

## **Translation**

by

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# Translation

## DESCRIPTION

HELEN GUILD, a successful appraiser of theatre photography, must decide if she wants to trust a stranger to translate a journal that may contain revelations she is uncertain she wants to know. For his part, ORAL TIMMINS, the translator, learns a lesson about the power of words to transform and the capacity of love to transcend time, place, gender, and language.

## CHARACTERS

- ORAL TIMMINS, a free-lance translator
- HELEN GUILD, a buyer, appraiser, and curator of theatre photography
- PALLAS WORTE, a buyer, appraiser, and curator of photography
- JEFFREY MITCHELL, Oral's friend
- UTILITY 1 will play VOICE OVER INTERCOM, KARLA BAEDER, ROSA at the Goethe Institute, WOMAN WITH CHILD at the café, PIPER at Jeffrey's workplace -- late fifties/early sixties, in physically good shape
- UTILITY 2 will play GEORG BETHE, CUSTOMER at the Goethe Institute, WAITER at the café, SID at Jeffrey's workplace, MAN AT PHONE BOOTH - late fifties/early sixties, in physically good shape

**Note:** All the actors will have to speak some German.

**Time:** Mid-1980s, so that there are no cell phones and email, and phone booths still exist

**Setting:** Any American city; Berlin

**Note:** The furniture, etc., in each scene should be selected so that it can be re-used in the following scenes; there should be a minimum of moving props on and off in order to speed scene changes. There is also a large picture window in each scene, which will be used in each subsequent scene for different purposes and lit to indicate times of day and moods. However, the director and set designer are free to discard any suggestions and do the settings in any way that fits budget and conception.

# Translation

## Scene 1

A smartly furnished office, solid, without ostentation. Behind the desk, a window. During the scene the color gradually changes as time passes until it is early evening. A second desk or table sits off to the side.

HELEN looks out the window. On the desk, sitting alone in the middle of the blotter, is a 1-inch thick manuscript in a three-ring binder, black and unlabeled.

A voice comes over the intercom.

VOICE

Ms. Guild? Ms. Guild?

HELEN

Yes?

VOICE

There's someone here to see you.

HELEN

Yes.

VOICE

He's from --

(whispered consultation)

-- from the translation agency.

HELEN

(overlapping)

-- from the translation agency -- yes, I know.  
Tell him to wait a moment.

HELEN takes the binder. She holds it so that the upper-right hand corner is in her right palm and lower-left hand corner is in her left palm. Then she spins the binder, getting as many revolutions out of it as she can. Then she slams the binder down on the desk, squares it, then calls the receptionist.

HELEN

Send him in.

ORAL enters. HELEN indicates for him to sit down. ORAL sits, clutching a small leather portfolio. HELEN appraises him. ORAL fidgets under her gaze. Time passes.

HELEN

I need some German documents translated.

ORAL  
(unzips the portfolio)  
Okay -- I brought my résumé and samples --

HELEN  
Actually, not documents -- just one document.

ORAL  
(takes out résumé)  
Good -- I can show you --

HELEN  
What is your name?

ORAL  
My name. Timmins. Oral Timmins.

HELEN  
Oral Timmins?

ORAL  
Oral Timmins.

HELEN  
What a --

ORAL  
Yes.

HELEN  
-- singular name for a translator.

ORAL  
Yes.

HELEN  
I've only heard of -

ORAL  
-- one man with that name --

HELEN  
Yes.

ORAL  
The "deeply sighing, always-dying, keeps on crying Oral Roberts." My namesake.

HELEN  
Now you have me fascinated.

ORAL  
It's not --

HELEN

But it is -- go on --

ORAL

My parents -- big supporters, dollar- and Bible-wise. Hoping I'd follow Oral's path --

HELEN

So they named you --

ORAL

They had high hopes.

HELEN

But.

ORAL

(shrugs)

But. They knew they'd pretty much lost the battle when around ten years old I was calling son Richard "Dental" and his father "Hygiene."

HELEN

Hygiene.

ORAL

You know age ten -- thought it was a great joke -  
- repeated it -- to everyone.

HELEN

"Were" supporters?

ORAL

Still are. I'm sorry -- are you --

HELEN

Not to worry, Oral Timmins. I actually hoped the Lord would keep him when he threatened to die if he couldn't raise money.

ORAL

(laughs)

I know -- headline: "GOD TO ORAL: DROP DEAD."

HELEN

And your parents --

ORAL

They are still Sunday-morning folks -- though I'm not sure who they're watching now.

HELEN

Do you ever -- well, how else to put it? --  
resent --

ORAL  
My parents weren't vicious. Just hopeful.

HELEN  
And you don't --

ORAL  
You can't hate them for being hopeful.

HELEN  
No, we can do that to ourselves well enough.

ORAL  
(reaching into portfolio)  
Look, I can show you --

HELEN  
And are you a sermonizer?

ORAL  
Just a humble hack at heart. "Have tongue, will translate."

HELEN  
But raised on the Bible, yes? Words as weapons.

ORAL  
More like words as flesh.

