

PAY THE WRITER

A New Play

By Tawni O'Dell

Representation:
Gurman Agency LLC
Susan Gurman
susan@gurmanagency.com
212-749-4618 Ext. 3

© 2022 by Tawni O'Dell
All Rights Reserved

Cast of Characters

CYRUS HOLT

BRUSTON FISCHER

LANA

YOUNG CYRUS

YOUNG BRUSTON

LEO

JEAN LUC

HOMELESS WOMAN

Scene 1

Curtain rises revealing a cyclorama of New York City at twilight when the world is not completely dark or entirely lit. Renowned literary agent, BRUSTON FISCHER, stands alone center stage. He's conservatively outlandish, dressed with style and flare, a man of consequence and wit that wants to be noticed but not stared at. His wardrobe is part of his persona and always features a pocket square. As the indigo sky fades into lavender and the sun begins to rise, the lights of the buildings flicker out and the silence of dawn becomes filled with the din of the awakening city. We stay in this established visual and aural environment for a moment. Bruston's phone rings. He takes the call and goes to work.

BRUSTON: *(on his phone)*

Bruston Fischer. That's your counter offer? Please don't waste my time with those numbers. *(Pause.)* Your imprint had no problem coming up with three million dollars for the memoir of a twenty-year-old TikTok star that no one read so don't tell me you don't have the money. Mm Hm. Well, for starters, a memoir requires that you be old enough to have memories. Piece of career advice, when it comes to books you can always count on the appeal of great storytelling wrapped around beloved universal themes but the snarky ravings of a snowflake best known for shrieking Ice Spice songs and advising where to get the best tattoos while glamping through Europe . . . not so much. *(Pause.)* Mm Hm. I see. All I know is by this time next year you can be the editor who discovered the summer's biggest beach read or the editor who passed on it. One will be living in Hudson Yards; the other in Paramus.

BRUSTON ends his call and is picked up by a vera light or spot which escorts him down center to address the audience. The cyc goes to black.

BRUSTON

I'm a literary agent. I know you know what an agent is: a person who acts on behalf of another person. We're all born with agents; they're called mothers. Unfortunately for some of us they often demand an emotional commission we can't afford to pay. *(Pause.)* I represent writers. When I first started out in my profession, I had the good fortune to lunch once with an extremely powerful publishing grande dame -- yes, she was great friends with Jackie O. She adored writers, but she warned me against them. She said to think of them as feral animals. Big cats, like tigers. You can find them fascinating, and admire them from afar, and even fantasize about cuddling up to one of them, but you can never let one in your house. *(Beat.)* I let one in.

Scene 2

Curtain rises revealing legendary African American novelist CYRUS HOLT standing in front of floor-to-ceiling windows in his lavish condo gazing intently at a panoramic view of Central Park. CYRUS is a charismatic literary bad boy whose behavior is tolerated because of his extraordinary talent, his humor, and his innate decency. The contents of the room are minimal and presented in an abstract fashion but must include signs of his fame i.e. posters of his book covers, framed photos of him with celebrities and politicians, shelves displaying his awards. BRUSTON enters carrying a high end leather portfolio and joins CYRUS at the windows.

CYRUS

I never get tired of this view.

BRUSTON

I remember when you bought this place. You told me how your great great grandfather traveled across an ocean trapped in the inky bowels of a slave ship, and how your father spent his life toiling in the onyx depths of the earth, and how sometimes the jungle was so thick in Nam you felt like you'd been buried alive in a fecund tomb. This view represented the black man's triumph over darkness.

CYRUS

That sounds like something I'd say. I'm so full of shit.

BRUSTON takes papers out of his portfolio and gives them to CYRUS to look over.

BRUSTON

You're my only client who won't e-sign.

CYRUS makes a looping gesture with his index finger

CYRUS

This is not a signature. This is finger painting. A man's identity . . .

BRUSTON

I don't have time for one of your rants about how technology has destroyed the human soul. And by the way, you have a lot of nerve constantly renouncing everything modern yet you live with a millennial. (Pause.) By choice.

CYRUS

I wish you wouldn't call her that.

BRUSTON

She calls you Boomer. Where is your lovely child bride, by the way?

CYRUS

Heather isn't a child. And she never got to be a bride. We didn't have a real ceremony when we tied the knot.

BRUSTON

Right. I remember. She was too busy what with prom and studying for her SATs.

CYRUS

Now she wants a wedding. I told her nothing elaborate, but she's insisting I wear white tie and tails. I objected at first but then I got to thinking I could buy instead of rent and hold onto it for my funeral someday.

BRUSTON

Top hat?

CYRUS

There won't be room. I'm having my ego buried along with me.

CYRUS waits for BRUSTON to respond to his joke. When he doesn't it begins to dawn on him that BRUSTON is upset.

CYRUS

Come on. That was funny.

BRUSTON

You better write it down before you forget it. Put it in your next novel.

The two men continue to talk without looking at each other as BRUSTON becomes distracted by his phone and CYRUS surreptitiously takes out a notepad and writes down the joke.

CYRUS

I'm thinking of getting together with Leo. I haven't seen him for a while.

BRUSTON

That's nice.

CYRUS

It's not like it's easy for us to get together.

BRUSTON

Oh, no. He lives on the upper *East* Side.

CYRUS

Phones work both ways. He could call me. But he'd tell you he's busy. It's not easy living in a fool's paradise where you've never had to work a day in your life or even make your own dinner reservations.

BRUSTON

He never had to.

CYRUS

I gave him everything. And don't say except my time or attention. I did what I could. Maybe I wasn't a very good father and that's why he turned out to be a disappointment, but I choose to blame Lana.

BRUSTON

There's a blast from the past. How long has it been since you've seen her?

CYRUS

Twenty years give or take. Leo's graduation.

BRUSTON

If I remember correctly dancing with her at the party led to the two of you spending a month at a bungalow in Bali.

CYRUS

Yea. (*smiling at the memory*) It ended badly, though. Everything with her ends badly.

BRUSTON

But you usually enjoy the time leading up to the disaster.

CYRUS

What are you saying? I might have a good time partying in the lounge of the Titanic and that should make up for the drowning later?

BRUSTON

You've never been able to get rid of her. She's in your blood.

CYRUS

She's in my blood all right. Hepatitis L.

BRUSTON puts away his phone and begins gathering up the contracts.

CYRUS

That's it? You're leaving?

BRUSTON

I have a very busy day. I don't have time to sit around listening to you talk about yourself.

CYRUS

Why are you in such a bad mood? (*Beat.*) Are you still mad at me?

BRUSTON

Are you still mad at me? Listen to the way you talk. You sound like a five year old. (*throwing a tantrum*) Yes! I'm still mad at you! If I was having a birthday party I wouldn't invite you! You don't seem to grasp how serious this is to me. I'm always the first person to read your work. I can't believe you sent it to someone else before me. And to send it to that . . . that . . . ridiculous, arrogant, narcissistic . . .

CYRUS

Jean Luc can't help any of that; he's French. And he's a genius in his own right. He's the only translator I trust. I want to be assured he's going to do this book.

BRUSTON

He translates all your books. Why would this one be any different?

CYRUS

Do you remember how excited I was when I saw that first French edition? To realize my work had transcended my own language? I remember the first time we went to Paris, my first duck confit, my first white burgundy, my first French . . . ah, Giselle . . . Monique . . . Sophie . . .

BRUSTON

I've heard all the Paris stories, Cy, and lived a few of them.

CYRUS

I don't understand why you haven't been able to track him down? You know he's always available to me when he's working on one of my novels. Why is he blowing me off?

BRUSTON

Have you been listening to anything I said?

CYRUS

You know how I feel about my French readers.

BRUSTON: (*giving up*)

You're a god there.

CYRUS

You're supposed to say, "Here, too."

BRUSTON and CYRUS stare down each other. BRUSTON won't say it.

CYRUS

Okay. I'm not a god here. Here I'm the black author on every American Lit syllabus kids try to avoid reading.

BRUSTON

Nice try but humility has never been your strong suit.

CYRUS

I know. I'm also the author of the Pulitzer-prize-winning novel about racism in the military during the Vietnam War no one really cared about until it was made into a Spike Lee joint starring Michael B. Jordan and Nicki Minaj.

BRUSTON

No one cared about? It was an international bestseller and won every award under the sun. Look where you live, Cyrus. Do you really expect me to feel sorry for you?

CYRUS

I still spend most of my time at my apartment in the Village.

BRUSTON

Good for you. You have two homes. I have one, and I'm about to lose it. I'm going through one of the most traumatic times in my life, and you don't even think to ask how I'm doing.

CYRUS

How are you doing?

BRUSTON

I've lived in that building over half my life. I can't imagine living anywhere else. I feel about that street the way people feel about their hometowns.

CYRUS

You mean it's an ugly, backward, unbearably dull shit-hole full of small-minded, badly-dressed homophobes who almost drove you to suicide?

BRUSTON

Not *my* hometown, per se.

CYRUS

And you're sure there's no way you can afford to buy?

BRUSTON

You wouldn't believe what they're asking. There was a time I could have easily managed it, but . . . you know why I can't.

CYRUS

I've never told anyone.

BRUSTON

I know, and I appreciate that.

CYRUS

Remember when we decided to make all this official? You drew up a one-page contract on a sheet of notebook paper. We agreed we would never lie to each other and whatever we said to each other would be completely confidential like a confessor to a priest.

BRUSTON

You're lying to me now. About this book. You won't let me read it. You won't tell me what it's about. You've put me in a terrible position with your publisher. (*Pause.*) I guess this is as good a time as any to tell you I've come to an important decision about that old scrap of paper. Since you haven't seen fit to share this latest book with me I'm not going to represent it.

CYRUS: (*getting angry*)

Come on, Bruston. Be serious.

BRUSTON

You don't need me. You have a longstanding relationship with your editor. I negotiated the advance before you began writing this book. Any lawyer can look over the contracts and advise you.

CYRUS

You've threatened to quit on me before.

BRUSTON

Quit *on you*. Interesting choice of words. Implying by *me* quitting I'm letting *you* down. I'm not quitting on you; I'm simply quitting. The implication being you've let me down.

CYRUS: (*losing his temper*)

How have I let you down? Have I ever thought about getting a different agent? Have I ever written a bad novel?

BRUSTON

How would I know? Maybe you have written a bad novel.

