, Hugo.

HUGO

Here she is! Trippy McTripperson.

HARRIET

Let me begin by saying what a totally reprehensible thing you did to me last night.

HUGO

Oh, lighten up.

ALEX

You're in a good mood. Why are you in a good mood?

HUGO

(With performative gravity) When the revolutionary is led to his death does he not know the weightlessness of vindication?

HARRIET

You've been spending way too much time with Topher.

ALEX

So you're what, Robespierre in that scenario?

HUGO

I'm not going to lie to you. I have absolutely no idea who that is.

HARRIET

Hugo. Don't you dare tell me to lighten up. I'm a *victim*.

HUGO

Oh yeah? I victimized you by *accidentally* giving you an experience of intellectual and spiritual expansion (which you desperately needed)?

HARRIET

Do not. Gaslight me.

HUGO

Here we go.

HARRIET

You can't do things like that to people, Hugo.

HUGO

Okay, okay. I'll apologize before I'm washed away in a flood of righteous tears.

I'm. Sorry.

HARRIET

That was not sincere.

HUGO

Jesus Christ, grow up Harriet. I made the gesture.

HARRIET

It was LSD. It's *illegal*. How about if I called the police, Hugo?

(*Beat.*)

HARRIET

What?

ALEX

Come on, Hugo. Apologize. To *both* of us, actually. That thing was meant for me.

HUGO

Alright. I'm really sorry. That was totally unfair and over the line.

HARRIET

Yes, it was.

HUGO

I will never accidentally give you drugs again.

HARRIET

Thank you.

HUGO

Have you guys seen Topher this morning?

Not yet.

ALEX

No.

HARRIET

I called him like four times.

HUGO

(Enter Shae SR.)

Hi, Shae.

HARRIET

Hey, have you seen Toph?

HUGO

No. And I don't care.

SHAE

You look like shit.

HUGO

Well, thanks for noticing. Someone made me sneak into my boss's hellscape of an office last night and I couldn't sleep afterward.

SHAE

Wait what?

HARRIET

Why does everyone hate me this morning?

HUGO

I'm *scared*, okay? I'm fucking scared.

SHAE

Scared? Of what?

HUGO

Of...of...just forget it.

SHAE

HUGO

Shae. It's okay. He's just weird. That stuff is just...stuff. It's just a weird hobby.

HARRIET

What stuff?

SHAE

No, Hugo. I didn't like it at all.
I didn't like it.

HUGO

He's harmless, Shae.

SHAE

Nobody else has a really bad feeling about this?

HARRIET

Hang on, what are we talking about?

ALEX

Yeah. I do.

(Enter Hearst SR. Long beat.)

HEARST

Hello, everyone.

ALL

Hi, hello, good morning doctor, etc...

HEARST

I have news about Benji. Where's Topher?

HUGO

We don't know.

HEARST

You all look as though you've seen a ghost.
I'm pleased to tell you Benji has been recovered.

SHAE

Oh.

HUGO

Are you sure?

HEARST

Yes. Thankfully no harm has come to him or anyone else, as far as we know. We've shipped him to a nearby specialist for testing. Just a precaution.

Alex, I'm sorry to say your research will have to proceed without him. After he's cleared he'll be sent to a sanctuary in England.

ALEX

Did you say *proceed*?

HEARST

I'm afraid it was the only way to prevent a total cessation of your research here. Having said that, my intention is to redouble our efforts and continue to support Ms. Harding's valuable work.

ALEX

Does that mean...?

HEARST

Provided we update our security, remain vigilant and grovel to the appropriate parties, you'll have a new Bengal tiger in the rotation and an option to extend the project.

ALEX

Extend? For how long?

HEARST

Until you publish. And for as long as your work continues to bear fruit. We could even arrange for you to do your post-doctoral fellowship here.

ALEX

Oh.

HEARST

I know it's a lot to consider. There's no need to decide immediately. Plenty of time.

HUGO

Doctor, are we...? Do we...?

