

## **NEA High**

by

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# NEA High

## DESCRIPTION

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

## CHARACTERS

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

## SETTING

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

## TIME

- Present

## MISCELLANEOUS

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

# NEA High

## Act I, Scene 1: The Tempest

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

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

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

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

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## Act I, Scene 2: The Art Show

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

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

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

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

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

HELMS  
Who painted this?

SAVORY  
So, Councilor --

HELMS  
Who painted this?

SAVORY  
-- you find this interesting.

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

SAVORY  
Oh --

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

SAVORY  
Not art --

HELMS  
Who painted this?

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

SAVORY  
A little strong, Councilor Helms?

HELMS  
"Abstinence Has No Substance." Aviva Matthews.

SAVORY  
(overlapping)  
Perhaps you shouldn't --

HELMS  
(overlapping)  
Where is Aviva Matthews?

SAVORY  
She should be h[ere] --

HELMS  
Is she here?

SAVORY

As I said --

HELMS

I want to discuss this with her right now.

AVIVA

I am here.

Everyone turns to look at her and her parents.

HELMS

The Aviva Matthews. Come here, then.

AVIVA

Good evening, Councilor Helms.

HELMS

Evening, yes. Good --

BIJU

Councilor Helms --

HELMS

And you are?

BIJU

Biju Matthews.

ALEXA

Alexa. Matthews.

HELMS

(to ALEXA)

Come here.

(indicating the painting)

Your daughter did this.

BIJU

We're very proud.

SAVORY

Perhaps this is not the best time --

HELMS

Dealer's choice, Mr. Savory.

BIJU

Has Aviva caused a problem?

HELMS

(to AVIVA)

Come here. The city council gave you money.

(to SAVORY)

Correct?

DRAGÓN

The city council did award --

HELMS

Remind me --

DRAGÓN

-- Ms. Matthews an art scholarship --

HELMS

-- who you are.

DRAGÓN

Norman Dragón.

HELMS

(with proper pronunciation)

Ah, Mr. Dragón.

DRAGÓN

Head of the Art Department.

HELMS

Right. From --

DRAGÓN

Argentina. No Evita references, please --

HELMS

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

DRAGÓN

Can't put Juan over on you --

They measure each other.

HELMS

So you're responsible for this --

DRAGÓN

(overlapping)

This exhibit? As I have been for the past 10 years.

(indicating the "paintings")

Aren't they good?

HELMS

(indicating AVIVA)

Did you teach her?

DRAGÓN  
I've had the pleasure.

HELMS  
To do this?

BIJU  
What problem does this make?

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

BIJU  
(overlapping)  
What is the problem --

DRAGÓN  
(overlapping)  
As city council president --

BIJU defers to DRAGÓN.

DRAGÓN  
You approved Aviva's scholarship.

SAVORY  
Norman --

HELMS  
A pig in a poke, then --

ALEXA  
That's enough!

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

AVIVA  
I am an artist.

HELMS  
Then come here.

ALEXA  
Aviva has done nothing wrong.

BIJU  
(to SAVORY)  
What makes the problem here?

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

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

ALEXA  
It's just a painting.

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

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

HELMS  
Explain this to me.

SAVORY  
Councilor --

HELMS  
(stops him, to AVIVA)  
Well?

AVIVA  
What's not out front for you?

HELMS  
No aesthete with me, all right?  
(indicating DRAGÓN)  
Don't be him. Now, Ashland got this back as  
payback. Explain this to me.

BIJU  
Aviva --

HELMS  
(while looking at BIJU)  
Defend yourself.

(directly to AVIVA)  
We await.

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



HELMS

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

HELMS replaces the painting.

AVIVA

Yes.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

Not hardly --

DRAGÓN

She doesn't mean that at all.

HELMS

Stop answering for her.

AVIVA

It's not about insulting you.

ALEXA

Aviva --

AVIVA

Mom -- my time.

(to HELMS)

I didn't make it about you -- specifically. Or about insulting anyone -- specifically.

HELMS offers the chair to AVIVA.

HELMS

Defend.

She hesitates.

HELMS

Not me specifically, you said.

She gets on it and squats. The contest begins.

AVIVA

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

HELMS

Name it.

AVIVA

(emphasizing syllables)

Nos-tal-gi [pronounced "jee"] - a. Nostalgic --  
and disappointed. Mental/sentimental.

They measure each other.

HELMS

That's all the "deep" we get?

AVIVA

You snap on the lock --

HELMS

Bring order to craziness --

AVIVA

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

HELMS

It's a nationally recognized program --

AVIVA

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

HELMS

The whole thing's about your age --

AVIVA

About your age.

HELMS

That makes no sense.

AVIVA

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

HELMS

Which would be --

AVIVA

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

HELMS

(indicating herself)

Bright and white?

AVIVA  
Women in the down position.

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

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

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

AVIVA  
They're out of this.

HELMS  
Your family loves you --

AVIVA  
Leave them out of --

HELMS  
-- don't they?

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

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

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

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

HELMS  
Really?

AVIVA  
Yes.

HELMS  
Is dat so?

AVIVA  
Yes.

HELMS

Bet the farm on that?

AVIVA realizes she's hit a dead-end.

HELMS

Get down. Sit down. How old are you?

AVIVA

Eighteen.

HELMS

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

SAVORY

Don't embarrass --

HELMS

Answer me: abstinent -- yes or no?

BIJU

Elton, you do something --

AVIVA

What's that got to do with the painting?

SAVORY

I agree --

HELMS

(indicating the painting)

Do you practice what you have her preach?

BIJU

(goes to AVIVA)

Let's go.

HELMS

(staring AVIVA down)

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

BIJU

I trust my daughter.

HELMS

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

BIJU

Let's go.

HELMS

So you're declaring abstinence is stupid.

No. AVIVA

Let's go. BIJU

That self-restraint -- HELMS

Honey -- ALEXA

No. AVIVA  
(to HELMS)

Aviva -- ALEXA

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

I don't deny anything. AVIVA

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

I know. AVIVA

You do? HELMS

Yes. AVIVA

Were you at the council meetings? HELMS

No. AVIVA

Did you speak in opposition? HELMS

No. AVIVA

I know you didn't because I sat there for all the evidence from the doctors and nurses, your HELMS

pregnant classmates -- well, enough, because,  
obviously --

(indicating the painting)  
-- you had better things to do.

ALEXA

That's enough!

HELMS

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

(indicating the others)

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

AVIVA

And because you don't like me --

HELMS

I don't have to cut you any slack.

AVIVA

I told you the truth --

HELMS

You made yourself believe that --

AVIVA

So I'm a liar.

HELMS

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

DRAGÓN

What else do you want?

AVIVA

Better to be eighteen than --

ALEXA

Aviva, we're going.

HELMS

Than what?

ALEXA

Aviva --

HELMS  
Better than what?

BIJU  
(to HELMS)  
Don't bait her!

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

AVIVA keeps her mouth shut.