HELEN  
Flesh --

ORAL  
Speaking and living -- cognate. Sympathetic.

HELEN  
My parents named me Helen because they wanted a goddess.

ORAL  
All right.

HELEN  
Daughter of Zeus and Leda, wife of Spartan Menelaus --

ORAL  
Eloper with Paris to Troy -- destroyer of cities --

HELEN  
"She moves a goddess -- "

ORAL

"-- and she looks a queen."

HELEN

I learned that one early on -- used it on the  
playground to confuse the attack dogs.

ORAL

And the Helenas: All's Well That Ends Well, St.  
Helena, mother of Constantine. And St. Helen's  
fire -- uh, blue flames on the ship's masts: if  
one, bad weather; if two or more, it be fair  
sailin', me hearties.

HELEN

Their tuition was well spent --

ORAL

They might [argue] --

HELEN

But, to the heart of the matter -- your German.

ORAL

Fluent. Since this high.

HELEN

First language?

ORAL

Third-generation parents, so I got English with  
my oatmeal. It was the older people in town, at  
the Turn Verein -- a kind of community center.  
Trouped there every day for German lessons --

HELEN

Show me.

ORAL

What?

HELEN

Show me a lesson.

ORAL

Really?

HELEN

Yes.

ORAL

You want me to do a German lesson?

HELEN

How else can I test the goods?

ORAL

All right.

HELEN

Stand up.

ORAL rises.

ORAL

Well, these crusty old Teutons worked us hard.

Takes the posture of a stern teacher, speaks English in a German accent.

ORAL

"Now, class, the numbers. Very important -- think of them as pennies, adding up, adding up.

(uses his fingers)

Repeat: eins, zwei, drei, vier, fuenf -- " I loved saying "fuenf"! Fuenf! Do you want me to --

HELEN

To what?

ORAL

Go on -- it gets boring in another three numbers -- but I can --

HELEN

Part A done -- we'll get to B in a moment --

ORAL

(sits)

Cubic yards of irregular verbs. Getting all the glottals right --

ORAL makes the proper hacking sound in his throat.

ORAL

-- "machen."

HELEN

You hated it.

ORAL

Are you kidding -- you could make disgusting noises and get praised!

HELEN

The ten-year old heaven.

ORAL

It just took with me.

HELEN

Oral gratification.

ORAL

Well, yes, in a manner of speaking --

HELEN falls silent. ORAL waits.

HELEN

Help me remember something, Oral Timmins.

ORAL

If I [can] --

HELEN

I memorized this once -- How does it begin?

(flat pronunciation)

"Und diese menschlichere Liebe" -- would that be right, "menschlichere"? [pronounces it as "mens-likker"]

ORAL

Mensch - the ssh sound, a little forceful, tongue behind the air. Mensch.

HELEN

Mensch.

ORAL

Menschlichere. Not "likker" -- let the air escape. Soft, not hard. Menschlichere.

HELEN

Menschlichere.

ORAL

(laughs)

Well, not native -- yet. Okay, "Und diese menschlichere Liebe" -- "And this more human love -- "

HELEN

-- "die unendlich rücksichtsvoll" -- is that right?

ORAL

"Rücksichtsvoll" -- don't know. Continue.

HELEN

"Rücksichtsvoll und leise" -

ORAL

Ah! -- "that will fulfill itself, infinitely" --

(continues)

"Infinitely considerate and gentle" -- I know this.

HELEN

"Und gut und klar in Binden und Lösen sich --"

ORAL

"Sich vollziehen wird" -- "and kind and clear in binding and releasing."

(continues)

"Wird jener ähneln, die wir ringend und mühsam vorbereiten, der Liebe, die darin besteht, dass zwei Einsamkeiten einander schützen, grenzen und grüssen."

HELEN

Couldn't have said it better myself.

ORAL

"And this more human love -- "

HELEN

Wait.

HELEN opens the drawer of her desk and opens a copy of Rilke.

HELEN

"And this more human love --

HELEN indicates for him to continue.

ORAL

"And this more human love -- that will fulfill itself, infinitely considerate and gentle, and kind and clear in binding and releasing -- "

HELEN holds up a finger to stop him; she continues.

HELEN

" -- will resemble that which we are preparing with struggle and toil, the love which consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other." Thunderous applause.

ORAL

When did you have to memorize Rilke?

HELEN

Didn't "have to." I wanted to be the young poet.

HELEN puts the book back in the drawer.

ORAL

So you memorized it --

HELEN

Many burned bridges ago.

HELEN walks away.

HELEN

Mr. Oral Timmins, on that desk sits an unusual document.

ORAL

All right.

HELEN

Unsolicited it came to me -- though I know who wrote it. Would you bring it to me?

ORAL takes the binder to HELEN. She points to photographs on the "wall."

HELEN

Some of my background. Please, look.

ORAL walks along the "wall" looking at the photos, listening while HELEN speaks. He finishes as she finishes.