HEARST

I have no intention of dismissing anyone. By the looks of you, the weight of your guilt has been more than sufficient punishment.

(Beat. Shae sobs. Harriet goes to comfort her.)

HEARST

Oh, there there, now.

HARRIET

I think she needs a minute.

HEARST

Please.

(Exit Harriet and Shae SR.)

HEARST

Chin up. It was a mistake. Let's put it behind us and move forward, shall we? Miles to go. Work to be done.

HUGO

I'm sorry, Doctor. I don't understand.
The WCS or Panthera or some organization didn't...demand you take action? Against us?

HEARST

Would you prefer I terminate you, Hugo?

HUGO

No. No. I just don't understand.

HEARST

I took full responsibility. It happened under my supervision, after all. It's a poor workman that blames his tools.

HUGO

Right, but I haven't heard anything from-

HEARST

Hugo. Please. It's over.
All we can do now is focus on preventing future incidents.

Okay.

HUGO

HEARST

Go home. Get some rest. It'll be a few days before we can reopen, anyhow.

HUGO

Really?

HEARST

Go home.

(A beat. Hugo exits SR.)

ALEX

Doctor.

HEARST

I know this wasn't your fault.

ALEX

No-

HEARST

Your work is important. You shouldn't be punished for another's mistake.

ALEX

I need. To speak with you.

HEARST

Oh?

ALEX

You should sit down.

HEARST

Ah. I know what this is about.

ALEX

...

HEARST

What happened earlier. I'm sorry, it was highly inappropriate and...unbecoming. A moment of weakness. Forgive me.

ALEX

That's not what I'm talking about.

HEARST

Oh. What is it then?

(Alex walks slowly to her desk, removes the manila envelope and holds it in both hands. A long beat.)

HEARST

Consider very carefully what you're about to say.

ALEX

I have no idea what to say.

HEARST

Then say this.

I am far, far out of my depth.

Go on, say it.

ALEX

...

HEARST

Say it.

ALEX

I am far, far out of my depth.

HEARST

The situation is nuanced beyond my comprehension.

ALEX

Shut up.

HEARST

Say it.

ALEX

The situation is nuanced beyond my comprehension.

HEARST

Good.

I trespassed. I stole private property. I have committed multiple felonies.

ALEX

Tell me this is a mistake.

HEARST

Say it. *I trespassed.*

ALEX

I trespassed-

Fuck you.

HEARST

This could be very bad for you, Alexandra.

ALEX

I didn't do anything.

HEARST

Complicity is in the eye of the beholder.

ALEX

Where is he?

HEARST

Where is who?

ALEX

Benji.

HEARST

I told you. You won't see him again.

(A beat.)

ALEX

Where are the rest of them, are they safe?

HEARST

I'm afraid there's nothing you can do.

ALEX

I can talk to the police.

HEARST

And tell them what?

ALEX

That you're hiding in plain sight.

HEARST

Tell me, what evidence will you produce to support that claim?
Let me be clear. You will not leave this room with that envelope.

ALEX

...

HEARST

Try to understand.
I'm answerable to certain. Parties.
If you threaten their business I can promise you the retribution will be
grave.

ALEX

Don't threaten me.
You piece of shit.

HEARST

Calm down. You've no idea what it is you're objecting to.

ALEX

You sell the body parts of stolen tigers.

HEARST

To a high-end, niche clientele.

ALEX

And my work gives you a steady source of...product.

HEARST

It's true. I won't deny it.
But do you know what I find *most* compelling about your work, Alex?

ALEX

I have a pretty good idea.

HEARST

You study the classification of organisms. Meanwhile your generation is preoccupied with this...this...*social* classification. You urgently revise your identities. Day in, day out. Add a letter to this acronym. Discard that word. Wear the badge of your group. Moralize. Look down at the other herds from the self-righteous high ground. But constructing a category of living things is like trying to catch smoke. By the time you curl your fingers around it, it will have already changed its shape to evade you. Identity does not want to be found. Whoever you thought you were today, you won't be tomorrow. The same is true in science.