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

AVIVA  
I think --

HELMS  
Yes?

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

The UTILITY characters rejoin the group.

HELMS  
You blinked.

BIJU  
Blinked?

HELMS  
Refused to take the risk.

BIJU  
What are you talking about?

HELMS  
Mr. Savory.

SAVORY  
Yes?

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

SAVORY  
Councilor --

ALEXA  
You can't do that --

HELMS  
Did you hear that?

SAVORY  
I did.

BIJU  
Elton!

DRAGÓN  
You can't force us --

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

ALEXA  
What are you talking about?

HELMS  
Guide her, Mr. Drone On --

DRAGÓN  
Dragón --

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

DRAGÓN  
Should I bow first?

SAVORY  
Norman!

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

DRAGÓN  
Art should always be free of "shoulds."

HELMS  
Except that "should," of course.

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

HELMS

Two "shoulds."  
(still looking at DRAGÓN)  
And if I did?

They measure each other.

DRAGÓN

What would you do?

HELMS

What would you do if I did?

DRAGÓN

What I have always done.

HELMS

What you've taught her to do.

DRAGÓN

I've taught her to speak her mind.

HELMS

You've taught her mind to be selfish.

DRAGÓN

I've taught her mind to be honest.

HELMS

You've taught her mind to be disrespectful.

DRAGÓN

(overlapping)

An artist has the right --

HELMS

(overlapping)

-- has the responsibility --

DRAGÓN

We can debate this forever --

HELMS

I don't intend to --

DRAGÓN

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

HELMS

I have a power, given in trust --

DRAGÓN

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

HELMS  
I will, because I do trust it --

DRAGÓN  
You can't.

SAVORY  
I think we should all go --

HELMS  
A challenge?

SAVORY  
Into the reception?

DRAGÓN  
A plea -- for sanity.

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

DRAGÓN  
That's not what I meant --

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

DRAGÓN  
(realizes what she is thinking)  
What are you thinking?

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

DRAGÓN  
You can't --

HELMS  
Can't what, Mr. Dragón?

DRAGÓN  
You won't --

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

SAVORY  
Yes.

DRAGÓN  
Don't!

HELMS

Mr. Savory, close down the whole exhibit --

SAVORY

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

DRAGÓN

Completely w[rong] --

HELMS

(to AVIVA, indicating DRAGÓN)

Your cavalry -- too late. And really pretty bad in the saddle.

DRAGÓN

We should fight this.

HELMS

The third "should."

DRAGÓN

The noose starts with things like this --

HELMS

Mr. Dragón -- we're not sliding into fascism here -- so tell your inner Che Guevara to quiet down.

(to AVIVA)

Look at all the effect your art has created!

A pause as HELMS stares at the picture again.

HELMS

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

SAVORY

As principal --

HELMS

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

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

\* \* \* \* \*

**Act I, Scene 3: The Search for Miracles**

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

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

AVIVA

No!

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

AVIVA

Who?

(ignored)

Who is she?

PRAYER 1

Please, be quiet!

AVIVA

I just want to know --

PRAYER 1

What?

AVIVA

Who she is.

PRAYER 2

Who are you --

PRAYER 3

-- who thinks she can know anything?

AVIVA

I just woke up.

PRAYERS 1 & 2

Wishful.

PRAYERS 2 & 3

Thinking.

ALL 3

On your part.

AVIVA kneels as well.

AVIVA

Who is she?

PRAYER 1

What she is turning into is more important.

PRAYER 2

This is little Audrey.

PRAYER 3

Our Blessed Virgin Mother's bright note.

PRAYER 1

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

AVIVA

Who is she?

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

ALL 3

Facts.

PRAYER 2

She wants facts.

PRAYER 3

They all want facts.

PRAYER 1

Where the unenlightened --

ALL 3

-- must begin their light.

PRAYER 2

I suppose.

PRAYER 3

Drudgery, though.

ALL 3

So, the facts.

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

PRAYER 1

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

(drops the chant)

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

PRAYER 2

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

A pause at the bad joke.

PRAYER 1

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

PRAYER 3

Her chrysalis.

PRAYER 2

Her aurelia.

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

PRAYER 2

After a while, she eased into what the doctors call "akinetetic mutism" --

(drops the chant)

-- but we know what it really is.

(whispering)

She is a hyphen.

PRAYER 1

The coma was like a comma -- a pause. Now --

PRAYER 2

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

PRAYER 1

In her.

PRAYER 3

With her.

PRAYER 2

We find the higher compassion that overcomes our egos.

PRAYER 1

(to AVIVA)

Did you hear that clearly?

ALL 3

We find the higher compassion that overcomes our egos.

PRAYER 2

She soothes the urge for self-expression.

PRAYER 1

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

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

PRAYER 3

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

(drops chant)

A light-colored oil drips from statues and paintings --

PRAYER 1

The tears of Our Mother.

PRAYER 3

Blood has bloomed on the eucharistic hosts --

PRAYER 2

To show us that God works through our mouths.

PRAYER 3

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

PRAYER 2

With the proper mind --

PRAYER 1

The proper heart --

PRAYER 2

The proper pain --

PRAYER 3

These miracles can ease your dark fears.

ALL 3

Won't you accept her soft embrace?

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

AVIVA

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

PRAYER 1

Audrey feels the affliction of your desires.

AVIVA

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

PRAYER 2

She is sickened, Audrey -- heal her.

AVIVA

I have to fight to keep my eyes my own.

PRAYER 3

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

ALL 3

Bring her sorrow to an end.

AVIVA

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

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

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**Act I, Scene 4: The Theses of Councilor Helms**

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

SAVORY

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

HELMS

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

SAVORY

I don't understand.

HELMS

-- to talk to the two of you.

DRAGÓN

I thought you hated the picture.

HELMS

Did I say that?

DRAGÓN

The impression you gave --

HELMS

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

SAVORY

Do what, Councilor?

HELMS

That's why we treasure you, Mr. Savory. You keep us on message. As I said, something to discuss with the both of you -- but in a moment. I need your help -- you and you -- to talk some things through, first. So bear with me.

(to DRAGÓN)

How long have you been teaching?

DRAGÓN

That's what you want to discuss?

HELMS

"Bear with me," I asked.

DRAGÓN

Why do you want to know?

HELMS

Why wouldn't you want to tell me?

DRAGÓN

For twenty years.

HELMS

Always about art?

DRAGÓN

Art history, techniques --

HELMS

Always here?

DRAGÓN

In Argentina, other countries. And here.

HELMS

Do you paint?

DRAGÓN

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

HELMS

You've exhibited?

DRAGÓN

My students have, so --

HELMS

Sold paintings?

DRAGÓN

-- so I have, yes.

HELMS

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

DRAGÓN

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

HELMS

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

DRAGÓN

Except my conscience --

SAVORY

And to me, of course.

HELMS

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

DRAGÓN

Oh Piazzolla!