CYRUS

You're the one who's acting like a child.

BRUSTON

No, I'm not. I'm acting like an old man.

CYRUS

You're not old.

BRUSTON

That's how I've been feeling lately. Old. Obsolete. At this point in my life things were supposed to be easier, not harder. Instead I'm apartment hunting like I'm still that rube fresh off the bus. I'm losing my ardor for my industry. Publishers care more about writers' politics and Instagram numbers than they do about their ability to write. Have you seen the new slogan for Audible Books: Listening is the New Reading?

CYRUS

I've seen it. It's like saying sitting on your fat ass is the new walking.

CYRUS returns to the windows.

CYRUS

Bruston ...

BRUSTON

Yes, Cy.

CYRUS

Look.

BRUSTON joins CYRUS at the windows.

CYRUS

Somewhere out there is the street where we met. Do you remember?

BRUSTON

Of course.

CYRUS

Do you believe in fate?

BRUSTON'S phone rings. He takes the call as . . .

Scene 3

Cross fade into New York City street locale using the original cyc but it's now late at night. Angry disjointed voices shouting obscenities and homophobic epithets are heard off stage. YOUNG CYRUS rushes on stage, a satchel slung over one shoulder, and stops short.

YOUNG CYRUS

Hey! What the hell's going on here?

YOUNG BRUSTON, his face bloodied, staggers on stage.

YOUNG CYRUS

Oh, hey, man. Let me help you. You want to go to a hospital?

YOUNG BRUSTON

No, no, I'm fine.

YOUNG CYRUS

You don't look fine.

YOUNG BRUSTON

I'll be fine.

YOUNG CYRUS

What was that all about?

YOUNG BRUSTON

Apparently, they don't like pocket squares.

YOUNG CYRUS

I heard what they were shouting.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Then you know everything. Then there's no reason to talk about it. (*Pause.*) Weren't you at Random House earlier? I passed you in the hall.

YOUNG CYRUS

Yea. I saw you. Yea, that was me. You work there?

YOUNG BRUSTON

No, I just pass through periodically carrying huge stacks of manuscripts for fun. (Pause.) I'm sorry. That wasn't nice. Being punched in the face brings out the sarcasm in me. (*bursting into tears*) I thought if I moved to a big city I'd be surrounded by enlightened people.

YOUNG CYRUS

I don't know where the hell you got that idea.

YOUNG BRUSTON

You probably think I deserve all those names they were calling me.

YOUNG CYRUS

Why? Because you're crying?

YOUNG BRUSTON

Real men don't cry.

YOUNG CYRUS

Bullshit. I cry all the time. Learned how in the army. Learned a lot in the army. How to digest dog food. How to hike hundreds of miles with my feet covered in jungle rot. How to fall asleep while terrified. How to kill people. And I learned how to cry.

YOUNG BRUSTON

You were in Vietnam?

YOUNG CYRUS

Nah. I learned all that at boot camp. (Pause.) Sorry. Recalling the horrific brutality of man brings out the sarcasm in me.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Why were you at Random House?

YOUNG CYRUS

Trying to get my book published.

YOUNG BRUSTON

You wrote a book?

YOUNG CYRUS

You think because I'm black I don't know how to write?

YOUNG BRUSTON

I didn't say that. Some of our country's greatest writers are black.

YOUNG CYRUS

Right. All three of them. I bet you love Richard Wright.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Native Son is an incredibly powerful novel.

YOUNG CYRUS

The courtroom scene? Please. That man needed an editor with some balls.

YOUNG BRUSTON

So did Tolstoy.

YOUNG CYRUS

No argument there.

YOUNG BRUSTON

You've read Tolstoy?

YOUNG CYRUS

Because I'm black I'm not supposed to read Tolstoy?

YOUNG BRUSTON

Has anyone ever accused you of being defensive?

YOUNG CYRUS

What's that supposed to mean?

YOUNG BRUSTON

So you're a writer?

YOUNG CYRUS

I've written something.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Is it about the war?

YOUNG CYRUS

Hell, no. That I will never write about. This is just about shit, you know. Life.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Who's seen your book?

YOUNG CYRUS

Two editors. One said it was too black and the other said it wasn't black enough.

YOUNG BRUSTON notices YOUNG CYRUS studying him.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Oh, no. No, no, no. I know what you're thinking. I'm sorry but I can't help you get your book published. Look. Most people think they can write a book. They're wrong. Then there are the people who actually succeed in writing a book. Once they do, they think it's a great book. They're wrong again. It's probably not even a good book. It's probably a bad book.

YOUNG CYRUS

Yea, yea. I get what you're trying to say. You're assuming my book is bad.

YOUNG BRUSTON

I'm just saying the odds are against you. That stack of twenty manuscripts you saw me carrying --- they were all rejects.

YOUNG CYRUS

So read it. If you don't like it you don't have to help me.

YOUNG BRUSTON

That's what everyone says but they don't mean it. You're also going to tell me it won't bother you if I don't like it. That you'll understand. That you won't develop a deep, abiding hatred for me and track me down and beat me to a pulp.

YOUNG CYRUS

Seems you already got enough people doing that. Never mind. I thought editors were supposed to help writers.

YOUNG BRUSTON

God no. Editors care about books. They don't care who writes them.

YOUNG CYRUS

Then who does? Who helps writers?

YOUNG BRUSTON takes a moment to ponder this question.

YOUNG BRUSTON

All I can promise is I'll read it.

YOUNG CYRUS

That's all I ask.

YOUNG BRUSTON

And if it's good, who knows? Maybe I can help you. Even if I can't get anywhere at my house, I know the editor at Holt, Rinehart and Winston who published Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*. She's an exciting new black writer. It didn't sell well but The Times gave her a glowing review.

YOUNG CYRUS: (*unimpressed*)

I read her book.

YOUNG BRUSTON

What did you think?

YOUNG CYRUS

She has potential. But I'm better. (*Beat.*) Cyrus Holt.

YOUNG BRUSTON shakes hands with YOUNG CYRUS.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Bruston Fischer.

YOUNG CYRUS reaches into his satchel, brings out his manuscript, and hands it to YOUNG BRUSTON, who walks down right as lights fade elsewhere. He begins reading the manuscript as lights come up on YOUNG CYRUS standing behind him off to one side. YOUNG CYRUS will be the voice of what YOUNG BRUSTON is reading.

YOUNG CYRUS

They said she snapped but I never believed it. Are human psyches really as brittle as kindling? When some ill-defined outline of a woman with no color in her kills her baby and her man leaving them in pools of scarlet is it because she made a break with who she was before or is it because the world finally took notice of who she'd been all along? My mother didn't snap. She emerged. She happened. And when she did, if anyone had been paying attention, they would have noticed the sound is never sharp; it's the wet sucking whisper of quicksand swallowing a foolish bird.

Lights out on YOUNG CYRUS. YOUNG BRUSTON, amazed and visibly moved, looks up from the pages and stares into the night.

YOUNG BRUSTON

My God. He can write.

Black out.

Scene 4

Immediate restoration of lights up on an upscale hotel lobby bar. JEAN LUC sits alone nursing a glass of wine with the bottle on the table. He's a rakish Frenchman dressed with casual elegance and wearing an expensive scarf. BRUSTON enters.

JEAN LUC

It's good to see you, mon ami.

BRUSTON

Don't mon ami me, you sadistic little frog.

JEAN LUC

Ah! Frog is it, you obsequious parasite.

BRUSTON

Euro trash.

JEAN LUC

Agent.

BRUSTON

I can't believe you're here in New York, and you've been ignoring Cyrus.

JEAN LUC

I haven't been well but then again, none of us are well. The disease is called life and every day it brings us one step closer to our demise.

BRUSTON

Spare me your existential bullshit.

JEAN LUC

Women love it, you know? They may say no at first but a simple shrug and a, "C'est la vie, ma chérie," and they're putty in my hands.

BRUSTON

Silly putty, maybe.

JEAN LUC

Sit down. Have a drink.

BRUSTON

I'm not staying.

JEAN LUC

That's it? Right to business? No small talk? No how is your fabulous life?

BRUSTON

I don't care about your ridiculous life. I only care about your treatment of Cyrus. You'd be nothing without him.

JEAN LUC

He'd be nothing without me. An author is only as good as his translator.

BRUSTON

In another language. Not his own. Cyrus Holt is one of the most gifted writers of his generation. You know that.

JEAN LUC

Of course I know that. I would have never translated any of his books if I didn't think so. I have artistic standards.

BRUSTON

You translated *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

JEAN LUC

I wanted a beach house in Mallorca.

BRUSTON

Why have you been hiding from Cy?

JEAN LUC

I haven't been hiding. A coward hides. I'm a ????????. I've been avoiding him.

BRUSTON

Why?

JEAN LUC

What can I say? You've read the book.

BRUSTON: (*caught off guard*)

Why . . . well, yes . . . of course.

JEAN LUC: (*truth dawning on him*)

You haven't read the book? Ah, it's beginning to make sense now.

BRUSTON

What is?

JEAN LUC

He sent it to me first.

BRUSTON

No, he didn't. I've read the book.

JEAN LUC

What's it about?

BRUSTON: (*scrambling*)

A man . . . who . . .

JEAN LUC: (*delighted*)

You're making me so happy. You haven't read the book. Admit it. This conversation goes no further unless you admit he gave the book to me first. To me, not you. He gave it to me. He wants to know what I think. Not you . . .

BRUSTON

All right! Yes! He gave the book to you first.

JEAN LUC

Really? You must feel terrible.

BRUSTON

I don't care.

JEAN LUC

Then you really have no idea what it's about?

BRUSTON

No.

JEAN LUC studies BRUSTON carefully before continuing.

JEAN LUC

The book is bad.

BRUSTON

What do you mean it's bad?

JEAN LUC

It's not good.

BRUSTON

I don't understand. What's wrong with it?

JEAN LUC

It's not a significant book. It's not important. In the past he's written about provocative socio-political issues and grave injustices to mankind. This...this is fluff.

BRUSTON

Cyrus Holt wrote fluff? That's not possible. What's really going on here?

JEAN LUC

I didn't like it. I didn't like what it was about.

BRUSTON

You translate crap if the price is right.

JEAN LUC

I expect crap from crappy writers but this . . . this was a betrayal.