ALEX

We're not talking about my work. We're talking about your business.

HEARST

The two aren't unrelated. If nature were liberated from category we would be free to take our rightful place in it.

ALEX

And what place is that?

HEARST

You know the answer. The top spot, of course. The head of the table. How else do you arrange the value of living things but by first placing yourself at the center?

ALEX

Hierarchies have a way of being top-heavy. Ask the tiger. Ask anything sold to the edge of extinction by the so-called dominant group.

HEARST

Hierarchy is the only immutable product of nature. To deny it is futile. My business embraces it. That's all. The tiger devours the stag, I devour the tiger.

ALEX

I look at you and I'm ashamed. Ashamed to be a member of the species that bends over backwards to justify its cruelty.

HEARST

The trouble with your classification, Alex, is it makes it far too easy to attribute all the good in the world to one group and all the evil to the other.

ALEX

Classification protects life. It always has.

HEARST

Does it? If the category of an animal can be changed on a whim, then so can its value. But if the category is removed altogether, then all are equally insignificant and therefore in equal need of protection. All are vulnerable, worthy of study, worthy of preservation. We could have saved the Dodo, for God's sake! Or any of the hundreds of species driven to extinction every day by exclusionary classifications.

ALEX

I...

HEARST

Think of the tremendous good we could do, Alex. If we accepted that all life exists in an endless sequence of change and transformation.

ALEX

Doctor.

HEARST

We're more alike than you think. We want the same thing.

(Beat.)

ALEX

We are not the same.

HEARST

I'm not a monster, Alex. You know me.

You know me.

Better than most.

ALEX

I...I thought...

HEARST

Alex.

Alexandra.

You have a chance to be part of something. It may seem...distasteful to you at the moment. But all revolutions spit in the face of convention.

ALEX

Doctor-

HEARST

Full partner.

ALEX

What?

HEARST

You will have absolute parity in business decisions and in the trajectory of this institution.

ALEX

I-

HEARST

Or, if you like, you will never hear another word about my clients. We pretend this never happened and I fast track you to management.

ALEX

Management?

HEARST

That's right. I can put you on the board. I can give you authority. *Real* authority. No more begging for funding, no more fighting for scraps. *Your* zoo.

ALEX

What- what about my research?

HEARST

Did you think you were finished? Not even close. We can make this the foremost research facility in the country. The cutting edge. Imagine what we could do, Doctor Harding.

(Beat.)

ALEX

I need to sit down.

HEARST

No, you don't.

ALEX

I thought you were a scientist.

HEARST

I'm more than that.

ALEX

You actually think you're different? You aren't a trailblazer. You aren't some pioneer. You're a fucking fraud and a criminal.

It makes you feel powerful, doesn't it? Transcendent, even? It's convincing when you play God. You have two of the most important qualities.

HEARST

Which are?

ALEX

Vanity and cowardice.

HEARST

I'm a coward now, am I?

ALEX

You're terrified. You're a fucking child.

HEARST

Ha.

ALEX

What could possibly be more threatening to you than me?

HEARST

...

ALEX

I see now why you really brought me here.

HEARST

I admire you, Alex.

ALEX

You read my proposal. You brought me here because it scared you.

HEARST

Don't be ridiculous.

ALEX

I was- how did you put it? A lower creature but a formidable one.

HEARST

I never said that.

ALEX

Capable of overturning the natural order.

HEARST

...

ALEX

You brought me here because you were afraid of me.

HEARST

I brought you here because you are exceptional.

ALEX

You have no idea.

HEARST

I know how valuable you are.

ALEX

Everything you stand for, your "ethos". It's fear.

HEARST

...

ALEX

You'd never give me any real authority. To feel safe you need to be in control. I know what I am to you. One of those things on your wall.

Something to be anatomized, disassembled and manipulated. Neutralized through study.

HEARST

You've committed a crime.

ALEX

But you can't get rid of a threat like that by violence or captivity.

HEARST

And why's that?

ALEX

Because it will always stare back at you through the glass.