HELMS

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

SAVORY

They haven't called for censorship --

HELMS

Thin ice, principal.

SAVORY

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

HELMS

Who?

SAVORY

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

HELMS

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

SAVORY

I hear talk about a petition drive.

HELMS

So have I.

SAVORY

End of my report, then.

HELMS

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

DRAGÓN

You would go that far --

HELMS

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

DRAGÓN

Which is --

HELMS

Which is why I'm here with the two of you. I have my -- list -- to nail to the church door.

(to DRAGÓN)

Surprised a "politico" would know Martin Luther?

DRAGÓN

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

HELMS

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

DRAGÓN

Thesis 96 --

HELMS

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

DRAGÓN

What does that have to do with --

HELMS

Follow me closely.

DRAGÓN

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

HELMS

Parts of you I do like --

SAVORY

Norman -- Councilor --

HELMS

I do --

SAVORY

You were saying, Councilor --

HELMS

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

DRAGÓN

Which one?

HELMS

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

DRAGÓN

That's true.

HELMS

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

DRAGÓN

That doesn't make sense --

HELMS  
The artist is just a means --

DRAGÓN  
A means?

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

DRAGÓN  
Art has nothing to do --

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

DRAGÓN  
Art has nothing to do with morality.

HELMS  
You mean my kind.

DRAGÓN  
I mean any kind.

HELMS  
And that mistake --

DRAGÓN  
Principle.

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

DRAGÓN  
The royal "we" --

HELMS  
A collaborative enterprise.

SAVORY  
We were talking about the reason you were here.

HELMS  
We are getting to it --

SAVORY  
Could you now?

HELMS

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

SAVORY

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

HELMS

Would you consider her rebellious? Ambitious?

DRAGÓN

Ah, the police work --

SAVORY

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

HELMS

Gauging --

(to DRAGÓN)

What can you add?

DRAGÓN

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

HELMS

Passionate?

DRAGÓN

Disciplined.

HELMS

But not passionate?

DRAGÓN

Her work is very crucial to her.

HELMS

But not passionate?

DRAGÓN

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

HELMS

Measuring, balancing -- And you would support her?

DRAGÓN

Unconditionally.

HELMS

And "Abstinence Without Substance" --

DRAGÓN

Is a good example of Aviva's work.

HELMS ponders this.

HELMS

Why have you bothered to teach art?

DRAGÓN

Is this for my dossier?

SAVORY

Norman.

HELMS

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

SAVORY

Councilor, it's a busy day --

HELMS

I'm almost done.

DRAGÓN

She's gauging.

HELMS

(to DRAGÓN)

Why bother?

DRAGÓN

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

HELMS

I can agree with you!

(to SAVORY)

See, we can agree. In the abstract, we can agree. But then we come down to the cases: A crucifix in urine --

DRAGÓN

We have many voices --

HELMS

Women smeared in --

DRAGÓN

A lot of dark vowels --

HELMS

Bullwhips inserted --

DRAGÓN

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

HELMS

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

SAVORY

(to DRAGÓN)

You have a class coming up.

DRAGÓN

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

HELMS

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

SAVORY

Yes?

HELMS

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

DRAGÓN

I don't understand.

HELMS

Something that shows she understands, really understands, her -- power to give "a voice to what is inside us" --

(to SAVORY)

-- that's correct, right? that's what he says he teaches, right?

SAVORY

Restitution?

The "change of class" bell rings.

HELMS

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

DRAGÓN

Corrects her point of view.

SAVORY

You want to give her a second chance?

HELMS

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

DRAGÓN

You mean betray --

HELMS

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

SAVORY

I'll deal with this.

HELMS

(to SAVORY)

That's why we pay you the large bucks, Mr. Savory. Mr. Dragón --

DRAGÓN

Yes?

HELMS

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

SAVORY

To your class?

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

\* \* \* \* \*

**Act I, Scene 5: The Search for Miracles Continued**

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

PRAYER 1  
You are a painter.

AVIVA  
Yes.

PRAYER 2  
Not important.

AUDREY  
Unimportant.

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

AVIVA  
But I need to speak --

PRAYER 3  
Speaking like do -- pure ego.

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

AUDREY  
Too -- much -- appetite.

The PRAYERS sit cross-legged.

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

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

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

AVIVA

It was the truth!

PRAYER 3

It did not bring people to healing.

AVIVA

I wanted to make them think.

PRAYER 1

It brought them to anger.

AUDREY

Anger is not thinking.

AVIVA

But it's the highest calling!

PRAYER 1

What is?

PRAYER 2

Pigment on cloth?

PRAYER 3

Stretched on a wooden frame?

AVIVA

Self-expression!

AUDREY

Self is nothing.

The PRAYERS face AVIVA.

AVIVA

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

PRAYER 1

Spirit.

PRAYER 2

Energy.

PRAYER 3

Servants to both.

AUDREY

Self is blinding.

AVIVA

I can't!

PRAYER 1  
That's because you are stuck --

PRAYER 2  
-- in the old paradigm --

PRAYER 3  
-- of thinking you are --

ALL 3  
Important.

PRAYER 1  
None --

PRAYER 2  
-- of us --

PRAYER 3  
-- is --

ALL 3  
Important.

AVIVA  
I am!

AUDREY  
Then, unhappiness for you.

AVIVA  
I'll take that!

AUDREY  
And unhappiness for others.

AVIVA  
I'll take that on, too!

PRAYER 1 stands.

PRAYER 1  
You'd sacrifice others.

AVIVA  
I have to fight what stupid people do.

PRAYER 2 stands.

PRAYER 2  
There is strength in letting go.

AVIVA  
Strength in a fist.

PRAYER 3 stands.

PRAYER 3

In the end, none of it matters.

AVIVA

The end is at the end, not now.

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

ALL 3

Are -- you -- prepared?

AVIVA

For what?

AUDREY

Are you prepared?

AVIVA

For what?

AUDREY

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

A sound of murmuring voices rise as the lights fade.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Act I, Scene 6: The Gauntlet**

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

SAVORY

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

BIJU

And you didn't --

SAVORY

Didn't what?

BIJU

Straighten her out?

SAVORY

She was not open for reversal.

BIJU

Elton, Aviva can't be hammered --

SAVORY  
Nobody forces anyone --

ALEXA  
And I voted for her.

BIJU  
So did I.

SAVORY  
So did I.

BIJU  
Acting like the lord of the manor --

ALEXA  
Restitution --

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

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

BIJU  
Alexa -- it's so simple.

ALEXA  
I hate when you take that tone.

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

(makes the sound of a whip)  
Simple.

ALEXA  
We've now moved back to Haiti.

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

ALEXA

Biju, sit down.

BIJU

Making the word flesh, that's all.  
(imaginary sword stabs)  
The knight in shiny armor --

AVIVA

(with emphasis)

Stop it. Everyone -- just -- stop it.

They wait for AVIVA to speak.

AVIVA

There's nothing wrong with her doing that.

BIJU

What?