BRUSTON

So you've been avoiding Cyrus because you don't have the balls to tell him you think the book is bad?

JEAN LUC

Oh, I have the balls.

BRUSTON

You have no balls.

JEAN LUC

I have big balls.

BRUSTON

None of this matters. Cyrus told me he doesn't think you should translate the book since you didn't have the decency to respond to him.

JEAN LUC

Ha! What a sad, transparent lie. He'd never use a different French translator. He respects me. He cares what I think. I'm going to tell him the truth. The book is bad. He shouldn't publish it.

BRUSTON gets in JEAN LUC'S face, eventually grabbing him by the scarf.

BRUSTON

You listen to me, you ungrateful French turd. I'm going to set up a meeting between the two of you, and you're going to tell him how much you love the new novel, and if you do or say anything that upsets him I will make it my personal mission to destroy your career. I will smear your name with every publisher, editor, agent, and author I know across the globe. When I get done with you, you'll be translating a "Ten Signs of Diabetes" pamphlet into Urdu.

JEAN LUC: (*unflustered*)

A hundred million people speak Urdu.

BRUSTON releases JEAN LUC.

JEAN LUC

Why do you care so much about this book? Is it because he won't let you read it?

BRUSTON

I don't care about it any more than I care about his others.

JEAN LUC

I think you do. (*Pause.*) You really don't know what it's about?

BRUSTON

I'll call you with the time and place to meet Cyrus, and you *will* show up. And you won't upset him.

JEAN LUC

He's a big boy. He can take care of himself.

BRUSTON

Not always.

BRUSTON walks downstage into light to address the audience while JEAN LUC continues to drink in half light that fades to darkness.

Scene 4a

BRUSTON

I love the French. I do. Not *that* one. (*Pause.*) I always wanted to go to Paris from the time I was a child. I never told anyone except my mother. I knew she would understand. She understood everything about me. She was the one who started my love affair with books. She always had a battered paperback in her apron pocket and whenever she had a free moment she'd pull it out and read. When I got old enough she started passing the books on to me despite my father's objections. Books were for sissies, according to him. She'd agree to his face but in private, she'd tell me I should keep reading above all else. When I asked her why it was so important, she'd smile and say one word: escape. The night my father beat me up after hearing a rumor in town about me and another boy, she didn't stop him and when he threw me out of the house and told me to never come back, she stood behind him and nodded. For a very long time I lived with the belief that my mother didn't love me. Then one day it occurred to me that maybe she loved me more than I could possibly comprehend. Maybe she meant "escape" as a verb, not a noun. (*Beat.*) I finally made it to Paris. With Cyrus.

Scene 5

YOUNG BRUSTON sitting at an outdoor Parisian café with the midday skyline of Paris behind him featuring the Eiffel Tower. There's a bottle of wine on the table and a few shopping bags at his feet. YOUNG CYRUS joins him, late for their lunch and hung over.

YOUNG CYRUS

Have you ever heard of this shit? Absinthe?

YOUNG BRUSTON

Yes, I've heard of it.

YOUNG CYRUS

Have you ever tried it?

YOUNG BRUSTON

No.

YOUNG CYRUS

Don't. Just don't. I mean, it felt good at one point but . . . I don't remember a thing. Not a damn thing. And that's a shame because that girl was fine. You know you're really missing out on something not having sex with women.

YOUNG BRUSTON

I've been told the same thing about not having a Volkswagen.

YOUNG CYRUS

I could get used to it here. Being a rock star. Even though I've had two bestsellers I'm still nobody in America. I guess writers there can never be important because writers aren't important, but here they actually admire you. And not because you make money doing it. They admire your courage. Seriously, that's what that girl said to me last night. Even translators are rock stars. That Jean Luc. The women he gets. Can you imagine someone getting tail because they're a literary translator in America? Imagine that conversation. Some nerdy little guy and some smoking hot chick. (*sexy girl's voice*) What do you do for a living? (*nerd's voice*) I just translated Anna Karenina into English. (*sexy girl's voice*) Oooo. Let me take my clothes off and . . .

YOUNG BRUSTON

Please, Cyrus. Save some of this highbrow insight for the panel at the book fair tonight.

YOUNG CYRUS

These things make me crazy. I never know who I should pretend to be. Half of them want me to talk like the Reverend King, the other half want me to talk like J.J. on Good Times. Dy-no-mite! You're lucky you're in the closet.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Yes. I was just thinking the other day how wonderful it is I can't let anyone know who I really am and must live in shame and fear all the time.

YOUNG CYRUS

All I'm saying is at least you have the option of hiding who you are.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Right. Me and Liberace.

YOUNG CYRUS

No matter how many times I come here, I still can't believe I'm here. Cyrus Holt. Black man. Son of a coal miner. Sitting in Paris. The toast of the town.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Your father's very proud of you.

YOUNG CYRUS

How do you know that?

YOUNG BRUSTON

He told me.

YOUNG CYRUS: (*skeptical*)

My father . . . told you . . . he's proud of me.

YOUNG BRUSTON

His exact words were, Thank God that boy can write because he wouldn't have lasted two days in the mines.

YOUNG CYRUS: (*laughing*)

Oh, man. My dad. That's for sure. I never knew he figured that out.

YOUNG BRUSTON

I wonder why he thought you wouldn't make a good miner? Because you're afraid of the dark, or does it have something to do with your work ethic?

YOUNG CYRUS

What's that supposed to mean?

YOUNG BRUSTON

You've already missed two interviews with major newspapers. You blew off a lunch with . . .

YOUNG CYRUS

I'm a writer. No one works harder at writing than I do. That other stuff isn't important.

YOUNG BRUSTON

That other stuff is how you make a living.

YOUNG CYRUS

Writing novels is how I make a living.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Being a writer is your art; being an author is your job. The greatest novel ever written doesn't exist unless people are reading it. Otherwise it's a bunch of paper in a drawer.

YOUNG CYRUS

A bunch of paper in a drawer? That's what you think about my work?

YOUNG BRUSTON

You know that's not what I think about it but the fact is your books don't live unless I sell them. Getting them published is just the first step. There's still a lot more work to be done.

YOUNG CYRUS

You want gratitude? Is that it? Gratitude for doing a job for which you get paid? I thank you all the time. You're on this trip because I brought you along.

YOUNG BRUSTON

You are on this trip because I made the arrangements with your French publisher, set up the interviews, contacted the festivals . . . I don't want gratitude. What I would like is a little appreciation now and then which is different than gratitude.

YOUNG CYRUS

No, it isn't.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Yes, it is, oh, mighty wordsmith. Gratitude is: Thank you for mowing my yard. Appreciation is: Wow, you did a good job mowing my yard.

YOUNG BRUSTON gestures at the bottle of wine and towards YOUNG CYRUS in his stylish suit and expensive watch.

YOUNG BRUSTON

This all costs money.

YOUNG CYRUS

I don't care about money.

YOUNG BRUSTON

You better start because you don't have any left.

YOUNG BRUSTON takes a velvet jewelry box out of one of the shopping bags and slides it across the table to YOUNG CYRUS.

YOUNG BRUSTON

This was delivered to the hotel this morning. You can't afford this. Who is she?

YOUNG CYRUS takes a beautiful gem-encrusted bracelet out of the box and admires it

YOUNG CYRUS

It's for Lana.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Lana?! You just got through a hideous divorce. For months I've listened to you rant about how much you hate her!

YOUNG CYRUS

Sometimes I still think . . .

YOUNG BRUSTON

This is what I'm talking about. You don't think!

YOUNG BRUSTON snatches the bracelet and returns it to the box.

YOUNG BRUSTON

You need to write the book about Vietnam.

YOUNG CYRUS

Don't start on me. I'm never writing that book.

YOUNG BRUSTON

I have publishers salivating over the possibility of this book. Everyone agrees it's time for the definitive novel about the war, and you're the only one who can write it.

YOUNG CYRUS

What if I can't write it?

YOUNG BRUSTON

Some great artists are controlled by their talent; others take control of their talent.
Which one are you? I know which one your father would want you to be.

YOUNG CYRUS

I don't want to think about the war.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Have you ever found a way not to think about it?

YOUNG CYRUS

The deepest emotions I've ever felt in my life I felt in Nam: not while I was making love to a beautiful woman, or watching one of my books climb up the best seller list, or holding my newborn son in my arms, but in a jungle on the other side of the world killing people who had never done a damn thing to me. It's the worst thing that's ever going to happen to me . . . but I guess it's also the most significant.

Slow fade to black.

Scene 6

As lights are restored we discover BRUSTON and CYRUS at a bustling Vietnamese restaurant. They sit at a table with various dishes spread in front of them. CYRUS picks listlessly at a bowl of Mi Quang noodles with his chopsticks while BRUSTON eats.

BRUSTON

Are you going to spend the entire dinner in sullen silence? Why did you want to see me?

CYRUS

Why did you accept my invitation?

BRUSTON

It's a divorce. We have to figure out how to split up the furniture.

CYRUS

I want the La-z-boy recliner and the George Foreman grill.

BRUSTON

Done. I can't believe you haven't asked me about your precious Jean Luc. I found him. He's here in New York.

CYRUS: (*eagerly*)

What did he say about the book?

BRUSTON

Book? What book? We didn't talk about a book.

CYRUS

What did he say?

BRUSTON

His comments were vague and idiotic, but he definitely didn't like it. He said it was bad, and he called it fluff, and when I pressed him to be more specific he said he didn't like what it was about.

BRUSTON waits for CYRUS to react, expecting him to be angry. Instead, CYRUS roars with laughter.

BRUSTON

You're not upset?

CYRUS

If Jean Luc liked this book, it would mean I failed completely.

BRUSTON

I don't understand. But I don't want to understand. I don't care anymore.

CYRUS

This might cheer you up: I did something stupid last night.

BRUSTON

I'm stunned.

CYRUS

I called Lana.

BRUSTON

Why on earth would you do that?

CYRUS

I didn't mean to. The phone started to dial ...

BRUSTON

How many times have I explained to you phones don't dial by themselves.

CYRUS

Mine does sometimes.

BRUSTON

What did Lana say when your magic phone accidentally called her phone?

CYRUS

Cy, is that you?

BRUSTON

I mean, what did you talk about?

CYRUS

I said, Yea, it's me. Then she said, What's going on? And I said, Not much.