(Beat.)

I'm a tiger.

HEARST

Enough.

ALEX

I'm a tiger.

HEARST

That's enough.

ALEX

I'm a motherfucking tiger.

HEARST

Enough!

(Hearst explodes and struggles to restrain himself. A long beat.)

HEARST

This is not a difficult decision, Alex. I'm offering you a chance to realize your potential. Your immense potential.

ALEX

Stay where you are.

HEARST

You know, you're not the only one I've approached.

ALEX

Who?

HEARST

What does it matter? We both know you're of a different order altogether.

(Beat.)

HEARST

Take some time to think it over. They stumble that run fast.

ALEX

I don't need time. *(ref. the envelope)* I still have this.

HEARST

How much? How much will it take to convince you? Name your price.

ALEX

You have nothing left. No other tools.

HEARST

I have other tools. But you won't like those.

ALEX

If you touch me, you'll condemn yourself.

HEARST

I don't know if you recall, but a recent accident set a predator loose.

ALEX

That never happened. You made it up.

HEARST

And yet you still heard the sound of his footsteps.

(Lights fade.)

ACT II

SCENE III

(Later. Lights up on Hugo in Alex's chair flipping through one of her research texts. Topher enters SR.)

HUGO

Dude, where the hell have you been? Are you okay?

TOPHER

Yeah, I'm fine.
I was at home.

HUGO

I sent you like a hundred texts.

TOPHER

Where is everyone?

HUGO

Hearst sent us all home for the day.

TOPHER

So what are you doing here?

HUGO

I couldn't relax. I was really worried about you, man.

TOPHER

You waited for me?

HUGO

Yeah.

TOPHER

Why?

HUGO

We should never have gone into his office. It was stupid.

TOPHER

Yeah. It was.

HUGO
I'm sorry about all that.

TOPHER
It's not your fault.

HUGO
Yeah, I know.
But I kinda felt like the ringleader.

TOPHER
Don't worry about it.

HUGO
But hey, we didn't get fired! Oh shit, I guess you weren't here for that.
Did you know we didn't get fired?

TOPHER
I hadn't heard that actually.
Good.

HUGO
Fuckin' A it is!

TOPHER
Look, Hugo. I need to talk to you.

HUGO
Oh. Dude. Don't worry about it. I've decided I'm not gonna hide it from
people anymore. It doesn't change who I am.

TOPHER
It's not about that, Hugo.

HUGO
Why do you keep saying my name like that?

TOPHER
It's about what I said the other night. In Hearst's office.

HUGO
What'd you say?

TOPHER
You really don't remember?

HUGO
Remember what?

TOPHER
Oh. Um.
You know what? Never mind.

HUGO
No, c'mon.

TOPHER
No seriously, I'm good.

HUGO
You sure?

TOPHER
Yeah. It's okay. Time for a quick game? It's been a while.

HUGO
Yeah, why not. Whose turn to guess?

TOPHER
Mine.

HUGO
Aww shit. The doctor is in.
Okay.
Got it.

TOPHER
Is it a living thing?

HUGO
Yeah.

TOPHER
Is it a person?

HUGO

Yes.

TOPHER

Is it someone you know personally?

HUGO

Goddamnit. How do you always get the first three right?

TOPHER

I guess I just know how you think.

HUGO

That you do, my friend. That you do.
Three down. Shoot.

TOPHER

Is it your brother Stuey?

HUGO

Nope. Good guess, though.

(Roy and Stephen enter through US enclosure door at a run. Out of breath, harried, they exit and reenter SR a moment later.)

ROY

Have you seen Hearst?

HUGO

Um-

STEPHEN

Hearst. Have you seen Dr. Hearst?

HUGO

Uh no, I thought he went home for the day.

(Roy and Stephen exit.)

HUGO

Nice to see you, too.

TOPHER
That was weird.

HUGO
Something must be on the loose.
Too soon?

TOPHER
Can I just keep guessing?

HUGO
Okay. What's up with you?

TOPHER
What do you mean?