AVIVA

She's not doing anything wrong by doing that.

The three adults are momentarily struck silent by her words.

AVIVA

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

SAVORY

Aviva --

AVIVA

I voted for her, too -- my first vote -- my adult ID. Pulled that lever -- ka-ching.

(to BIJU)

I've been thinking.

BIJU

You always do.

AVIVA

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

BIJU

Yes.

AVIVA

Community, too --

BIJU

Just a bigger family --

AVIVA

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

BIJU

Family was all that kept those dark nights away.

AVIVA

(to ALEXA)

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

ALEXA

Your wicked Wiccan mother --

AVIVA

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

ALEXA

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

AVIVA

(overlapping

-- the cage of thing." From some soy chunk  
advertising thing, wasn't it?

ALEXA

Yes. Remember how god-awful --

BIJU

I remember that -- ooh!

AVIVA

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

ALEXA

Clean the slate and liberate!

AVIVA

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

BIJU

Of course.

AVIVA

So --

SAVORY

Aviva?

ALEXA

Let us help you, Aviva.

BIJU  
(to SAVORY)

What are our options?

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

AVIVA  
I had a dream.

BIJU  
About what?

AVIVA  
It confused me.

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

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

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

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

ALEXA  
The dream.

AVIVA  
The dream --  
(to DRAGÓN)

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

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

BIJU  
She exists?

DRAGÓN  
Four thousand people once came to a Catholic Mass  
in a football stadium while she laid out stiff in  
a little glass house. Constant pilgrimages to  
her home. Even the Church is investigating for

possible miracles -- they'd hate to miss a new one. You dreamed about her?

BIJU  
(to AVIVA)

How do you know about her?

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

BIJU  
You had a vision.

People ponder the word "vision."

AVIVA  
She spoke right into my bones -- right into them. She gave me an --  
(looks for the word)  
-- an annunciation? Is that it?

BIJU  
Ah, yes!

ALEXA  
About what?

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

SAVORY  
Norman --

DRAGÓN  
She didn't.

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

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

SAVORY  
Careful --

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

(using her finger)  
-- jab, jab, jab, jab, jab. So why be surprised  
when they jerk in pain and go bam, bam?

(like a boxer)

I meant to trash her. I did. Meant it. Because  
I'd decided she wasn't in on the truth the way I  
was. So who am I? Who am I to do that? Why  
should I get away with acting like -- like --  
some terrorist?

DRAGÓN

You're not a terrorist --

AVIVA

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

BIJU

But I didn't mean this --

AVIVA

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

ALEXA

Hold my hand.

AVIVA

She speaks for a lot of people.

ALEXA

Here, hold.

AVIVA

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

AVIVA does not hold ALEXA's hand.

DRAGÓN

It's not the same thing at all.

AVIVA

Look -- all of you. Friends, my friends, friends  
of friends, friends of friends I don't even have  
-- they're all fucking like rabbits.

(to SAVORY and DRAGÓN)

Sorry -- but you know this, too, don't you? And  
what are most of these --

(makes a hand gesture about "coupling")

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

AVIVA makes a gesture of a rounded pregnant belly.

AVIVA

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

AVIVA takes a deep breath.

AVIVA

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

BIJU

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

SAVORY

Nothing has to be decided right now.

ALEXA

But she does want an answer.

SAVORY

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

DRAGÓN

(to SAVORY)

What are you going to do?

BIJU

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

DRAGÓN

(indicating them all)

What are we going to do?

SAVORY

You can't do anything.

DRAGÓN

Doesn't anyone have a little desire to fight back?

(to AVIVA)

Don't you?

SAVORY

This is not your call.

DRAGÓN

Listen. Listen. The poet laureate of England gets about a hundred bucks a year, and his only

job is to write poetry to celebrate the country that uses him. Almost without exception, the poetry is mierda. Why? Written on demand from a king or a queen who does not want to be upset. Queen Helms wants you as her laureate. Will you, won't you? That's the question on the table.

(to AVIVA)

Guernica. Remember? Remember? And Goya.

AVIVA

Quinquela Martín.

DRAGÓN

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

SAVORY

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

DRAGÓN

(to AVIVA)

There's the squeeze play.

The "change of class" bell rings.

DRAGÓN

I've got to go.

(to BIJU and ALEXA)

Call me, talk to me, if you want, okay?

(to AVIVA)

Welcome to the minefield.

DRAGÓN leaves.

SAVORY

I'm sorry.

ALEXA

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

BIJU

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

ALEXA

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

BIJU

Steel-toed boots for everyone!

ALEXA

Could we sue her?

SAVORY

Somebody's already working on that.

ALEXA

Run an impeachment?

SAVORY

Is strong principle a high crime?

ALEXA

A coup, then.

BIJU

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

ALEXA

We'd rally the masses.

BIJU

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

ALEXA

I know masses of masses --

AVIVA

In the dream --

Everyone pays attention.

AVIVA

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

ALEXA

Prepared.

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

ALEXA  
Did you understand that?

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

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

\* \* \* \* \*

### Act I, Scene 7: The Dream Complete

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

AUDREY  
Are you prepared?

AVIVA  
Tell me for what.

AUDREY  
No one can tell you.

AVIVA  
Then how can I be?

PRAYER 1  
It will not get easier.

PRAYER 2  
Or more understandable.

PRAYER 3  
It can't be avoided.

ALL 3  
And you are responsible for knowing everything.

AUDREY  
Do not forget.

AVIVA  
What?

AUDREY  
The letting go.

AVIVA  
I can't.

AUDREY  
The peace in letting go.

AVIVA  
A peace like death.

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

PRAYER 2  
Each color shades into decay --

PRAYER 3  
Every canvas haunted by your eventual dissolving.

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

PRAYER 1  
Oh --

PRAYER 2  
-- such --

PRAYER 3  
-- confidence!

PRAYER 1  
Her faith --

PRAYER 2  
So touching --

PRAYER 3  
Her faith --

ALL 3  
Unearned.

AUDREY  
If they disagree? Deny? Demean? Destroy?

AVIVA  
Then I will fight.

PRAYER 1

The folly of youth --

PRAYER 2

The overpriced arrogance --

PRAYER 3

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

AVIVA

I will lose it all, then.

AUDREY

You will.

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

ALL 3

There is another way.

AVIVA

There is no other way.

AUDREY

You will be sliced naked to the bone.

AVIVA

Good.

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

AVIVA

Yes!

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

AVIVA

No.

To black. Music for transition into intermission.

INTERMISSION

### **Act II, Scene 1: The Theses Nailed To The Door**

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

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

HELMS

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

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

HELMS

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

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

UTILITY 1

Councilor Helms --

HELMS

Aren't you supposed to be in school?

UTILITY 5 stands and faces the audience.

UTILITY 5

Homeroom is in an hour.

UTILITY 2 stands and faces the audience.

UTILITY 2

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

HELMS

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

UTILITY 3 stands and faces the audience.