HELEN

I deal in photography -- buy, sell, and appraise. This past May I went to Germany to evaluate a private collection taken during the Weimar period. A buyer here wanted photos of American blacks who went to Germany to perform -- especially some exquisite Josephine Baker images. He hired me to tell him their worth, agreed to pay all my expenses. So off I went. While there I met the person hired by the family to do their appraisal. We had much in common. I sent off the appraisal and decided to stay for a small vacation. This person made my stay delightful. After my return we wrote several letters, then lost contact -- until --

(holds up the binder)

I can pick out words here and there -- days of the week. Numbers. "Fuenf." Places. My name. Her name.

ORAL

Work-related?

HELEN

No.

HELEN looks directly at ORAL, the binder clasped to her. ORAL returns her gaze.

ORAL

May I see it --

HELEN moves back to the desk, then to the window. ORAL follows as far as the desk.

HELEN

Weimar Germany --

ORAL

All right.

HELEN

Full of -- the right word? -- ambiguity.

ORAL

An unsettled time, I suppose.

HELEN

Many of the photographs I saw were chock-full of ambiguity -- lines crossed in gender, dress, class. And soon the "facts" ground them out because their lines weren't neat. As a translator, Mr. Timmins, don't you always lie?

ORAL

That canard about the Italian for "translator" being the same as "traitor"?

HELEN

Did Rilke say what you said he said?

ORAL

It's a facsimile.

HELEN

A lie.

ORAL

The best way to say in English what's said in German.

HELEN

And how does that happen?

ORAL

A mix. A guess.

HELEN

Rummaging in the dark --

ORAL

Some words carry over directly but concepts -- estimates.

HELEN

How do you estimate?

ORAL

One gets taught --

HELEN

No -- not one. Not one. You. If you're not using the facts -- Mr. Timmins -- if the reference books don't tell you what you need -- where does it all come from?

ORAL

One develops -- I develop -- a feel --

HELEN

A grope --

ORAL

A feel for what's underneath.

HELEN

Rummaging in the dark.

ORAL

Yes, but not in the dark -- in life, life in general -- in my own life, in my own heart. "Thoughts come not from the head but from the heart."

HELEN puts down the binder, opens a desk drawer and takes out a Polaroid camera.

HELEN

Parry with a quote.

ORAL

Always quote to impress.

HELEN

It does not. Look at me.

HELEN takes a picture of ORAL, puts the camera on the desk but holds the picture.

HELEN

You trust your heart?

ORAL

Yes.

HELEN

And why should I?

ORAL

Actions speak louder -- you haven't sent me home yet.

HELEN

That just means I don't distrust.

ORAL

(taking his portfolio)

I can show you my own "pictures," if you want --

HELEN

Your words to action.

ORAL

Words to flesh.

HELEN

(pointing to portfolio)

How would you estimate it?

ORAL

Done as well as anyone's.

HELEN

As well as anyone's.

ORAL

As well as yours.

HELEN

Complimented or dismayed?

ORAL

Depends.

HELEN

On?

ORAL

Pardon me for saying this -- "forward" as my folks would say -- but it depends upon your own heart.

HELEN

Pass on that for the moment.

HELEN looks at the Polaroid, shows it to him from a distance.

HELEN  
And this portfolio -- full complement of human  
virtue?

ORAL  
And vice.

HELEN  
That is good to know.

ORAL  
And in-between.

HELEN  
The ambiguities.

ORAL  
I have never let a fact outshine the ambiguous.

HELEN hands the Polaroid to ORAL.

HELEN  
Is this a face you would trust? Is this face a  
good translation?

ORAL  
(with a gesture)  
Fuenf!

HELEN  
I think I have danced enough.

ORAL  
All right.

HELEN spins the binder as before, then hands it to ORAL. ORAL hands  
her the photo, takes the binder but does not open it.

HELEN  
I need to know what this says and have to trust  
you to tell me. At least, I have to not distrust  
you to tell me. We need to make a contract.

ORAL  
Spell out what needs to be spelled out.

HELEN  
Not an agency contract --

ORAL  
No -- not even a contract -- a -- covenant.

HELEN  
Covenant. An "Oral Hygiene" word. Covenant,  
then. And your end?

ORAL  
Simple -- what you've been testing here: the best  
my head and heart can offer.

HELEN picks up Polaroid, looks at it and then at ORAL; ORAL looks  
straight back at her.

HELEN  
Open it. Read the first paragraph.

ORAL  
Now?

HELEN  
"The world wants to be betrayed."  
(smiles slightly)  
Always quote to impress. Yes, now.

By this time the window has darkened considerably. The room is also  
in semi-darkness. ORAL opens the binder to the first page and reads  
silently, tracing his index finger under the lines. He looks at  
HELEN, then back down to the page.

HELEN  
Are you ready?

ORAL  
Yes.

HELEN  
Two blue flames, wasn't it, for good weather?

HELEN holds up both hands and wiggles the fingers as if they were  
flames.

HELEN  
And away.

Transition music: The Threepenny Opera.

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## Scene 2

A richly appointed room, though not ostentatious. The light through  
the window should be bright sunlight, warm and comforting. On the  
table are several archival boxes of photographs, neatly arranged and  
in sleeves, and a loupe.