HUGO
You're all sullen. And twitchy.
And not your usual I'm-a-grown-ass-white-guy-that-owns-salamanders
twitchy.

TOPHER
Hugo.

(Beat.)

I don't want to ruin this.

HUGO
Ruin what?

TOPHER
This.

HUGO
Okay.

TOPHER
Because *this* means a lot to me.

HUGO

Dude. How much time have we spent together in this goddamn place? How much random shit have we hashed out in that reptile house? In those weird hallways that have the like very dark zoo slash suicide cult lighting.

Whatever it is. You can tell me.

TOPHER

I'm not good at this part.

HUGO

What part?

TOPHER

The talking part.

HUGO

Toph, you have the biggest vocabulary of anyone I've ever met. It's a little annoying.

TOPHER

That's not going to help me with this.

HUGO

Okay.
I'll help you.

TOPHER

How?

HUGO

How about this? We'll play another game.

TOPHER

No, I don't think that's a good idea.

HUGO

Come on, here we go. Is it something you did?

TOPHER

Hugo.

HUGO
Come on. Is it something you did?

TOPHER
No.

HUGO
Is it something you didn't do?

TOPHER
Yes.

HUGO
Cool. Are you keeping track?

TOPHER
What?

HUGO
Of questions. Duh.

TOPHER
Fine. Two.

HUGO
Is it something you regret not doing?

TOPHER
Hugo, I-

HUGO
Is it something you regret not doing?

TOPHER
Yeah. Three.

HUGO
Does it have to do with work?

TOPHER
No.
Yes.

HUGO
Help me out.

TOPHER
No, not really.

HUGO
Does it have to do with someone at work?

TOPHER
Yeah.

HUGO
Great. Great.
That's five?

TOPHER
Hugo, please-

HUGO
No. Hey, it's okay. Making progress.
Does it have to do with Hearst?

TOPHER
No, it's not- can we please not do this?

HUGO
If you're not gonna be a man and just / tell me then-

TOPHER
Look, it's not like a *binary* thing, okay? Yes or no isn't going to-

HUGO
Oh shit. Does it have to do with me?

TOPHER
Come on, knock it off.

HUGO
It does, doesn't it?

TOPHER
I'm done playing.

Yes or no.

HUGO

Yes. Yes.

TOPHER

Yes.

HUGO

Just me?

TOPHER

Yeah. You're the only thing.

(Pause.)

HUGO

Cool cool. I think maybe that's enough for now.

TOPHER

You don't know how this feels.

HUGO

You're, uh. You're okay.

TOPHER

No. No, I'm really not.
I can tell you with conviction that I am not okay.
Hugo.
Hugo.

HUGO

I'm right here. You don't need to say my name.

(Pause.)

TOPHER

Hugo.

HUGO

Hey. Come on. Cut it out.

TOPHER

I.

HUGO
 Don't. Don't.
 This isn't who you are.

TOPHER
 ...?

HUGO
 This isn't who I am.

TOPHER
 Hugo.

HUGO
 Topher.

(Pause. Topher closes the distance to Hugo very slowly. Hugo is at first in a kind of defensive stance. The closer Topher comes the more Hugo softens. Their lips meet with great care and fragility. Short beat. Hugo exits SR. Long pause.)

(Alex enters through the US enclosure door, carrying a backpack. Topher on the verge of collapse, turns and sees Alex. Turns back immediately. After a moment, he turns again and waves to Alex who waves back. Topher exits SR. Alex hurriedly comes DS to the window, looking out into the space, making certain she's alone. She turns US and begins photographing various parts of the enclosure with her phone. Alex turns to see Shae entering from Dr. Hearst's office. They see each other. Long beat. Alex exits through the US door. Shae is paralyzed. Alex enters SR. A beat.)

SHAE
 Hey.

ALEX
 ...

...

SHAE

ALEX

Is he in there?

SHAE

No.

ALEX

How long?

SHAE

What?

ALEX

How long have you known?

SHAE

About what?

ALEX

Shae.