BRUSTON

Riveting. Like being in a Noël Coward play. (*Beat.*) Why did you call her?

CYRUS

I guess I got some messed up idea in my head I'd like to see her again. We talked for a little bit then she started bringing up the past. She could never let anything go.

BRUSTON

You mean like the other women, the lying, the drinking, the disappearing for months at a time . . . ?

CYRUS

That's my process you're talking about.

BRUSTON

Oh, yes. Your process. (Pause.) Has it really been twenty years? That's a long time.

CYRUS

Yea. I'm sure it's a good thing we're not getting together. It would be depressing. She'd be old now. Maybe she got all wrinkly. Maybe she got fat.

BRUSTON looks up from his meal and sees LANA enter the restaurant. She's a stunning, statuesque woman in her 60s who approaches them with the slinky confidence of a runway model. CYRUS notices the look of surprise on Bruston's face and twists around in his seat to see what's happening. He jumps up as LANA approaches spilling the noodles into his lap. LANA stops in front of CYRUS and gives him a devastating smile.

LANA

Hello, Cy. Is that Mi Quang all over your crotch or are you just glad to see me?

CYRUS, embarrassed, covers his pants with a napkin.

CYRUS: (to Lana)

What are you doing here?

LANA

You called me.

CYRUS

It was an accident.

LANA

You don't call ex wives at two in the morning by accident.

CYRUS

Who do you call at two in the morning by accident?

LANA

If it was an accident why did you stay on the phone and talk to me?

CYRUS

I was being polite.

LANA

You? Be polite?

BRUSTON: (*interrupting*)

Excuse me. I'm sure the patrons of Madame Pho's are enjoying this immensely, but why don't we all sit down? (*Beat.*) Hello, Lana.

LANA

Hello, Bruston.

Some jostling and rearranging takes place. CYRUS and LANA childishly don't want to sit together. BRUSTON ends up squashed between the two of them and they speak over him.

CYRUS

How'd you find me?

LANA

I went to your home and some girl told me you were here.

CYRUS

She's not some girl. She's my wife, Heather.

LANA

That's right. I forgot you married her. She told me you were here.

CYRUS

Did you tell her who you are?

LANA

She didn't ask.

CYRUS

You showed up at my home looking for me and my wife didn't ask who you are?

LANA

I told her my name. Maybe you've mentioned me at some point. I am the mother of your son.

CYRUS: (*scoffing*)

My son. My son doesn't care about me.

LANA

Well, whose fault is that?

CYRUS

Yours.

LANA

Mine? Oh, please, Cyrus. You aren't still clinging to this pathetic notion that I turned him against you? You did that all on your own. Even before we were divorced.

BRUSTON: (*interrupting*)

If I may . . . I think you were both bad parents.

CYRUS and LANA: (*in unison*)

Shut up, Bruston.

LANA

And it's not true that he doesn't care about you. He may have trouble showing it, but I know he adores you.

CYRUS

Leo adores cashmere.

BRUSTON

And chili cheese fries. He always loved chili cheese fries.

LANA

So what if your son has good taste in clothes and appreciates the finer things in life? You're a writer, for God's sake. You're an artist. People praise you for your tenderness and humanity. Not for being tough and manly.

CYRUS

There are manly writers. What about Ian Fleming? Ernest Hemingway?

BRUSTON

Jacqueline Susann.

LANA

Ernest Hemingway blew his brains out.

CYRUS

So what?

LANA

Maybe you have to be mentally ill to be a writer.

CYRUS

Here we go. Bring it on. Let's hear how hard it was being married to a writer. How we're all crazy and selfish.

LANA

You forgot nasty and cheap.

CYRUS

It might be misery living with us when we're poor, but you sure don't mind spending our money when we hit it big. You don't mind living in a restored brownstone, sending your darling son to fancy private schools, and giving away my money to your charities

LANA

I earned that money. Being your wife was a full time, exhausting, dangerous job. Worse than being a coal miner.

BRUSTON

But far less sooty.

LANA

I gave up my own dreams for you.

CYRUS

You gave up nothing because of me. I never stopped you from doing anything.

LANA

Being a dancer required 110 percent of myself physically and mentally. How was I supposed to be at my best at an 8 a.m. audition when I was up all night getting stoned and listening to you go on and on about what you wanted to write next and then having wild sex?

CYRUS

You didn't seem to mind it while you were doing it.

LANA

Of course I didn't mind it. I loved you.

CYRUS

I loved you, too.

LANA

I put you first. Then I got pregnant.

CYRUS

Blame Leo, blame me. The fact is you weren't good enough to make it on Broadway.

LANA: (*stunned by the hurtful remark*)

This was obviously a mistake. I thought maybe you needed me.

CYRUS

Needed you for what?

LANA

I don't know, Cy. You called me.

CYRUS

It was an accident.

LANA

The only other time you accidentally called me in the middle of the night since we've been divorced was when *The New York Times* gave that terrible review to *Losing Daylight* . . .

An ominous silence falls over the table.

CYRUS

You should go.

LANA

It was fifteen years ago. You've won two National Book Awards and a Pulitzer Prize since then. You can't possibly still be upset because one critic didn't like one of your books?

BRUSTON

Actually, it was a lot of critics.

CYRUS and LANA: (*in unison*)

Shut up, Bruston!

LANA

No one's brilliant all the time.

CYRUS

I said you should go.

LANA

So now you're mad at me? It's my fault you got a bad review? I wasn't even around when you wrote that book.

LANA stands to go.

LANA

I thought I'd get emotional seeing you again. We'd remember the good times. Instead all I remember is why I left you.

CYRUS

You didn't leave me, bitch. I left you.

LANA: (*flying into a rage*)

Bitch?! You want to start the name calling? You want to get into a battle of words with me, Mr. Writer?!

BRUSTON breaks up the fight.

BRUSTON

Please, stop. We don't want to do any of this here. Those words are hate crimes now.

A tense moment passes before LANA makes the decision to leave. LANA exits.

BRUSTON: (*to Cyrus*)

You're not an innocent passenger on the Titanic. You're the iceberg.

Cross fade out of restaurant as Bruston's office is revealed.

Scene 7

Bruston's office is elegant yet lived in with an imposing antique desk, an overstuffed vintage chair for visitors, and shelves bursting with books and manuscripts. The walls are hung with portraits of authors and framed book covers. BRUSTON paces while on a Bluetooth call.

BRUSTON: (on Bluetooth)

Is it just me or are some of these young editors getting dumber by the day? I had lunch with Jen and Liz and one of their new recruits last week. Liz was talking about how much she enjoyed this book fair she went to in Moscow before the pandemic. She listed all these amazing sights she saw including Lenin's tomb and the newbie looked up from her tiramisu and said, John Lennon's buried in Russia?

LANA enters the office. BRUSTON is surprised to see her.

BRUSTON: (on Bluetooth)

I've got to go. Yes. That sounds great. Copy me on the notes.

LANA

Hello, Bruston.

BRUSTON

Hello, Lana. How did you get past my receptionist?

LANA

I told him in a very suggestive way that I'm a surprise from your past and while he wrestled with that information I slipped him a hundred dollar bill.

BRUSTON

Where's my hundred dollar bill?

LANA

Your time is that valuable?

BRUSTON

It will buy you fifteen minutes.

LANA places a hundred dollar bill on Bruston's desk. She walks around the office looking at books and photos.

LANA

You really are somebody now, aren't you?

BRUSTON

So are you. Married to one of the richest men in the country.

LANA

Am I?

BRUSTON

Number eighty-six. According to "Fortune 500."

LANA

You've been keeping track of me.

BRUSTON

I haven't.

LANA

We're divorced.

BRUSTON

How are your daughters?

LANA

Grown and married now. I'm a grandmother.

BRUSTON

You don't look like a grandmother.

LANA

I don't know a single grandmother who looks like a grandmother. Should I cut to the chase?

BRUSTON

By all means.

LANA

What's going on with Cyrus?

BRUSTON

Could you be more specific?

LANA

Why did he call me?

BRUSTON

A better question might be why did you come to see him when he did call?

LANA

I came the last time.

BRUSTON

When he called you about the reviews on *Losing Daylight*?

LANA

I came running. I was worried about him. But by the time I got here he had gone off somewhere to lick his wounds and he took someone along to help with the licking.

BRUSTON

I'm sorry.

LANA

No, you aren't. Not really.

BRUSTON

I don't know what you mean.

LANA

The divorce. I got custody of Leo, you got custody of Cy and loved every minute of it.

BRUSTON

What?

LANA

You won.

BRUSTON

I was in some kind of competition, and Cyrus was the prize? I would've preferred a tiara.

LANA

Everything's a joke to you.

BRUSTON

Everything's a battle with you.

LANA

Life with Cyrus was a lot like a war zone.

BRUSTON

I was in the same war.

LANA

I'm the one who actually lived with him. I had to deal with the day-to-day chaos, his temper, his drinking, his disappearances . . .

BRUSTON

Yes. His process. I dealt with all of that, too.

LANA

You heard about it. And you only heard his side of it. (*Pause*) I know you put up with a lot, too, but you also got to bask in the glow. Share the first class travel. I did the laundry.

BRUSTON

You could've come along.

LANA

I had a baby at home. (*Pause.*) Sometimes I was so jealous of you. Cy couldn't make a move without you. He thought you walked on water.

BRUSTON

He did? He worshipped you, Lana. Surely you know that.

LANA

He had a funny way of showing it.

BRUSTON

You had the ultimate control over him. When things were going well between the two of you he was a lovesick puppy who couldn't concentrate on his work, and when things weren't going well he was a raging lion who couldn't concentrate . . .

LANA

Because he was too busy chasing other women.

BRUSTON

Which came first the chicken or the egg?

LANA

I don't understand.

BRUSTON

Did he chase women and that caused your fights or did your fights cause him to chase women?

LANA

Are you defending him?

BRUSTON

That would be like defending the sun for shining.

LANA

You're saying he couldn't help it?

BRUSTON

I'm saying he has some kind of power we don't understand. People are drawn to him even when he behaves badly. (*Quoting a line from one of Cyrus' novels.*) He continued to sit blazing in the center of her orbit while she struggled to break free from his gravitational pull.

LANA

From *Burning Bridges*. The first book he wrote after our divorce.