From off stage voices approach. The conversation is animated, friendly. Entering the room are GEORG BETHE and KARLA BAEDER; after several beats, HELEN GUILD and PALLAS WORTE enter. Note: The German characters should speak their English with German accents, though these do not have to be heavy. PALLAS has the lightest accent of all.

GEORG  
(just as he enters)  
What a good meal!

KARLA  
(just as she enters)  
Georg, I can't believe you.

GEORG  
And I love talking with the American!

KARLA  
Georg! Don't change the subject.

GEORG  
And the subject is --

KARLA  
That you believe love is irrelevant.

GEORG  
I didn't say "irrelevant," Karla -- I said "troublesome." And I added, if you remember, "probably unnecessary."

KARLA  
Now you're just being a provocateur!

GEORG  
We're born alone, we're mostly alone while we coast along, we die alone. Where's the tragedy in that?

KARLA  
So arid. So forlorn.

GEORG  
You're my lawyer -- you're not supposed to have a heart. If I find out you have a heart -- I'm going to have to watch you!

GEORG walks to table, looks at photographs.

GEORG  
Besides, it's much better to make money -- though I'll be glad when this business is over. Imagine some American wanting to buy this -- trash. And for so much lucre!

PALLAS and HELEN enter, HELEN paying close attention to PALLAS.

KARLA  
Your parents required it in their will.

GEORG  
The dead hand of the dead past.

KARLA  
Don't be too sentimental.

GEORG  
(to the two women)  
Ah, our better halves. I hope Frau Worte here  
hasn't chewed your ear off -- don't you just love  
American slang! Chewed your ear off!

HELEN  
Pallas has been just marvelous.

PALLAS  
Yes I have! And her ear is quite intact, Georg.  
Her lovely ear is quite intact.

HELEN  
(halting German)  
Alles ist einfach wunderbar.

GEORG  
You have just spoken more German than most  
Americans speak in a lifetime.

HELEN  
No excuse for not being better at it, except  
laziness.

KARLA  
And that you are American.

PALLAS  
Karla!

GEORG  
Karla, you've turned nationalist.

KARLA  
I meant in terms of language. Americans are so  
ignorant of other languages.  
(to HELEN)  
Accept my apology -- I did not mean to mean that  
you were some "ugly American."

PALLAS  
She certainly is not.

GEORG

Pallas to the rescue again. And a lawyer with manners! Most certainly have to keep a close eye on you! Helen -- what did you think of our dear lawyer's penchant for pathos over lunch, all that Rilke about love and solitude? What does the American say about love?

HELEN

(jokingly)

Is there an American point of view?

PALLAS

Don't let him bully you.

GEORG

Rilke, Rilke, Rilke, Rilke --

KARLA

Grow up --

HELEN

Very true, Georg -- Rilke is Rilke is Rilke is Rilke.

GEORG

So?

HELEN

I think what he says is very true. That's it.

GEORG

Which is?

KARLA

Don't bother her with all this. I should go.

GEORG

Wait, Karla. Helen?

HELEN

The American point of view?

PALLAS

One American point of view.

HELEN

In general --

GEORG

The debater's thrust --

HELEN

-- love and solitude are two things Americans don't connect. It's much the opposite.

GEORG  
But you like Rilke?

HELEN  
I do.

GEORG  
But you're American?

KARLA  
Master of the [obvious] --

HELEN  
Yes.

GEORG  
So why? What makes you so different?

PALLAS  
(to GEORG)  
Like a mongoose!

GEORG  
But debonair!

KARLA  
Now you have me curious.

PALLAS  
So I guess you must answer.

HELEN  
If you insist -- because Rilke doesn't give in to  
the noise.

GEORG  
Explain.

HELEN  
In the United States, everything has to have a  
sound track. I was in a bar once where they even  
had televisions in the bathroom. If you have the  
noise, you don't have to think.

GEORG  
And thinking and love have to do with each other  
--

HELEN  
A very artful debater, Georg -- first you pooh-  
pooh -

GEORG  
Pooh-pooh? Was bedeutet das "pooh-pooh"? [What  
is this pooh-pooh?]

HELEN  
(laughs)

An elegant American phrase for "dismiss." First you dismiss Karla for saying that love is necessary, and now you seem to say that love should be spontaneous, not the product of thinking -- which would imply that you think it's necessary.

GEORG  
(to KARLA)

Help me out here!

KARLA

Why?

(to HELEN)

Continue making my point.

HELEN

Rilke's point -- I think. Before you can love someone else --

GEORG

Does this "you" mean you, too?

HELEN  
(smiling)

Before you can love someone else --

GEORG

Another debater's point.

PALLAS

Let her finish.

GEORG  
(to KARLA)

The summing-up, eh?

HELEN  
(to PALLAS)

Thank you. Before you can love someone else, you have to so love yourself as to be completely alone with yourself --

PALLAS

Yes.

HELEN

-- completely at ease with your solitude -- safe in your loneliness. In that respect, Georg, you're right -- we're born, live, and die alone.