UTILITY 3

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

HELMS

I don't disagree. Your question?

UTILITY 4 stands and faces the audience.

UTILITY 4

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

HELMS

Where did you hear this?

UTILITY 5

Around.

HELMS

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

UTILITY 1

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

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

UTILITY 2

The First Amendment --

HELMS

Good to see the history teachers are doing their jobs.

UTILITY 2

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

HELMS

No one here is a tyrant.

UTILITY 2 hands the paper to UTILITY 5 to finish.

UTILITY 5

(pushing on)

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

HELMS

Did you all write that?

UTILITY 3

With some help.

HELMS

The rest of you believe that?

(they agree)

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

UTILITY 4

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

HELMS

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

UTILITY 3

Except the picture she painted.

HELMS

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

UTILITY 5

Artists do sometimes.

HELMS

Look, it's all a balance, isn't it? You can see that. My new curriculum is about dealing with a problem -- her painting directly undercuts that.

I'm trying to save some lives -- your lives, really, to bring it down to cases -- and she's telling people that saying "no" is, well, I'm not sure what she thinks about it, only that she thinks her "no" is better than my "no." We disagree. My job is to promote the public good.

And it was in the public good to give her "no" back to her.

UTILITY 1

What if she doesn't do the painting?

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

HELMS

No exhibit. If you don't like that, take it up with her, as I said.

(to the general audience)

This is good, fruitful -- obviously some of our best standing in front of us. I think we should give them a hand for their grit.

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

HELMS

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

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

\* \* \* \* \*

## Act II, Scene 2: Aviva and Helms

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

HELMS

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

it's nice to know you have friends. I see you've brought me something.

AVIVA makes no move to unwrap the canvas.

HELMS

You can unwrap it.

AVIVA continues to remain still.

HELMS

(to BIJU and ALEXA)

Is she all right?

ALEXA

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

HELMS

I hate to push the point, but today is the deadline.

(to BIJU and ALEXA)

Have either of you seen --

BIJU

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

HELMS

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

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

HELMS

You weren't aware?

ALEXA

No. Beeba --

HELMS is strangely moved by the canvas.

AVIVA

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

HELMS

This wasn't what I was expecting.

ALEXA

You shouldn't be expecting anything from her.

BIJU

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

HELMS

(to AVIVA)

I don't want to humiliate her at all.

BIJU

Maybe we should give you your own medicine back.

HELMS

You'll have to take a number --

(to AVIVA)

What made you do --

BIJU

Let's go, Aviva.

BIJU and ALEXA move to exit.

HELMS

Wait.

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

HELMS

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

HELMS taps her own breastbone.

AVIVA

Then you can more of this than I do.

BIJU

Aviva.

HELMS

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

(pointing to canvas)

It's about this.

ALEXA

Aviva --

AVIVA

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

ALEXA

This is very painful for her.

HELMS

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

BIJU and ALEXA wait.

HELMS

You're disheartened.

AVIVA

That doesn't take a Ph.D.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

No.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

(pointing to canvas)

That's all that seemed to come out.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

Your point?

HELMS

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

AVIVA

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

HELMS

All right -- I understand. But one last thing.  
(indicating canvas)

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

AVIVA

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

HELMS

But there is.

AVIVA

You wouldn't believe me if I said it.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

It doesn't feel good.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

Load it on.

HELMS

To lighten it up.

AVIVA

Throw it in.

HELMS

I admire your grit.

AVIVA

My what?

HELMS

Your grit.

AVIVA

What exactly is "grit"?

HELMS

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

AVIVA

It sounds like an old word.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

"Grit" is good?

HELMS

"Grit" is good.

AVIVA

Why are you saying this?

HELMS

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

BIJU

(to AVIVA)

We should go.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

You, scared?

HELMS

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

HELMS holds up the picture.

HELMS

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

HELMS holds it up against what would be the wall.

HELMS

Here?

AVIVA

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

HELMS

"Viva Aviva!" Now apply that edge.

AVIVA

To what?

HELMS

To another picture.

AVIVA

I don't understand.

HELMS

To another picture. I asked you for another picture.

(holding up canvas)

Interesting, but not sufficient.

AVIVA

I still don't understand.

HELMS

I am giving you an extension until Monday.

AVIVA

An extension.

HELMS

A second second chance.

ALEXA

Why?

BIJU

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

HELMS

(indicating AVIVA)

What the two of us want -- it's not all that different, is it, Ms. Aviva Matthews? Is it?

BIJU

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

HELMS

I'm in a giving mood only this far, Mr. Matthews.

(to AVIVA)

The rest you can figure out on your own.

(holding up the canvas)

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

BIJU

Let's go.

HELMS

Onward and upward.

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

I feel horrible. ALEXA

Imagine how she feels. BIJU

I feel -- at the mercy. ALEXA

Think of her. BIJU

When you unwrapped that canvas -- ALEXA

Want to know a truth? BIJU  
(to AVIVA)

What? ALEXA

I was glad you gave that to her. BIJU

I wasn't -- ALEXA

I was proud of you! BIJU

Don't prime her! ALEXA

That weasel! BIJU

Don't use her! ALEXA

Use her? BIJU

Everyone is using her -- ALEXA

For what? BIJU

To make a point -- ALEXA

No one's using her -- BIJU

ALEXA  
Stick it there, twist it --

BIJU  
Me?

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

BIJU  
Not true --

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

BIJU  
Not true!

ALEXA  
For the greater glory!

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

AVIVA  
Dad --

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

BIJU  
Your Beeba --

AVIVA  
Your Beeba --

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

AVIVA sits.

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

BIJU  
(to AVIVA)  
Me too, I must admit.

ALEXA

Boom, right down!

BIJU

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

ALEXA

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

AVIVA

Mom --

ALEXA

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

AVIVA

I am eighteen.

BIJU

She is eighteen.

ALEXA

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

BIJU

Alexa --

ALEXA

As if eighteen finishes anything! Beeba --

AVIVA

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

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

BIJU

So what are you going to do?

ALEXA

Biju!

BIJU

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

ALEXA

The world's too quick --

BIJU

What can we do to help?

ALEXA

It's too quick! All right!

(to AVIVA)

So what can we do?

AVIVA

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

BIJU

Rise, fall, and rise again.

AVIVA

That last step -- slippery.

ALEXA

Really, Beeba: what do you want?

AVIVA

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

BIJU

What?

AVIVA

I'm not sure. But there's Mr. Dragón guilting me with Picasso and Goya -- Picasoya -- and poor Mr. Savory's pelotas squeezed between Councilor Helms and the school budget, and my fellow classmates middle-fingering me for fucking up an extra-curricular activity on their résumé. If I repaint, I can please -- let's see -- one councilor -- maybe, one principal, five fellow canvas-biters: seven bits. Mr. Dragón -- left in the lurch.

BIJU

Us -- in the "lurch" category.

(to ALEXA)

Right?

ALEXA nods wearily.