BRUSTON: (*still quoting*)

She was his Venus; the most beautiful of planets but not necessarily the easiest to inhabit.

LANA

I know the line. It's lovely. I always wondered which slut inspired it?

BRUSTON

You.

LANA

Listen to us going on about how terrible he was. What does that say about us? Why did we put up with him?

BRUSTON

We loved him.

LANA

That's the easy answer.

BRUSTON

There's nothing easy about that answer.

LANA

It's thrilling. Being part of something bigger than yourself. I do miss that sometimes.

BRUSTON

Like being the towel boy. You're not big enough to play the game, but you still get your picture taken with the team for the yearbook.

LANA

Are you his towel boy?

BRUSTON

I like to think I'm more than that.

LANA

What does that make me? The cheerleader he got pregnant under the bleachers?

BRUSTON

I'm sorry about what he said last night. About your dancing. It's not true, you know? I saw you dance once. I'm not talking about the times I saw you in the chorus. I saw you rehearsing once. You thought you were alone. You were dancing to Sinatra singing "Come Rain or Come Shine."

LANA

I was going to perform it at my dad's birthday party. He loved old blue eyes.

BRUSTON

You were wonderful.

LANA

Thank you, Bruston. I had some talent, but you know talent isn't enough. You have to be obsessed, and I wasn't. Well, I was until I met Cyrus. I put everything I had into my marriage and Leo and our home. All the domestic stuff I told myself I would never care about. (*Beat.*) Why did he call me?

BRUSTON

I don't know.

LANA

You must have some idea. Has he been acting strange lately?

BRUSTON

There's one thing. He won't let me read his latest book.

LANA

But you're always the first. You're his agent. You have to read the book. (*Pause*) I'll find out what's going on.

BRUSTON

How?

LANA

I have my ways.

LANA stands to go. BRUSTON joins her.

BRUSTON

Let me walk you out.

LANA

No need. (*Glancing at Bruston's pocket square.*) You and your pocket squares. You must have a thousand of them.

BRUSTON: (*patting his pocket square*)

A thousand and one.

LANA exits. BRUSTON picks up the hundred dollar bill off his desk and walks downstage to address the audience.

Scene 7a

BRUSTON

You're assuming I'm very good at my job; I am. You're assuming my writers have made a lot of money and therefore, so have I. Also true. Then why can't I afford to buy my apartment? There are certain words that make even the most cautious of investors go weak in the knees: Madoff, Enron, crypto currency. The word that ruined me? Love.

His name was Wyatt. He was bright, charming, well educated and had an uncanny ability to anticipate my every need. We'd been involved for almost a year when he planned a romantic getaway to Fiji. One day he suggested we leave the resort and go exploring. The last thing I remember was walking with him on a path near a rocky outcropping. I don't remember the fall. By the time I woke up in a hospital, Wyatt had disappeared off the face of the earth with all my money and most of my valuables. I never told anyone what happened except for Cyrus. He came and stayed with me until I was well enough to travel. He brought me home. He's never said a critical word to me about any of it. He did ask me once if I loved Wyatt. I told him, no. (Beat.) I said love ruined me. Not being in love. Looking for it.

Black out.

Scene 8

Mid-day sunlight fills Cyrus's studio apartment in the East Village. It's furnished simply with a desk, a bed, and a small sofa. Wall to wall shelves are stuffed with books, papers, photos, and mementos. A fishing pole stands in a corner. CYRUS at his desk. LEO approaches the apartment door. He's a good-looking, timid man dressed quietly but expensively. He knocks. CYRUS answers the door.

LEO

Hey, Dad.

CYRUS

Hey, son.

The two men can't decide if they should hug or not; they have always had a strained relationship. Finally, LEO lightly embraces CYRUS and CYRUS pats him on the back.

LEO

Wow. The Fortress of Solitude. You know I've only been here one other time.

CYRUS

Only one other time? When was that?

LEO

You don't remember? No, of course you don't. Why would you remember? I was eight. Mom brought me here because . . . well, I don't like to say. I don't like rehashing old unpleasantness.

CYRUS

She sent you up because she thought I had a woman here.

LEO: (*embarrassed*)

Yes.

CYRUS

Did I?

LEO

You still don't remember? You were alone. You figured it out right away, though. You went to the window and yelled down at her that she was a terrible mother using her child to spy on his own father. Then the two of you screamed back and forth at each other. Then you slammed the window shut, told me to find a book to read, and we ordered Vietnamese food.

CYRUS

What would you have done if I did have a woman here?

LEO

God, I don't know.

CYRUS

Would you have told your mother?

LEO

If she asked me. I wouldn't lie to her.

CYRUS

What if I asked you to lie for me?

LEO

Wow. I don't know. That's a tough one. Would you have done that? Asked me to lie? When I was a little kid?

CYRUS

Yea. I probably would have.

LEO

Isn't it weird how two people can experience the same moment in time and it can have no impact whatsoever on one of them and for the other, it becomes one of the most vivid memories of his entire life?

LEO looks around the apartment. He stops when he comes across his father's fishing pole.

LEO

Nothing's changed. It's amazing. It's like being in a museum. (Pause.) Your fishing pole. This must be an antique by now.

CYRUS

Now there's something I remember. Taking you fishing in the pond behind your grandparents' house. You were six or seven.

LEO

I was fourteen.

CYRUS

You had the time of your life.

LEO

I hated every minute of it.

CYRUS

You caught a large mouth bass.

LEO

I caught someone's old thermos.

A frustrated CYRUS and LEO fail to agree on the memory of going fishing until they begin to discuss Lana. Suddenly they're in sync. They join each other on the edge of the bed and enjoy the retelling.

CYRUS

We were late getting back. Your mother was mad.

LEO

She was! She was pacing on the front porch.

CYRUS

With her arms crossed like this. The way she always did.

LEO

She was wearing her sundress that was swirled with different shades of blue. I loved that dress. It made me think of the ocean.

CYRUS

I loved that dress too. It made me think of . . . (*something salacious implied*)

LEO

She was mad because you took me to Grandma and Grandpa's without telling her then you called her and told her if she wanted me back for school the next day she'd have to come pick me up.

CYRUS: (*cracking up*)

A three-hour drive.

LEO: (*laughing, too*)

She was so mad she threatened to cancel your next visitation.

CYRUS

Then she realized she'd only be punishing herself.

LEO and CYRUS: (*in unison, laughing*)

We didn't care if we got to see each other.

CYRUS

Do you know your mother's in town?

LEO

I'm meeting her later for dinner and a show. Or I could have her meet me here and she could stand on the street and the two of you could scream at each other just like old times.

CYRUS

How badly did we screw you up with our fighting?

LEO

Wow. Okay. Another tough one. You know, I don't know. It was just sort of something I lived with. I can tell you that worse than the fighting was seeing Mom sad. You made her sad a lot and that made me sad. (*Pause.*) I knew you were sad, too.

CYRUS

How'd you know that?

LEO

The drinking, mostly. But you had to be sad. And you had to be mad. You had to feel all the emotions of the rainbow and feel them strongly. You're a great artist. It comes with the gift.

CYRUS

I've heard this defense of artists my whole life. How our talent gives us free rein to be complete jerks to the people we love. How we can be drunks and cheat on our spouses and not follow the rules all in the name of our art.

LEO

An artist's brain does work differently than a regular person's brain.

CYRUS

I guess so.

LEO

I used to wonder if my brain was going to start being an artist's brain someday. It never happened. Then I tried sports. I tried to be a straight A student. I tried origami. I was never good at anything. Do you remember? Of course you don't. Do you know how hard it was being someone who's not good at anything and your father is someone who's the best at something?

CYRUS

I always felt like I could never measure up to my dad.

LEO

Grandpa was a coal miner.

CYRUS

Damn right. He was the bravest man in the world. Do you know how tough you had to be to go down in the pit? Know on any given day you might be blown up or crushed or trapped? I used to watch him sitting at the kitchen table on those freezing cold winter mornings calmly eating his breakfast, knowing he was going out into the darkness to work below the earth in darkness, only to return home in darkness. There was something supernatural about him. I was never quite sure if he was god or beast. Either was worthy of awe.

LEO

Oh. That was good.

CYRUS

That was good.

LEO

You should write that down.

CYRUS goes to his desk and jots down the quote on a pad of paper then regards LEO with a contemplative air.

CYRUS

What do you want to be when you grow up?

LEO

I'm thirty-nine.

CYRUS

You don't seem to have a purpose.

LEO

I told you I'm not good at anything.

CYRUS

You are good at something. You're good at being a nice guy. (*with admiration*) It's a very difficult thing to be in this world. I couldn't do it. I'm not a nice guy.

LEO

You're okay, Dad.

Lights fade to black. After a beat, light in the apartment is restored revealing CYRUS lying on his bed reading. The reflection from the window establishes it's now late at night. LANA appears in half light at the doorway.

LANA: (*knocking*)

Cy. It's Lana. Cyrus! It's Lana. Are you in there? Open up. Please!

CYRUS opens the door and LANA throws her arms around him. He returns the embrace.

CYRUS

What's going on?

LANA

Nothing. It's just . . . I had a bad dream.

CYRUS smiles suggestively at LANA.

LANA

What are you smiling at?

CYRUS

That was always your excuse on the nights when you wanted to get busy and I was asleep. "I had a bad dream" was code for, "wake up and do me, baby."

LANA

Those really were nightmares.

CYRUS

Then why did we always end up having sex afterwards?

LANA

Because I needed a distraction.

CYRUS

You want me to distract you now?

LANA

You think I came here to have sex with you?

CYRUS

Why else would you come here?

LANA

I see your ego is still fully functioning.

CYRUS

All of me is functioning.

LANA walks around the apartment, silently reminiscing.

LANA

I remember the first time you brought me here.

CYRUS

I did a good job of distracting you that night.

LANA

You did. But what I remember most is how clean the apartment was. The bathroom was spotless. The toilet seat was down. And you had a big bouquet of flowers sitting right there. I knew it was all to impress me. No man had ever done that for me before.

CYRUS

Not surprised. I told you, white boys are lazy. And messy. And they smell funny. (Beat.) You used to love to smell me. For no reason. It's what you'd do instead of a kiss. Smell my arm. Smell my back.

LANA goes to CYRUS and nuzzles his neck, breathing in deeply. He begins to enjoy it. She pulls away.