PALLAS

But not all kinds of alone are the same.

HELEN

Right. Right. This is how it hits me: it's only out of that solitude that you can love someone else. And people who love each other need to protect each other's solitude. No sound tracks. No noise.

KARLA

Game, set, match.

GEORG

Pallas -- a kindred soul here, perhaps.

PALLAS

Perhaps.

KARLA

Georg, I must go -- I do have other clients.

GEORG

Other lunches, she means.

KARLA

Pallas, a pleasure working with you again. Helen. I know the way out.

GEORG

All the ins and outs. May you find love.

KARLA

May you pay my bill on time.

GEORG

I love you.

KARLA

Put the check in the mail to show it.

GEORG

Consider it done.

KARLA

Then I love you, too.

KARLA leaves.

GEORG

A lawyer with a heart -- how rare, how rare. Pallas, I have a question to ask you.

GEORG goes to the boxes of photos on the table; to HELEN.

GEORG

Helen, please excuse me for a moment -- a little more business -- well, pleasure, for me at least. Unless, of course, your Mr. Wiley wants to buy these as well.

HELEN

Pallas has already persuaded me to spend more of Mr. Wiley's money than he had expected.

(to PALLAS)

You are sharp.

PALLAS

Always easier to play with other people's money.

GEORG

Pallas. Pallas. We also found these photos in the vault -- a hand-signed note said they had been taken by Erfurth.

GEORG shows her the note, a protective sleeve.

GEORG

Pictures of Erwin Piscator, the Red Revue, Blue Blouses. What do you think?

While GEORG is talking, HELEN moves to the window, calm. PALLAS, trying to listen to GEORG, nonetheless lets her gaze go to HELEN.

GEORG

Look at these. Mahagonny. And that's Brecht. Brecht!

Picks up the loupe, leans down to look at the photo more closely.

GEORG

Look. Das ist sehr lecker. Lecker! [This is so delicious. Delicious.]

GEORG becomes absorbed in looking at the pictures. As he does, PALLAS moves to HELEN.

PALLAS

You seem pensive.

HELEN

I'm sorry.

PALLAS

Don't apologize.

(indicating GEORG)

His beloved Brecht!

(recites, from Threepenny)  
"The world is poor and men are bad / There is of  
course no more to add." From Threepenny. Die  
Dreigroschenoper.

HELEN  
Quote to impress?

PALLAS  
Only among strangers. Georg knows all of  
Threepenny.

HELEN  
I've never even heard it.

PALLAS  
No matter -- knowing all of it is not a great  
accomplishment to my mind. Are you pensive?

HELEN  
Just thinking about going back. I'm done here.

GEORG  
Pallas -- look at this!

PALLAS  
In a moment.  
(to HELEN)  
Is your patron expecting you?

HELEN  
Not for several more days. You moved things  
right along!

PALLAS  
Then why not stay?

GEORG  
Pallas! Look!

PALLAS  
In a moment. Will you? Stay?

GEORG  
(to himself)  
Truly remarkable! Like silken thighs. Like the  
soft underbreast.

At GEORG's statement, HELEN and PALLAS look at each other and then  
burst out laughing.

GEORG  
What? What?

PALLAS  
Your critical terminology -- You're  
embarrassing our American.

HELEN  
I don't scare that easily.

PALLAS  
Good.

GEORG  
You tell me, then.  
(calls them to the table)  
Look at this Blossfeldt. Look at the  
luminescence in his picture of the thistle -- he  
makes something so common look extra-ordinary.  
Like you'd never seen it before. Something lifted  
out of the ordinary.

PALLAS  
Perhaps Helen would like to see some of your  
other Blossfeldt.

GEORG  
Would you?

PALLAS  
(to HELEN)  
Say yes.

HELEN  
(quizzically)  
Yes.

GEORG  
Good! I'll be right back!

GEORG hurries from the room.

HELEN  
What was that about?

PALLAS  
I just wanted a moment -- to get your answer.

HELEN  
About what?

PALLAS  
About lingering. For a few days. You said  
yourself you don't need to be right back.

PALLAS takes HELEN's hand in hers.

PALLAS

It would give me great pleasure if you stayed.

HELEN pulls her hand away slowly.

HELEN

I think it's possible.

PALLAS

What are you doing this evening?

HELEN

I have to write up my report and fax it to Mr. Wiley.

PALLAS

Tomorrow morning, then?

HELEN

Do you really like this picture?

PALLAS

Do you?

HELEN

I can see what Georg liked.

PALLAS

Do you like it?

HELEN

It does shine. Just as Georg said.

PALLAS

It does shine -- as Georg said.

HELEN

Do you like it?

PALLAS

This is what I like. I like how it seems to say, "Here and now." Present at the present tense. Dasein.

HELEN

Dasein?

PALLAS

Being. Zuhanden sein.

HELEN

(haltingly)

Zuhanden sein.

PALLAS  
Being at hand.

HELEN  
Coffee tomorrow morning?

PALLAS  
That will do for a start.