AVIVA

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

ALEXA

And you?

AVIVA

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

BIJU

Whatever you choose --

ALEXA

Whoever you choose to make that choice --

BIJU

-- you know we'll support you.

AVIVA

For "granite." I know. But --

ALEXA

Ah, that "but" --

AVIVA

I have to do it this way.

ALEXA

I know the agenda of that "but" --

AVIVA

Because I have "grit."

ALEXA

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

AVIVA

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

BIJU

Even Charles Lindbergh had a ground crew, hey?

AVIVA

Hey!

BIJU

Someone to do the worrying --

ALEXA

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

AVIVA

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

ALEXA

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

BIJU

I'll do the hospitality.

ALEXA

The Caribbean warmth.

AVIVA

And me --

BIJU

You -- you go long!

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

BIJU

And we'll all cheer.

ALEXA

Which cannot be told apart from the sound of weeping.

BIJU

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

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

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Act II, Scene 3: The Solo Flight**

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

\* \* \* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

UTILITY 1  
Tweety Bird or Sylvester?

UTILITY 2  
Nothing appealing about either one.

UTILITY 1  
Then resonates. In sympathy with.

UTILITY 2  
I feel the most tragedy for Sylvester.

UTILITY 1  
Not Tweety.

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

UTILITY 1  
But Sylvester brings his hunger on himself --

UTILITY 2  
It comes from love --

UTILITY 1  
He wants to eat Tweety!

UTILITY 2  
Only because that's all Tweety offers -- I mean, Tweety's stuck in an old paradigm -- cats eat

birds. Sylvester wants a different union -- cross-species. But the only way he can connect is on terms laid down by Tweety -- he can either play the eating game or leave the field -- and leaving, obviously, is not a live option for Sylvester.

UTILITY 1

Because he's a --  
(imitating SYLVESTER's lisp)  
-- "thychotic thtalker"!

UTILITY 2

Every obsession is based on love.

UTILITY 1

Every love doesn't need to be an obsession.

UTILITY 2

Don't be so sure.

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

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

UTILITY 2

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

UTILITY 1

But he -- he is a "he," isn't he?

UTILITY 2

I don't know -- Either of them, actually --

UTILITY 1

We need some anatomically correct animation here before proceeding.

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

UTILITY 3

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

UTILITY 3 exits, repeating the phrases.

UTILITY 3

Messéd are the bleek. Ressed are the blighteous.  
Messéd are the bleek. Ressed are the blighteous.

AVIVA scrawls UTILITY 3 into her sketchbook in heavy strokes.

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

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

UTILITY 4

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

He reads frantically for a few moments.

UTILITY 4

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

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

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

UTILITY 4

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

UTILITY 2

(to UTILITY 4)

Hey, demon spawn --

UTILITY 4

You don't wanna know anything about me --

UTILITY 2

Hey, lickspittle --

UTILITY 4

I'm just trying to keep things in!

UTILITY 2

Move your pathetic pathogens out of here!

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

UTILITY 2

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

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

UTILITY 2

My fucking parents wanted to know why I let everything go. Why not -- everything let me go. Work hard, buy shit, vote for suck-up politicians, die full of poisons and scar tissue.  
(the drumming is louder now)  
Everything's bleak, so I wear black.  
Everything's wrecked, so I retch. I puncture my body because beauty sucks and I can bleed out all the tox-sicks.  
(drumming stops)  
I got the perfect freedom. I got the perfect freedom that comes from hating everything.

UTILITY 2 starts to exit, then abruptly returns.

UTILITY 2

I'm the court jester. I'm the canary in the cave.

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

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

UTILITY 4

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

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

UTILITY 4

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

No poetic reference to what you didn't have!

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

-- most people are fucking donkeys! --

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

Kabala. Kabalabalabalabala.

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

Slam the door on that one Slam it Slam it

It's all in the equations --

Einstein didn't want you to know that.

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

UTILITY 4

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

UTILITY 4 kicks the drum away.

UTILITY 4

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

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

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

UTILITY 2

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

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

UTILITY 2

You walk a path of endless sorrow, my friend. My fiend.

(to UTILITY 4)

You are drummed out of life even as I show you the light.

UTILITY 4

Let me inform you about light.

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

UTILITY 2

To the funkier rhythm of a flukier power.

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

UTILITY 2

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

UTILITY 4

Starlight is our mother. A motherfucker! Mom!

UTILITY 2

(to UTILITY 4)

Sorrow cancels starlight.

UTILITY 4

No! Leave her alone.

UTILITY 2

Starlight is smoke -- no more, no less.

UTILITY 4

No!

UTILITY 2

The weight -- gone; the comfort -- dust; the link -- cracked.

UTILITY 4

No!

UTILITY 2

You're going -- going -- g[one] --

UTILITY 4

No!

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

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

UTILITY 3

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

UTILITY 2

Endless prayer by the balls --

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

UTILITY 3

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

UTILITY 2

Life rips through you at a higher caliber there.

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

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

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

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

AVIVA

Whether I want it or not, it just keeps coming. My fingers drown in it -- charcoal blood, my rag-paper brain. Pours in from the outcasts cast out, line after line after line -- fire always burns from the margins in. More and more and more and more they come -- oh-pressed, dee-pressed, sue-pressed, ree-pressed, com-pressed -- seeking me for their express purposes.

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

AVIVA

Pressed into service -- the halt, lame, salted, blind, bleak, marxed, flattened, surplused, welfared out, branded, browned, blacked -- the nothing-left-to-lose, the depopulated, vox depopuli. I take life from this thickness that

won't thin out, this hereness, nowness,  
thingness, thisness -- reality so distilled that  
it will not let me betray myself. Here I am at  
home, Councilor Helms.

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

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

AVIVA

Aviva. Matthews.

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

\* \* \* \* \*

#### Act II, Scene 4: The New Picture

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

DRAGÓN

So you did it.

SAVORY

And the title?

AVIVA

"Abstinence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder."

SAVORY

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

AVIVA

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

SAVORY

What does that mean?

ALEXA

She'll be here soon.

AVIVA

Yes, she will.

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

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

AVIVA  
Mistakes.

BIJU  
(laughing)  
Interesting choices.

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

AVIVA  
Wait. Wait.

DRAGÓN  
What?

SAVORY  
You can still change the --

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

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

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

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

ALEXA  
I didn't know you were --

(to BIJU)

Did you?

AVIVA

No one will ever notice.

ALEXA

Then why do it?

BIJU

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

ALEXA

But if it's not open --

BIJU

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

ALEXA

I don't know --

SAVORY

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

AVIVA

You all defended me before --

DRAGÓN

Aviva --

AVIVA

So let her come --

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

HELMS

Well?

AVIVA indicates the painting. HELMS looks at it.

HELMS

What is the title this time?

AVIVA

"Abstinence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder."

HELMS gives AVIVA both a piercing and a quizzical look.

HELMS

Again?

AVIVA  
"Abstinence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder."