SHAE

What?

ALEX

You're really going to do this?

SHAE

I have no idea / what you're talking about.

ALEX

I know, Shae. I know about Hearst.

SHAE

What the hell / is going on?

ALEX

There's not enough time, okay? There's not enough time left for me to sit here and pretend that our roles are magically reversed and suddenly *I'm* the fucking idiot.

Shae. Please. When.
When did you talk?

SHAE

The day after you started.

ALEX

Jesus Christ.

SHAE

Do you want me to apologize?

ALEX

I want you to fucking *think*.
Think about the repercussions.
Think about his buyers.
Think about what it looks like. What it actually looks like. When he does those things.
I don't know what he told you, how he manipulated you...

SHAE

Do you want to know why I listened to him? Why I didn't call the cops or report him or just run away screaming?

ALEX

No.

SHAE

Well, I'm gonna to tell you.

ALEX

I don't want to hear it.

SHAE

Because the truth is that no matter what I do or how hard I work or who I try to please I'm always at the fucking bottom.

And he came to me first.

ALEX

Shae. You're not at the bottom of anything.

SHAE

What do you know about it?

ALEX

Don't tell yourself that to make it easier.

SHAE

He came to me first.

ALEX

...

SHAE

That's right. He talked to me before he talked to you.

ALEX

Shae. Listen to me.

SHAE

This is how it feels.

ALEX

Shae. Whoever you think I am, whatever you think I've done- it's *him*. He's been playing us against each other since I started.

SHAE

It doesn't change the timeline.

ALEX

Shae. He came to you first because he knew you were weak.

SHAE

Fuck. You.

ALEX

Sorry, I didn't mean that.
Malleable. He knew you were malleable.

SHAE

Is that what you call someone who just got a promotion?
Who's...who's...upwardly mobile?

ALEX

Listen to me. You haven't thought this through. People go to prison for this.

SHAE

It's too late.

ALEX

No, it's not. We can stop this. We can burn all this down. We can ruin him.

SHAE

He made me do something bad.

To prove I was loyal.

And let me tell you something, Alexandra, I didn't blink a goddamn eye.

ALEX

Shae. What are you talking about?

(Roy and Stephen enter SR.)

ROY

You have to leave. Now.

ALEX

Stay where you are.

I'll fucking scream.

STEPHEN

Alex. He's coming. It's not safe.

ALEX

Is that what he told you to say?

ROY

No.

ALEX

I know what you really do for him.

ROY

We have to go.

STEPHEN

Please. Take my advice. Get out of here.

(Roy and Stephen exit SR. Pause. Alex begins to feverishly gather research from her desk and shove it into her backpack.)

SHAE

What are you doing?

ALEX

My research. I have to save as much as I can.

SHAE

Stop.

ALEX

I think I might still be able to salvage the project.

SHAE

You're not leaving.

ALEX

What are you talking about?

SHAE

Hearst has video. Of you with Benji. With the other cats.

ALEX

What are you saying?

SHAE

Your name is on everything. All the correspondence. All the invoices. Contracts.

ALEX

What?

SHAE

He told me to doctor them.

ALEX

You. *Doctored* them.

SHAE

Like a motherfucking PhD.
If you tell anyone, you'll never convince them you weren't involved.

ALEX

Bullshit.

SHAE

You have a choice here. Don't be an idealist.

ALEX

I don't know what he said to you, what he promised you, but-

SHAE

Alex. I can't go back now.

ALEX

Yes you can. We can fix this.

SHAE

No. It's done.

ALEX

Nothing he can give you will be worth it.

SHAE

That's not true.

ALEX

What, then? Why are you doing this?

SHAE

He said you'd ask that.

"Stay, Mephistopheles, and tell me what good will my soul do thy lord?"

"Faustus, it will enlarge his kingdom".

(Hearst enters slowly through the US enclosure door wearing the loose and bloody pelt of a freshly skinned bengal tiger. His dark silhouette is fixed between the two women. Beat. Blackout.)

END OF PLAY