HELEN  
Where?

PALLAS  
Near your hotel is a nice little Konditorei.

HELEN  
I'll meet you there. At 10.

GEORG enters with a large volume, puts it on the table and opens it.

GEORG  
More and more and more and more.

HELEN  
Georg --

GEORG  
Yes?

HELEN gives PALLAS a smile as she speak.

HELEN  
Vielen Dank für die Gastfreundschaft.

PALLAS  
Very good.

GEORG  
Have you been getting tutored? Your German has improved immensely in the last five minutes.

HELEN  
It must be the atmosphere.

GEORG  
No need to thank me -- just thank me by looking. There!

They look at the photo.

PALLAS  
Like silken thighs.

HELEN

Like the soft underbreast.

GEORG

Couldn't have said it better myself.

Lights down as they continue looking through the book. Transition music: something from Marlene Dietrich.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 3

The Goethe Institute -- can be a simple morph from GEORG's house. ORAL sits at a table going through books, doing research, taking notes -- quite busy. ROSA comes in, lugging books, and plunks them down on the table next to ORAL. ORAL does not even look up.

ORAL

Rosa, Rosa, my love --

ROSA

(overlapping)

Not your love, Mr. Timmins.

ORAL

(overlapping)

-- my love --

ROSA

Jeffrey is your love.

ORAL

I was poetically speaking, of course --

ROSA

Not your type.

ORAL

But what would I do without your type? And, to be honest, you without me? And the Goethe Institute without the likes of us?

ROSA

The last two on your list would survive.

ORAL

You are harsh.

ROSA

You should see how I treat people I don't like.

ORAL

I believe you just gave me a left-handed compliment. Then a harsh love is better than none, and I accept.

ROSA rearranges, straightens the materials on the desk.

ORAL

(points to a book)

I need that.

ROSA hands it to him.

ROSA

You haven't been here in a while.

ORAL

I have not been many places in a while, Rosa. I seem to be in state of some hibernation.

ROSA

And no more details than that?

ORAL

You'll have to buy the memoir.

ROSA

That will never happen.

ORAL

Your buying?

ROSA

Your writing -- you'd actually have to be organized.

ORAL

Touché, ouch, and all of that.

ROSA sits, starts looking through the materials.

ROSA

You were once more talkative.

ORAL

I was once more a lot of things, Rosa -- I think -- I can't always remember -- some days I just feel old and -- dodgy -- yes --

ROSA

Dodgy -- but not today, apparently -- a very interesting collection of materials -- "priapic," one might say.

ORAL

Not only phallic -- I've got Walter Lacquer and Peter Gay around here somewhere -- and there's some "gyno" stuff thrown -- somewhere -- about prostitutes.

ROSA

(picks up book)

Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin.

ORAL shuffles the books around as he speaks.

ORAL

And there is this other material about "kul-cha" -- the Bauhaus, Dix, Kollwitz -- intellectuals -- Spengler, Heidegger, Jaspers --

ROSA rises to leave.

ROSA

Well, I will leave you with your "investigations"  
--

But she doesn't leave.

ORAL

You're dying to know, aren't you?

ROSA

I will formally say no --

ORAL

As a discreet librarian should --

ROSA

But of course yes. Who wouldn't be intrigued when a penniless translator --

ORAL

Wait --

ORAL rummages in his pockets, holds up two pennies.

ORAL

I have pennies, Rosa -- plural --

ROSA

Ah -- so when a tuppenny translator, then, looks at dirty pictures of naughty boys --

ORAL

And girls --

ROSA

At a library where he does not belong --

ORAL

Aided by the golden-hearted if gruff and superb -  
-

ROSA

Should he be trusted --

ORAL

He should -- because he has a job.

ROSA

Researching this stuff.

ORAL

Not exactly -- but it's connected. I know that  
look, but it's true! My new boss connected it --  
I wouldn't have thought it up myself. Weimar and  
ambiguity seemed to niggle at the back of her  
mind, and so --

ROSA

Straight to arms of the Institute.

ORAL

And my Rosa -- you being the only one that lets  
me use a library without a membership.

ORAL puts away his pennies.

ORAL

And two pennies does not mean I'm still not  
penniless.

ROSA

Any clues?

ORAL

To?

ROSA

Why?

ORAL

Well, my "job" is translating a document that my  
boss "she" got from another "she."

ROSA

Is your boss "she" a "she-inclined person"?

ORAL

"She," I think --

ROSA

The "boss she" --

ORAL

The "boss she" is "she unsure" --

ROSA

"She-shy" -- so to speak --

ORAL

But, apparently, not completely "she-no" --

ROSA

Or "she-yes" --

ORAL

Aye, there's the rub that brought on the Weimar -  
-

ROSA

And this "other she" wrote --

ORAL

I read part of it out loud to "boss she" --

ROSA

And?

ORAL

"Boss she" said "yes" to what could've been "no"  
right then and there -- because the "other she's"  
words --

ROSA

Were --

ORAL

Enough to make me glad I have this job.