LANA: (*looking around the apartment*)

Leo's crib was right there. How did we live in this tiny place?

CYRUS

We got a bigger place.

LANA

When *Foolish Birds* became a bestseller. Once we moved I never came back.

CYRUS

You never came inside. You spent a fair amount of time on the sidewalk screaming at me. (Pause.) I saw Leo today.

LANA

He told me at dinner. That's how I knew you were here. He said you had a good talk.

CYRUS

We did. I worry about him, though.

LANA

Is that what you call it? You have an interesting way of showing concern for people. Never seeing them. Never speaking to them. Not remembering their birthdays.

CYRUS

I remember his birthday.

LANA

A month late. Always a month late. What's that about?

CYRUS

For some reason I think he was born in June.

LANA

Maybe because that's when you finally noticed him. You were finishing a book in May.

CYRUS

I was a good father. I played with him. I took him to the park. I changed diapers.

LANA

You were a great father. For a while. Then you weren't. Then you were. Then you weren't.

CYRUS

He doesn't do anything.

LANA

What do you want him to do? Not everyone has a burning passion that consumes and drives them the way you do. As a matter of fact most people don't. They just live their lives. They have jobs and families. They go to Disney World. They go bowling.

CYRUS

My son should be driven.

LANA

You didn't raise your son to be that way. You barely raised him at all.

CYRUS

And those early years are the most important. Everything that happens when we're adults is surface. A crack in a vase can be repaired; the color of a glaze can be changed. But childhood is when the clay of our psyches is being formed; when it's still wet and anyone who can get their hands on us has the power to mold it into whatever shape they want it to be.

LANA

Ooh, that's good.

CYRUS

That was good, huh?

LANA

You should write that down before you forget it.

Cyrus walks eagerly to his desk and finds a pen and notepad.

CYRUS

What was it again?

LANA: (*recalling his words*)

When the clay of our psyche is being formed . . . when it's still wet...

CYRUS puts down the pen and pushes away the notepad.

LANA

What's wrong?

CYRUS

There aren't going to be any more books.

LANA

Is that what this is all about? Writer's block? You're freaking out because you think the well has run dry? Again? It never does, Cy.

CYRUS

It's not writer's block.

LANA

Is it about this latest book you won't show Bruston?

CYRUS

How do you know about that?

LANA

I went to see him. I'm trying to figure out what's going on with you.

CYRUS

It's not about a book.

LANA

Of course it is! It's always about a book. (*Pause.*) Do you know what was the hardest part about living with you? It wasn't the drinking, or your temper, or even how you'd abandon Leo and me for months at a time to go write. It wasn't even the other women. It was the deep depressions when you'd lie in bed for days when the writing wasn't going well. The manic highs when the writing was going well and you couldn't stop talking about it. Those frightening moments when I'd look at you and realize you weren't here; you were somewhere else in your head as completely and profoundly as an insane person. Then when you'd finish a book, there'd be nothing left of you except a groveling child. All that mattered was if you had pleased the muse. Once you were certain you did, all you could think about was would you be able to do it again? (*Beat.*) I'm not going to lie, Cy. I wanted to come first.

CYRUS: (*tenderly*)

The moments when you did were the best of my life.

CYRUS takes LANA to the bed. They sit on the edge together, and he puts his arm around her.

CYRUS

The reason I called you is I'm dying.

LANA

Why would you say something like that? What do you mean?

CYRUS

I'm sick. I may not look it right now but I will very soon. It's terminal. I have about six months.

LANA

Terminal what?

CYRUS

It doesn't matter.

LANA

Yes, it does!

CYRUS

I've been to the best doctors. I've had all the tests. Discussed all my options.

LANA

Cyrus, no! I don't believe this. I won't accept it. You shouldn't either. There are so many brilliant doctors and new medications and ...

CYRUS

Were you listening to me?

CYRUS holds LANA and tries to calm her down.

CYRUS

Do you remember the ending of *Lamb to the Slaughter*.

LANA: (*incredulous*)

You tell me you're dying and then you want to talk about one of your books?

CYRUS

It wasn't a happy ending.

LANA

How could it be with a title like that?

CYRUS

I let you read it as I was writing it. When I got to the last few chapters and told you how it was going to end, you got so angry with me.

LANA

I loved those characters. They were like real people to me. I didn't understand how you could be so cruel to them.

CYRUS

I explained to you there are two kinds of endings: the one you want for your characters, and the one they're supposed to have. No matter how hard it was for me, it was my job to accept the right ending and make it the only ending.

LANA

This is not how *this* story is supposed to end.

CYRUS

Did you really have a bad dream?

LANA

I needed an excuse to see you.

CYRUS

Are you going to be okay without me?

LANA

I've been without you for a long time.

CYRUS tenderly takes LANA's face into his hands and stares deeply into her eyes.

CYRUS

Are you going to be okay without me?

LANA

No.

CYRUS and LANA embrace. Slow fade to black.

Scene 9

We find BRUSTON sitting behind his desk in his office working at his computer. CYRUS enters carrying a messenger bag. BRUSTON looks up but doesn't acknowledge him at first.

BRUSTON

I'm sorry. Are you lost? The bathrooms are down the hall.

CYRUS

I'd like to see you.

BRUSTON

Do you have an appointment?

CYRUS opens his bag and sets a manuscript on Bruston's desk.

BRUSTON

What's this? A book? (*echoing the night they met*) So . . . you're a writer.

CYRUS

Don't be an ass about this.

BRUSTON

Does this manuscript come with an apology?

CYRUS

Apology for what?

BRUSTON

It's my job to read your work first. It's my right. Giving it to Jean Luc was a slap in my face.

CYRUS

It's my book.

BRUSTON

Yours to write; mine to sell.

CYRUS

You're right. I was completely out of line. I apologize.

BRUSTON

Are you high?

CYRUS gets up from the chair and begins wandering around the office while BRUSTON goes back to work.

CYRUS

You're not going to say anything else about the book?

BRUSTON glances at the title page.

BRUSTON

Corner Man? It's a terrible title.

CYRUS

I know you don't know a lot about boxing.

BRUSTON

Please tell me this is *not* a novel about boxing.

CYRUS

A corner man's a trainer who assists a fighter during breaks. He can't help him while he's in the ring fighting, but he's there for him the moment he steps out of the fray.

BRUSTON

This sounds like a novel about boxing.

CYRUS

It's not about boxing. Why don't you read it?

BRUSTON

I will. I have to finish these contracts then I'm dashing off to look at an apartment.

CYRUS

Any luck?

BRUSTON

I can find another apartment. The problem is I don't want another apartment. I want my apartment.

CYRUS

Do you believe in fate?

BRUSTON

I don't believe my destiny is to live in Hoboken; if that's what you're getting at. (Beat.) You asked me about fate the other day.

CYRUS

You didn't answer me. You got a phone call and left.

BRUSTON

Do I think our lives are predetermined? No. I think we use hindsight to explain things the way we want them explained.

CYRUS

I think it was fate when we ran into each other on the street all those years ago. I think it was fate when I handed you that copy of *Foolish Birds*. You can't deny it changed your life.

BRUSTON

It did. But do you really think some supernatural force made it happen?

CYRUS

My mind's been filled with nothing but memories lately. Maybe that's why I called Lana. I needed to touch one of them. (Beat.) I remember the soft, summer night when I strayed too far from that southern university town where I was writer-in-residence and ended up eating gravel in the parking lot of a bar with a good ole' boy's boot crushing a tread mark into the side of my face while he hissed, "You're gonna die, nigger." I remember watching a highball sail past my head and shatter against a wall while Lana screamed at me, "No matter how many girls you fuck, Cyrus, you're still gonna die!" I remember my Uncle Jonas pulling me up on his lap, giving me a box of Sugar Babies, and whispering in my ear, "Eat as much candy as you can while you can, boy, because some day you're gonna die." (Beat.) Bruston?

BRUSTON

Yes, Cy?

CYRUS

They were right.

BRUSTON

Yes, they were. We're all going to die someday.

CYRUS picks up the manuscript and holds it out to BRUSTON.

CYRUS

Take it.

BRUSTON

I'll read it. I promise I'll start reading it tonight.

CYRUS

Take it from my hand.

BRUSTON reaches for the manuscript. For a beat, they both hold it. BRUSTON has no way of understanding the importance of this moment. He returns to his computer.

CYRUS

Goodbye, Bruston.

BRUSTON: (*distracted*)

Bye, Cy. I'll call you tomorrow.

CYRUS exits. BRUSTON comes around the front of the desk to address the audience.

Scene 9a

BRUSTON

A few years ago one of my authors wrote a mega bestseller that was classified as a “journey of personal discovery” but was basically a fantasy travelogue for well off, middle-aged women who wanted to be able to eat without gaining weight and have sex with men who would never talk to them in real life. The writer has since become a wildly successful motivational speaker. Thousands of people swarm to her lectures. The message she preaches: Everyone’s A Genius. Really? Everyone? Everyone’s a genius? Have you ever been on the subway? Have you ever been to a rodeo? Have you been to the Olive Garden?

No one knows where genius comes from and who’s going to be blessed with it. That’s one of the reasons why it’s so coveted. It can’t be predicted. It can’t be bought or taught. But it can be destroyed, and it can be wasted. For decades I’ve watched Cy struggle with the voices in his head and his compulsion to put their stories on paper. I’ve watched him be the life of the party, captivate auditoriums full of fans, and sleep with countless women, but the sad truth is he’s spent most of his time lonely and miserable; a victim of the very thing that makes him valuable.

Oh no, no, no, everyone is not a genius. And everyone’s not a winner despite what your second grader’s soccer coach is forced to say. But I do believe everyone has a talent. The key is finding it and embracing it. My talent is taking care of talent.

Scene 10

A theatrical jump cut to an L.A. poolside setting. It's morning and a drunk YOUNG CYRUS trudges into the back yard of his rented bungalow wearing shorts and an open shirt. He's carrying a bottle of whiskey and a script that he tosses carelessly on the ground before collapsing into a chaise lounge. Next to the chair is a table with a glass and ice bucket on it. He pours himself a drink.

YOUNG BRUSTON enters with vigor. He's nattily dressed, as always, in an expensive suit with pocket square and carrying a briefcase.

YOUNG BRUSTON

I knocked and knocked. Finally a half naked woman opened the door.