HELMS  
One more time.

Everyone fidgets slightly.

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

HELMS  
A clever thing with words, don't you?  
(inspects the painting)  
But I'm going to ask you a very simple thing with  
very simple words: Where are they?

AVIVA  
Where are what?

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

HELMS looks at AVIVA. There is an uneasy silence.

HELMS  
I know you're not deaf.

AVIVA  
Councilor Helms, I delivered the picture you  
wanted.

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

A decision has to be made.

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

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

AVIVA  
I believe in what's there.

HELMS

In the values behind the paint?

AVIVA

I believe in everything that comes out of me.

HELMS

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

There is a hefty silence.

HELMS

Just one honest thing.

ALEXA

(half-hearted)

Just stop pushing her.

HELMS

This is barely a worthwhile shove.

ALEXA

Why treat her so badly?

HELMS

(to DRAGÓN)

Come on. Let me hear the formula.

DRAGÓN

Artists don't need to be questioned --

HELMS

I knew I could depend on you.

DRAGÓN

They don't need to be questioned.

HELMS

Yes, yes, that's what I thought you'd say.

(deliberately, to ALL)

Fuck. All. That. And fuck all of you.

Silence crashes around them.

HELMS

My mother showed more art in cooking a meal for us than any museum full of your paintings. At least she gave something of worth to someone, did it with love, and knew, right down to her eye teeth, why she did what she did. Which is more than you can tell me standing in front of what

you say you believe in -- "I believe in the painting." You, believe in the painting? You don't believe a stroke in it, do you? So why betray yourself saying crap like that? Your silence testifies.

AVIVA

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

HELMS

No, you didn't. No, you didn't, because there's none of your heart in it. That's what you and I were talking about just last week -- the truth in your heart. And you betrayed it for -- what? A gesture? A witticism? A pose? And as for "why," I can't begin to think I know.

(to ALL)

There's no heart in any of you.

(to AVIVA)

I'll ask you one more time -- where are the insults?

Reluctantly, AVIVA shows HELMS all the hidden items.

AVIVA

This hint of red --

HELMS

So you did lie to me.

AVIVA

A garter belt, underneath.

HELMS

And you all knew.

AVIVA

I spelled out "sex" in the lace.

HELMS

So very clever.

AVIVA

And this --

HELMS

It looks like the profile of a witch.

AVIVA

That's you.

HELMS

So. A joke. The picture as stand-up joke.  
Standing up. A stand-up person, aren't you?  
Why even bother?

(with rage)

This artist, so true to her art -- Mr. Savory.  
This is what I want to do. Re-open the exhibit  
-- the others shouldn't be punished for her lack  
of character.

ALEXA

There is no need to insult --

HELMS

(overrides)

Besides, I don't want to give the lawyers any  
work. As for this --

(indicating the painting)

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

BIJU

You have insulted all of us enough.

HELMS

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

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

SAVORY

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

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

HELMS

I am sorry.

ALEXA

For what?

HELMS

The bill of particulars doesn't matter.

(to AVIVA)

You do not need my father. And you do not need me remembering him.

(to BIJU)

If I've insulted you, then don't vote for me next time -- agreed? Assuming you voted for me last time. Mr. Savory? The curriculum.

SAVORY

That is my job, Councilor.

HELMS

Good.

(to AVIVA)

And then you. You betrayed a trust.

AVIVA

You don't have a deed on me.

HELMS

I gave you a second chance.

AVIVA

I took it with no strings.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

I have my own --

HELMS

-- that I'm the witch --

AVIVA

I have my own --

HELMS

-- then prove it.

AVIVA

What do you want from me?

HELMS

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

(indicating the painting)

This ranks with whale shit when it comes to honesty.

(more intimately)

You are not going to avoid what you need to do. And I promise you --

AVIVA

What?

HELMS

Neither will I. Neither will I. Two days.

(to SAVORY)

Forward me a notice about the exhibit.

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

UTILITY 5

They contemplate their betrayals.

DRAGÓN

An artist doesn't --

UTILITY 5

Why so bitter?

SAVORY

Stop, Norman.

DRAGÓN

It's outrageous.

SAVORY

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

UTILITY 5

Remembering his own failures?

SAVORY

We can hardly feel superior.

DRAGÓN

You should --

SAVORY

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

UTILITY 5

If only Aviva would fight his battles --

DRAGÓN

(more to himself than the others)

Then we're all cowards --

SAVORY

You lied as well, don't forget.

(to BIJU and ALEXA)

And I have to say I am disappointed --

BIJU

Perhaps we should have --

SAVORY

I wouldn't tell you how to raise --

UTILITY 5

Have they been the best parents through this?

SAVORY

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

UTILITY 5

Some limits, maybe --

ALEXA

Aviva -- honey --

AVIVA

I need to get to fourth period.

ALEXA

Yes, of course.

AVIVA

Later.

ALEXA

Right.

AVIVA

Can I leave it here?

SAVORY

Pick it up after.

UTILITY 5

She must inevitably come to him.

AVIVA

Mr. D --

DRAGÓN

What?

UTILITY 5

To soothe him.

AVIVA

It's all right.

DRAGÓN

It's not all right, Aviva! You Americans --  
Biju, you should know this better than anyone.

For almost twenty years I have been here, and you all strike me like the frog in the pot of water.

The flame gets turned up, little by little. Then, too late -- you're cooked! A little give-in here -- another stick on the fire. Another "it's all right," and you're slowly tenderized.

SAVORY

This is not the time.

DRAGÓN

(overriding)

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

AVIVA

(in synch with PAINTING)

What do you want me to do?

UTILITY 5

(in synch with AVIVA)

What do you want her to do?

DRAGÓN

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

UTILITY 5

"Fight my battles for me" --

DRAGÓN

My head says --

UTILITY 5

"I don't want to lose my job."

DRAGÓN

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

UTILITY 5

Sound the retreat.

BIJU

Save energy for the real battles.

DRAGÓN

This is a real battle --

UTILITY 5

I am worth it!

DRAGÓN

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

UTILITY 5

Don't forget me!

DRAGÓN

Don't pick up the habits of the frog!

UTILITY 5

I was your second rebellion!

AVIVA

I have your voice in my head --

DRAGÓN

Pretty annoying, isn't it?

UTILITY 5

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

DRAGÓN

I should go.

DRAGÓN leaves.

UTILITY 5

(to AVIVA)

You, however, are not used-up. Fight my battles, not his!

SAVORY

The home counties have been heard from.

UTILITY 5

In two days make my sister transform the witch.

AVIVA

I gotta book.

UTILITY 5

Two days.

SAVORY

Yes --

UTILITY 5 assumes its former position.

UTILITY 5

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

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

\* \* \* \* \*

### Act II, Scene 5: The Deposition

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

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

UTILITY 2

What do you want to do?

UTILITY 3

What do you want us to do?

UTILITY 4

What can we really do?

ALL 3

Why are you even doing this?