ROSA

"Boss she" wants to know --

ORAL

Forbidden fruit --

ROSA

(points to books)

And that's why --

ORAL

I'm looking through the historical garden.

ROSA rises, looking preoccupied, walks away from the table.

ORAL

And, Rosa, it's amazing what was there. Berlin was wide-open -- free --

ORAL rummages among his notes, pulls out a notecard.

ORAL

I got this from Louise Brooks: "Sex was the business of the town. At the Eden Hotel, where I lived, the cafe bar was lined with the higher-priced trollops. The economy girls walked the street outside. On the corner stood the girls in boots, advertising flagellation...."

ORAL rummages again, comes up with another notecard.

ORAL

Apparently there was a whole color scheme with boots and shoes that let clients know the inclinations of the wearer --

ORAL tosses the card, continues reading.

ORAL

"The nightclub Eldorado displayed an enticing line of homosexuals dressed as women. At the Maly, there was a choice of feminine or collar-and-tie lesbians. Collective lust roared unashamed at the theater. In the revue Chocolate Kiddies, when Josephine Baker appeared naked except for a girdle of bananas, it was precisely as Lulu's stage entrance was described by Wedekind: 'They rage there as in a menagerie when the meat appears at the cage.'"

ORAL puts the card away.

ORAL

I mean, every orifice had its price listed on the orifice menu. Brutal, I guess, but -- free -- unfurled --

ORAL sees the preoccupied ROSA.

ORAL

Was it the word "orifice"?

ROSA

I'm thinking of them both --

ORAL

From "she" to shining "she" -- so to speak --

ROSA

Stop it -- just stop it --

ORAL  
All right.

ROSA  
Stop thinking it was fun.

ROSA paces.

ROSA  
Good -- you shut up.

ORAL  
What are you thinking about?

ROSA  
I'm thinking of prices.

ORAL  
For? Or is it "of"?

ROSA  
You want some "oral" history? My mother -- my dear dear mutter -- was a kontroll girl in Berlin.

This takes ORAL back for a moment. Then he rummages, picks out a book, flips to a chapter, holds it up.

ORAL  
The clean prostitutes.

ROSA  
Let me see that.

ROSA scans the chapter while she speaks.

ROSA  
Yes -- yes -- with their kontroll books certifying their "clean venereal health."

Light up on UTILITY 1 as CUSTOMER, looking like a figure from a painting by George Grosz or Otto Dix. ROSA moves slowly toward him.

ORAL  
She told you this?

ROSA  
She showed me the book.

ORAL  
She kept it?

ROSA  
She wasn't ashamed. She ate well. She had me.

As ROSA approaches the CUSTOMER, she takes a small book out of her pocket and shows it to him. He thumbs it, checks something, hands it back. She puts it away.

ORAL

And your father --

ROSA

Who knew? Who cared? As far as I was concerned, I only had my mother's blood in me. That was certified, at least.

As ROSA speaks, she and the CUSTOMER dance The Dance of Solicitation. The movements should be simply and sharply choreographed, appropriate to the actors' abilities, and get increasingly rougher as the dance goes on.

ROSA

At least she didn't do the cheap crawl of the Alexanderplatz, where every dirty towel bore a face-print like Veronica's veil of torture and spunk. Or the Gravelstone, where crept the disfigured ones -- acid-scarred, crippled, limbless -- but they had their paying scavengers, too, as do all carcasses. Or the Münzis, pregnant but open -- triple rates, and you could have one according to your desired month of gestation -- such selection -- the "orifice menu" -- at least she was too old for a telephone-girl -- young nymphs dressed up as adult celebrities -- have a small-titted Dolly Haas or the hairless cunt of Lya de Putti --

A moment of danger for ROSA with her CUSTOMER. ROSA breathes heavily.

An exchange of looks, of money, of release. CUSTOMER exits, and everything is back to the present tense.

ROSA

It's a dark business, this crossing borders. It's not all -- not always -- [liberating] --

ORAL

I supposed I shouldn't be so -- fizzy -- about it, eh?

ROSA gives him what, for ROSA, would be a gentle look.

ROSA

Why do you think I keep bringing you the books?

ORAL

You all right?

ROSA  
Do you need anything else?

ORAL  
I think I have enough to chew on.

ROSA  
You don't, but you will.

ORAL  
Did your mother die happy?

ROSA  
Who said she's dead?

ORAL  
She would have to be --

ROSA  
She's every year of what you're counting.

ORAL  
Something improved her mortality.

ROSA  
Yeah -- not dying!

ORAL  
I suppose there's a lesson in that.

ROSA  
There's a lesson in everything. Be careful.

ROSA exits. ORAL studies. Transition.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### Scene 4

A small Kafé in Berlin, with some charm to it. PALLAS is sitting at a table, cup of coffee in front of her. Next to the cup is a wrapped gift. A light coat is draped on her chair. Music is playing softly in the background. As PALLAS sips her coffee, she picks up the gift and holds it. HELEN enters.

HELEN  
(in a bustle)  
Sorry, sorry, sorry.

PALLAS  
You aren't that late.