YOUNG CYRUS

If I'd known you were coming I would've made sure to have a half naked man here for you. (*looking down at his chest*) Wait. That's me.

YOUNG BRUSTON

You're drunk at ten in the morning?

YOUNG CYRUS

I never stopped being drunk from last night. That's not the same thing as getting drunk in the morning.

YOUNG BRUSTON

You did know I was coming. You asked me here.

YOUNG CYRUS

That's Vanity.

YOUNG BRUSTON: (*offended*)

No, it's not. You practically begged me . . .

YOUNG CYRUS

The half naked woman. Her name's Vanity.

YOUNG BRUSTON

One of the seven deadly sins.

YOUNG CYRUS

She sure is.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Maybe I should come back later.

YOUNG CYRUS

Have a seat. Take a load off. You want a drink?

YOUNG BRUSTON

It's a little early for me.

YOUNG CYRUS

Is that briefcase filled with cash? They paying me in small bills?

YOUNG BRUSTON

You're not my only client. I have other business here. But now that I'm thinking about it ...

YOUNG BRUSTON opens his briefcase and takes out a hardcover novel.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Martin asked if you'd sign a book for him.

YOUNG CYRUS

Impressive. You met with the big man himself? Our esteemed producer?

YOUNG CYRUS takes the novel and a pen from YOUNG BRUSTON and signs the book.

YOUNG CYRUS: *(as he's signing)*

To Martin. Pay the writer, you piece of shit. All my best, Cyrus Holt.

YOUNG BRUSTON

That's lovely. I'm sure that will get you paid.

YOUNG CYRUS

You're the one who's supposed to do that.

YOUNG BRUSTON

And I am.

YOUNG CYRUS

Is it invisible money? 'Cause I need the kind you can see.

YOUNG BRUSTON

You've received a lucrative first option payment on the novel and an advance on the screenplay. I've told you over and over again you won't see any more money until the budget's set and that's not going to happen until you finish the script.

YOUNG CYRUS

I have finished the script. I've finished it four times. I can't help it everyone else thinks they know better than me. The man who wrote the book. The man who created the characters. The man who came up with the story in the first place!

YOUNG BRUSTON

A movie is a collaborative effort. A novel is a solo performance. I warned you how difficult this was going to be for you. Hollywood has destroyed many a great novelist.

YOUNG CYRUS

I had some assistant to an assistant tell me some of my dialogue was "saccharine." Me?! Saccharine?! I guess my fag agent's been rubbing off on me.

YOUNG BRUSTON

You know what, Cyrus? I know you're drunk. I know you're in pain. I know you're a great writer. But none of those things give you an excuse to be an asshole to me. I'm done putting up with your bullshit.

YOUNG BRUSTON starts to leave.

YOUNG CYRUS

You can't go yet. You get paid for putting up with my bullshit.

YOUNG BRUSTON

I get paid to represent your work. I don't get paid to take your abuse.

YOUNG CYRUS

Abuse? What abuse?

YOUNG BRUSTON

I'm tired of the name calling. I've listened to it for almost twenty years. In all that time, you've never heard me use a racial slur.

YOUNG CYRUS

That's because I'd fire you, and you'd lose your meal ticket.

YOUNG BRUSTON

You're not my meal ticket. I have lots of clients.

YOUNG CYRUS

I'm your biggest.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Not anymore, Cy. You haven't been paying attention. I represent writers who are every bit as famous as you, who make more money than you.

YOUNG CYRUS

I'm your best!

YOUNG BRUSTON

I'm the best, too!

During the course of this heated exchange, YOUNG CYRUS and YOUNG BRUSTON approach each other until they are literally in each other's faces. They part and regroup for the next phase of the battle.

YOUNG BRUSTON

I'm good at my job, and I'm not going to let you jeopardize it.

YOUNG CYRUS

What does that mean? What have you heard?

YOUNG BRUSTON

I haven't heard anything.

YOUNG CYRUS

You've heard something.

YOUNG BRUSTON

All right. There are complaints about you. You're difficult. Uncooperative. Overbearing. I know that's how you act when you're scared but they don't. (Pause.) You've got to stop lashing out at other people and accept what's really going on. You're angry at yourself because you sold out. You didn't want to adapt your own novel. You didn't need to. You took this job for the money.

YOUNG CYRUS

I need the money. I have no choice.

YOUNG BRUSTON

If you need the money it's because you live beyond your means. You're in the middle of a third divorce. You spoil Leo.

YOUNG CYRUS

What do you know about having a kid?

YOUNG BRUSTON

Nothing. And I never will. Rub it in. I can't get married or have children because I'm gay. Do you enjoy reminding me of that? Is it one more way to feel superior to me?

YOUNG CYRUS

I am superior to you!

YOUNG BRUSTON

Why? Because you're straight?! Because you're a great artist?! Look at the color of my skin, Cy! There are a lot of people who'd say I'm superior to you!

YOUNG CYRUS grabs YOUNG BRUSTON by his suit jacket ready to throw him to the ground. YOUNG BRUSTON responds to his rage by grabbing his face in his hands and planting a kiss, like a slap, full on his lips. They explode away from each other, stunned, propelled to opposite sides of the stage. A deflated and embarrassed YOUNG CYRUS collapses on the chaise. YOUNG BRUSTON approaches him cautiously.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Look around you. Look at this beautiful place. We should feel good about all this. Do you realize how far we've come? And against what odds? The thing is, it can all be over in a minute.

YOUNG CYRUS

You think I don't know that? You think I don't worry all the time I won't be able to write the next book? You have other clients. Hell, you're so good at selling, you could sell anything: cars, vacuum cleaners, real estate. All I can be is a writer. (Beat.) They're bringing in someone else to finish the script.

YOUNG BRUSTON takes a seat next to YOUNG CYRUS. They sit side by side on the edge on the chaise.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Let them.

YOUNG CYRUS

I can't.

YOUNG BRUSTON

Put aside your pride and walk away. I'll make sure you get the same fee. (Pause.) I can't be there with you in the . . . the arena? The . . ? What's the place called where boxers fight?

YOUNG CYRUS

The ring.

YOUNG BRUSTON

I can't be there with you in the ring when you're creating. You have to do that by yourself. But I'm here when you get a break and need someone to wipe off the blood and tell you to hang in there. I'm that guy holding the gross bucket of spit.

YOUNG CYRUS: (*perking up*)

Hey . . . that was almost good.

YOUNG BRUSTON

That was almost good.

Scene 11

A slow fade from L.A. to a cyc of Battery Park showing the majesty of the Manhattan skyline and the Statue of Liberty in the background. A park bench sits stage left with a HOMELESS WOMAN asleep at one end. Next to her is a handwritten cardboard sign that reads: VIETNAM VET. GOD BLESS AMERICA. GOD BLESS OUR TROOPS. As in real life, the HOMELESS WOMAN goes unnoticed. She's part of the scenery. JEAN LUC paces waiting for Cyrus to arrive. CYRUS enters.

JEAN LUC

Mon ami.

CYRUS

Jean Luc. You mother fucker.

JEAN LUC

I feel bad about this whole misunderstanding about the book and Bruston.

CYRUS

You don't feel bad about anything. You put Bruston through some major grief and loved every minute of it.

JEAN LUC

I did.

CYRUS

Bruston says you hate the book. I think he even used the word, fluff.

JEAN LUC

Lies. All lies. He told me you're so angry you don't want me to do the translation.

CYRUS

You know I'd never let anyone else do it.

JEAN LUC

That's what I told Bruston. He's jealous, you know. Of our friendship.

CYRUS

Oh, I know. He's the jealous one.

JEAN LUC

Of course I don't hate the book. You could write about anything or anyone and it would be a masterpiece. That's the issue for me: Why him?

CYRUS

Why not him?

JEAN LUC

Do you want my list? Because I have one.

JEAN LUC takes a notepad out of his jacket pocket.

CYRUS

Holy shit. You actually have a list.

JEAN LUC

Number one: pocket squares.

CYRUS

That's not necessary. Tell me this: after you read the book, did you still wonder, why him?

JEAN LUC

Mostly I wondered, why not me? What about the time I was arrested for skinny dipping in the Fontaine Saint-Michel with Catherine Deneuve's nanny and Brigitte Bardot's dog walker?

CYRUS

The problem for me as a writer is there's no challenge to making your life sound exciting and meaningful.

JEAN LUC

Ah. Maybe I'm too interesting. (*Pause.*) I suppose if I put aside my personal prejudices, I can admit it's a remarkable book.

CYRUS

I want this to be your greatest translation. I want your promise.

JEAN LUC: (*somewhat surprised*)

Of course.

CYRUS and JEAN LUC look at the Statue of Liberty.

CYRUS

I've never gone up the Statue of Liberty. Never went up the Empire State Building either. Never saw the Grand Canyon. Never went to a major league baseball game.

JEAN LUC

And you're one of America's greatest voices.

CYRUS

I'm a typical American. We don't appreciate what we got until it's too late.

JEAN LUC

You know she was a gift to your country from ours to celebrate the end of slavery. She was originally supposed to hold broken chains but people warned Bartholdi such a blatant reference to slavery would be too controversial so he changed his design and put the chains at her feet; a more subtle way to deliver the abolitionist message.

CYRUS

Yea, because if ever there was a message that needed to be subtle it was slavery is bad.

JEAN LUC

Usually we send you our throwaways - our inferior wine, cheese, haute couture - knowing you won't be able to tell the difference. But we didn't skimp on her.

CYRUS

All in all, she was a pretty nice gift.

JEAN LUC

Thank you for your gift.

CYRUS

I had nothing to do with it.

JEAN LUC

You chose to share it.

JEAN LUC and CYRUS embrace again. The HOMELESS WOMAN begins to stir. JEAN LUC exits. As he's leaving CYRUS pauses next to the HOMELESS WOMAN intrigued by her sign.

CYRUS

You were in Nam?

HOMELESS WOMAN

That's what the sign says.

CYRUS

You were in Nam? Were you a nurse?

The HOMELESS WOMAN doesn't answer.

CYRUS

I was in Nam.

HOMELESS WOMAN

Oh, yea? You want a medal for that? My husband got a bunch.

CYRUS: (*realizing the meaning of the sign*)

Your *husband* was in Nam.

HOMELESS WOMAN

Look who just caught up.

CYRUS

Did he make it home?