AVIVA

No one ever asked me before.

UTILITY 2

To what?

AVIVA  
Explain myself.

UTILITY 3  
She hates you.

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

UTILITY 4  
You want pain?

AVIVA  
I want to spill the truth.

UTILITY 2 & 3  
Whatever --

UTILITY 4  
-- that is.

AVIVA walks to UTILITY 1.

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

To the UTILITY characters.

AVIVA  
Hey, muchas gracias for coming --  
(lacing her hands into a stirrup)  
-- for giving me a step up -- but, you know, I  
think this is a go-alone.

UTILITY 2  
We rehearsed.

AVIVA  
Dog-and-pony.

UTILITY 3  
But we agree with you. Right?

UTILITY 2  
Mostly.

UTILITY 4  
Yeah, mostly.

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

UTILITY 3

Oh great one!

AVIVA

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

(pointing to her posterior)

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

UTILITY 4

(relieved)

WWF-style. Atomic pile driver and all.

UTILITY 2

You sure?

AVIVA

(looking at UTILITY 1)

She's the only who really needs to be here.

Wants to be here. Either we work this together -

-

(making a sign of the cross)

I release you.

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

HELMS

You're leaving?

AVIVA

I asked them to bear me witness -- but now I've  
"unasked" them.

HELMS

And you understand why she's done this?

UTILITY 2

I think so.

HELMS

You were at the Rotary.

UTILITY 3

Yes.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

Not necessary.

HELMS  
(shrugs)

Your call.

AVIVA  
And the call is "Later."

UTILITY 1  
We'll stay --

AVIVA  
Released.

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

HELMS  
They wanted to help.

AVIVA  
They're like that.

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

AVIVA  
Not their fight.

HELMS  
This what we're having?

AVIVA  
You want me to defend myself.

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

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

AVIVA  
All right. You ready?

HELMS  
Born so.

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



HELMS

-- if the point moved them?

AVIVA

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

HELMS

You didn't.

AVIVA

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

HELMS

Exactly!

AVIVA

Don't look like you just bagged a mouse.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

So why would I go to all --

HELMS

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

AVIVA gestures as if to say, "Whatever."

HELMS

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

(indicates between her eyes)

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

AVIVA

So why am I here?

HELMS

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

(indicating UTILITY 1)

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

AVIVA

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

HELMS

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

AVIVA

And if I don't want to --

HELMS

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

AVIVA

I'm free to leave --

HELMS

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

AVIVA

I don't read minds.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

They're not.

HELMS

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

AVIVA ponders the choice.

AVIVA

I could always use being taller.

HELMS

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

(points to UTILITY 1)

Her turn.

AVIVA

Yeah.

AVIVA walks to UTILITY 1

AVIVA

(to UTILITY 1)

Ready?

UTILITY 1

That's how you made me.

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

AVIVA

(turning to HELMS)

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

UTILITY 1

Forced --

AVIVA

Forced on us a curriculum about our lives --

UTILITY 1

Our bodies.

AVIVA

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

UTILITY 1

Abstinence --

AVIVA

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

UTILITY 1

We fuck -- we're alive!

HELMS

Thus, your title.

UTILITY 1

"Abstinence Has No Substance."

HELMS  
These -- elements -- parts --

AVIVA  
The dress.

HELMS  
Ripped.

UTILITY 1  
Innocence dee-leted.

AVIVA  
No more innocent children today.

UTILITY 1  
We can't afford it.

AVIVA  
And besides, you adults --

UTILITY 1  
Your ge-ge-generation --

AVIVA  
Have fucked over --  
(backs off)  
Sorry --

UTILITY 1  
Don't be sorry!

HELMS  
Let it bite --

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

UTILITY 1  
Not us.

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

UTILITY 1  
Not us.

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

UTILITY 1

And we just love being morphed into a market niche.

AVIVA

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

UTILITY 1

And adolescence --

AVIVA

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

HELMS

Not all of us --

UTILITY 1

You're all stained --

AVIVA

Maybe not all --

UTILITY 1

You're too forgiving --

AVIVA

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

UTILITY 1

One fucking bad apple!

HELMS

The chain?

AVIVA

Your guilt --

UTILITY 1

Locking us down --

AVIVA

We're forced to live off your poison --

UTILITY 1

Head >em up!

AVIVA

And when the children of the cesspool --

UTILITY 1

Move >em out!

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

UTILITY 1  
Columbine, my Columbine --

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

UTILITY 1  
Tribal trash!

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

UTILITY 1  
"History --"

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

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

AVIVA  
Lock us down --

UTILITY 1  
Lock us out --

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

UTILITY 1  
Which you never even had!

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

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

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

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

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

UTILITY 1  
Just Say No.

AVIVA  
-- and ignorance in your cesspool --

UTILITY 1  
At The Mercy.

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

HELMS moves toward UTILITY 1.

HELMS  
The colors -- dark.

AVIVA  
Yes.

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

AVIVA  
Yes.

HELMS  
The way they're bent --

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

HELMS  
Demure.

AVIVA  
But make it look like painful, too --

HELMS  
Legs not standing up straight.

AVIVA  
Not allowed --

HELMS peers at UTILITY 1 closely.

HELMS  
Good detail work.

AVIVA  
I like detail.

HELMS  
Did those lessons help?

AVIVA  
We worked the small-brush.

HELMS  
Public money well spent?

UTILITY 1  
It put me on the map.

AVIVA  
It put clothes on her back.

HELMS  
You insulted me --

AVIVA  
She deserved to breathe.

HELMS  
You lied to me --

AVIVA  
I apologize for that.

HELMS  
At any cost for your art?

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

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

HELMS  
It was an adolescent thing to do.

UTILITY 1  
At least I'm interesting!

HELMS  
And loud.

AVIVA  
I am an adolescent.

HELMS  
No, you're not.

UTILITY 1

No, you're not.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

I've been told that before.

UTILITY 1

So what happens to me now?

AVIVA

What happens to her now?

HELMS

What does she want? You want?

AVIVA looks at UTILITY 1.

AVIVA

You really want to know?

HELMS

I really want to know.

UTILITY 1

Put me in the dark, I die.

AVIVA

She wants the chance to do what she does best.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

Didn't think so.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

You and I?

UTILITY 1

Let the games begin.

HELMS

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

UTILITY 1

The circle was too thin.

AVIVA

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

HELMS

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

AVIVA

And no queen bee from the throne.

HELMS

I won't sting --

AVIVA

I won't prance --

HELMS

We'll see how things go.

AVIVA

And we'll go from there. What now?

HELMS

I have work to do.

AVIVA

You'll talk to Mr. Savory.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

Yes.

AVIVA goes to say something, but HELMS stops her.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

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

HELMS

No.

AVIVA

Good.

HELMS

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

AVIVA

We'll see how things go.

HELMS

And we'll go from there.

AVIVA

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

HELMS

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

AVIVA

On target.

HELMS

I have work to do --

AVIVA

So do I.

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