HOMELESS WOMAN

What was left of him.

CYRUS

He was injured.

HOMELESS WOMAN

He was fine on the outside. Nothing you could do back then.

CYRUS

Where's he now?

HOMELESS WOMAN

He's dead. My daughter, too. And here I am. Stopped caring a long time ago. (*Eying Cyrus*) You really fought in Nam?

CYRUS

Yea.

HOMELESS WOMAN

How many tours you do?

CYRUS

Two.

HOMELESS WOMAN

So did my Alvin. He re-upped after the first one. He wrote me this letter at the time. Told me he was already a done deal. He couldn't unsee what he'd seen or undo what he'd done but somewhere back home was some innocent kid who had his whole life ahead of him. If he went home and this kid had to take his place, he'd end up dead or fucked up so Al decided to let him keep his life. Sometimes I think about that kid when I get down.

CYRUS

Like your husband was an anonymous organ donor who gave him a heart or a liver.

HOMELESS WOMAN

Something like that.

*CYRUS takes his out his wallet and gives the HOMELESS WOMAN a tidy stack of bills. She takes them eagerly. As he does this he notices she has a battered paperback copy of *The Jungle Back Home*, his novel set in Vietnam.*

CYRUS

That's *The Jungle Back Home* by Cyrus Holt.

HOMELESS WOMAN

Al's favorite book. You ever read it?

CYRUS

A long time ago.

HOMELESS WOMAN

This was one of his favorite passages. (*Reading from the book.*) It's not that different here. It's a quiet place with hills and quiet people who just want to be left alone with their rice paddies and their chickens. What exactly am I protecting my country from? Gnarled up old grandmas tough as jerky turning soft as kittens when they watch a homesick young man enjoy their cooking? Little kids with their arms blown off but still smiling up at you with shiny dark eyes like pools of night water? When you look into those eyes, you don't see anything bad there except the reflection of us. I told Joey once it's a fucked up world when the only time I'm equal to a white man is when I'm being looked at with hatred by people from another country. He said, yea, they don't see black or white here. They just see America.

The HOMELESS WOMAN closes the book.

HOMELESS WOMAN

Man, that guy can write.

CYRUS

Yes . . . yes, he can.

Lights fade on HOMELESS WOMAN as a vera light or spot picks up CYRUS and his slow exit stage right to black.

Scene 12

Cyrus Holt's funeral. LANA dressed in black appears down right wearing the bracelet Cyrus bought for her in Paris years ago. LEO enters dressed in a wildly colorful suit.

LANA

Hasn't anyone ever told you you're supposed to wear black to a funeral?

LEO

I am black. I'm always wearing it. Besides, I don't believe in grief.

LANA

What do you mean, you don't believe in it?

LEO

I know we have to feel it, but I'll be damned if I'm going to dress for it.

LANA and LEO embrace.

LANA

How are you holding up?

LEO

I'm okay. I'm getting a little tired of being hugged, though.

LANA

I know what you mean.

LEO

I have some news. Dad made me the director of the Cyrus Holt Foundation. There's a lot to be done. I'm going to start with the scholarship programs.

LANA

Sweetheart, this is fantastic. You're going to be so good at this.

LEO

Good at what?

LANA

Doing good work.

LEO

I don't understand why I'm so sad. I hardly ever saw him. Or talked to him. Why should I be upset? I should be able to pretend he's still alive and not speaking to me.

LANA

He didn't know what to say to you.

LEO

Cyrus Holt didn't know what to say? He had no problem talking to Barack Obama. Or Kevin Hart.

LANA

He may have respected the president and he may have thought Kevin was funny, but he didn't care what they thought about *him*.

LEO

I wanted him to notice me but when he did, it was overwhelming. It was too much attention. I felt like I was either in darkness or had a spotlight shining on me. Both were cold. I needed something in between. Something warm.

LANA

I'm sorry he wasn't able to give that to you. He put all his warmth into his work. That didn't mean he didn't love you.

LEO

I know. He loved you, too, Mom.

LANA

I know.

LEO

I don't know how much of what I'm feeling is grief and how much is joy. I don't mean I'm happy Dad died. I mean while he was alive I don't think I could ever truly understand him. I think I do now. (*Beat.*) I cried at the end of all of his books. Not because they were sad. Because they were perfect.

Cross fade as LANA and LEO exit arm in arm as lights reveal Bruston's office.

Scene 13

BRUSTON sits alone with a bottle of high end bourbon on his desk having a drink in his office after the funeral. He's taken off his tie and loosened a few buttons on his shirt, but he's still wearing a suit jacket with a pocket square. The office is lit only by a desk lamp. The glittering lights of the NYC cyc at night can be seen outside the window. LANA enters.

LANA

I thought I might find you here.

BRUSTON

Where else would I be?

CYRUS

Cyrus told me you're losing your apartment.

BRUSTON

It's official. Someone bought it. I have thirty days to vacate.

LANA

I'm sorry.

LANA takes a seat.

LANA

I know people say this all the time, but it really is a shame we don't get to attend our own funerals and feel all that love.

BRUSTON

I don't know. It gets to be a little too much. Who really wants to have that much praise and respect heaped upon them?

BRUSTON and LANA: (*in unison*)

Cyrus.

BRUSTON

He would've been pleased. Not by the celebrities and the politicians.

LANA

Oh, no. By the readers.

BRUSTON

Hundreds of them. Thousands. Just standing there on the street chatting with each other like they were waiting for a parade.

LANA

I noticed that, too. It wasn't a somber occasion. He touched a lot of lives in a very positive way.

BRUSTON takes a glass out of a drawer and sets it on his desk next to the bottle.

BRUSTON

Drink?

LANA

Cut crystal. Very nice.

BRUSTON

Didn't you throw one of those at Cy's head once?

LANA

I threw a lot of things at Cy. We were talking about it the other night. The night before . . . We talked about a lot of things.

BRUSTON

Did he tell you what he was planning to do?

LANA

He told me about the cancer. That it was terminal. That's why he called me. Why he saw Leo. But he didn't tell me about this.

BRUSTON

How's Leo doing?

LANA

It's difficult to be the child of a great man. To live in his shadow. The shadow's gone now. Maybe things will be clearer for him.

BRUSTON

You really love him, don't you?

LANA

That's a strange thing to say to a mother about her child.

BRUSTON

You talk about him differently than you do your daughters.

LANA

You have a special bond with your firstborn. It's not necessarily a better bond. It doesn't mean you love that child more . . . It's just different. And when you add to that feeling how you felt about his father . . . This may sound terrible but I never truly loved Todd. I cared about him, and I thought I could make a life with him. I married him and had two children with him. (*With laughter.*) Then I divorced him and took half his stuff. (*Beat.*) I was madly in love with Cyrus. How could I not be madly in love with his son?

As LANA takes the drink from BRUSTON he notices the bracelet.

BRUSTON

It can't be. Is that the bracelet he bought in Paris? That sneaky lying bastard. He swore to me he returned it.

LANA

He said he kept it all these years because as long as he held onto it he could also hold onto the hope we might get back together. I believed him. Cyrus may have lied sometimes, but he never lied to himself.

LANA reaches for the manuscript of Corner Man setting on the desk.

LANA

Is this it? The last novel?

BRUSTON

He finally gave it to me . . .

LANA

What's it about?

BRUSTON: (*echoing the Jean Luc scene*)

A man . . . who . . .

LANA

It's about you.

BRUSTON

How do you know?

LANA

I told you we talked about a lot of things. What do you think of it?

BRUSTON: (*struggling with his emotions*)

Does it matter? I'll never have a chance to tell him. To thank him. (*Beat.*) I'm so angry. He should've told me. I didn't get a chance to say goodbye. And why did he give up like that? I would've fought until the very end. I would've had every operation and tried every new drug . . .

LANA

You're not Cyrus. It was his choice, and he didn't make it because he was depressed or lonely or even in great pain yet. He always lived life on his own terms and when he lost that control, he didn't want to live.

BRUSTON

Cause of death: hubris.

LANA

Cause of death: That's all, folks.

BRUSTON takes an unopened letter out of his jacket.

BRUSTON

Heather gave me this at the funeral.

LANA reaches for the letter. BRUSTON snatches it away.

LANA

And you haven't read it? I would've ripped it open on the spot.

BRUSTON

I'm afraid.

LANA

Of what?

BRUSTON

The power of his words.

LANA

You think there might be something bad in there?

BRUSTON

I think there might be something magnificent in here.

LANA down her drink then walks over to BRUSTON and plucks the pocket square from his jacket. She takes a new one from her purse and replaces the old.

LANA

A thousand and two.

BRUSTON takes her hand with affection. They hold for a beat. LANA starts to leave then returns and grabs up Bruston's old pocket square as a remembrance. She sticks it in her bra with a sly smile. LANA exits. BRUSTON opens the letter as lights come up on CYRUS standing behind him. CYRUS will be the voice of what BRUSTON is reading.

CYRUS

You face the muse alone. Alone but surrounded by people both real and imaginary, shouting at you, pleading with you, all wanting something from you. You're alone but you can't do it alone. The corner is your sanctuary between those battles with your demons. If you're lucky there's someone there waiting to patch you up, to give you sustenance, encouragement, and guidance, but to always tell you like it is. He knows when you're struggling, when you're at risk of going down, when it's time to throw in the towel. I made this last decision without you. I hope you can forgive me. In the end it's not about gratitude or appreciation. It's about who you love and who loves you back. Goodbye, Bruston Fischer. You are my best friend. (Beat.) P.S. I bought your apartment for you. See that, I was listening.

BRUSTON folds up the letter and puts it back in his pocket. His phone begins to ring. He considers not answering but changes his mind.

BRUSTON: (on his phone)

Hello, Phoebe. No, I don't mind you calling this late. The funeral was over hours ago. I know I showed the book to you first. What can I say? The response has been unbelievable. I know it's her first novel, but I'm taking it to auction.

BRUSTON stretches out comfortably in his chair and puts his feet up on the desk.

BRUSTON

Please. This is Bruston Fischer you're talking to. I introduced Barnes to Noble. (Beat.) I convinced Hawthorne to call the book *The Scarlet Letter* instead of *Slut on Fire*. (Beat.) Mark Twain wanted to name the boy Elderberry Finkelstein, but I talked him out of it.

Curtain.

END OF PLAY