HELEN  
I hate being any kind of late.

PALLAS

Don't fret -- don't fret. Take off your coat,  
sit down, relax. I command you to relax.

HELEN

Coat is off. I am seated. I have obeyed. I am  
obeying.

PALLAS

(lengthening the "e")

Breathe. Deeply.

HELEN

Notice also that I have closed my eyes.

PALLAS

Quietly.

HELEN

I am obeying.

PALLAS

Good. Breathe. You cannot be late because time  
only begins when you get here. Our time begins  
now. Good. You may now rise to higher  
consciousness.

HELEN

And coffee, I hope.

PALLAS

Aren't they the same thing? A little more  
patience. In the meantime: small talk. Begin.

HELEN

I was talking with Karla -- again.

PALLAS

More negotiations?

HELEN

Karla thinks that my Mr. Wiley is not really  
serious about wanting to dicker down the price --  
and I agree. I'm pretty sure Mr. Wiley is just  
doing it because he thinks it proves the --  
manhood of the American businessman.

PALLAS

At least his dickering -- is that really an  
English word? --

HELEN

Dicker, dicker, dicker, dicker --

PALLAS

Well, at least his dickering kept you here a few extra days. Without guilt, I might add.

HELEN

Don't add anything.

A WAITER brings HELEN a cup of coffee.

HELEN

Oh, but you can add this, though. Danke. Ah, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I am really beginning to like -- this place.

(raises her glass)

We can thank my American for adding guiltless time -- and extra money, to boot.

PALLAS

I took the liberty -- if you don't mind -- of having this ready for you the moment you swept in. It has that flavor you like.

HELEN

Vielen, vielen Dank. [Many, many thanks.] Chilly outside.

PALLAS

Unusual weather.

HELEN

But not unpleasant. Reminds me of home.

HELEN indicates the gift.

PALLAS

Yes?

HELEN

Is that for me?

PALLAS

This gaudily wrapped bauble, thing of no importance, sitting by my right hand. That?

HELEN

Yes, that that!

PALLAS

Well, what does it look like?

HELEN

A gaudily wrapped -- gift.

PALLAS

No flies on you -- is that the phrase?

HELEN  
And is that that for me?

PALLAS  
So American -- no subtlety!

HELEN  
Straightforward.

PALLAS  
Impatient.

HELEN  
Omnivorous.

PALLAS  
A thing of appetite.

HELEN  
Of hearty appetite.

PALLAS  
That's yet to be proved.

HELEN  
That's yet to be provoked.

PALLAS  
This might be the agent provocateur we're looking  
for.

HELEN  
So I may open it?

PALLAS  
Not yet.

HELEN  
You dangle -- then withdraw. Pout, pout.

PALLAS  
It's our European decadence --

HELEN  
Really?

PALLAS  
-- gaudy, full of mystery -- luring in the  
innocent American.

HELEN  
In order to?

PALLAS

In order to educate, of course! Raise to a higher power.

HELEN

I thought decadence was a loss of power.

PALLAS

How little you know.

HELEN

How much you don't know how much I know.

PALLAS

It seems, then, more than enough mysteries to go around.

HELEN

And around.

PALLAS

Time to savor.

HELEN

I'll savor this coffee.

PALLAS

Savor this time.

HELEN

Consider me commanded.

PALLAS

You've already said that. So, how did your Mr. Wiley do on his negotiations?

HELEN

Georg held firm. Why not? Mr. Wiley knows what he wants, Georg knows what Mr. Wiley wants and how much he wants it -- Without the bluff, you can't win the hand.

PALLAS uses a mock American gangster voice, laced with her German accent.

PALLAS

Ain't it da truth?

HELEN

No, no! More flat: "Ain't it da truth?"

PALLAS

(mangling it)

Ain't it da truth?

HELEN

Flatter. Here --

HELEN takes PALLAS's jaw into her hand to manipulate it.

HELEN

Move your mouth this way. Say it with me: "Ain't it da truth?"

As they say this, HELEN moves PALLAS' jaw around so that the words come out garbled. PALLAS puts her hand on HELEN's as HELEN moves her jaw around. They laugh. There is a moment when HELEN becomes aware of their physical connection and slowly, but decidedly, moves her hand back to her coffee cup.

PALLAS

That felt nice.

HELEN

Yes. Even as we speak, the phone lines hum with Wiley dollars turning into Bethe deutschmarks. Transaction and translation.

PALLAS

Is that life?

HELEN

Of course not. Economics is not life.

PALLAS

That's good to hear.

HELEN

(indicating the gift)

I've savored five sips of my coffee. May I open it now?

PALLAS

Such impatience! A bit more savor.

PALLAS calls the WAITER over to fill her cup, which he does.

PALLAS

What will you do now?

HELEN

This now?

PALLAS

Later now. After now.

HELEN

I don't know. Some upcoming auctions a few of my clients want me to scope out, but they're not immediate. Curatorial work with a university --

probably a summer project. You know, at the moment, I don't have a single, goddamned "should" on my calendar!

PALLAS

You sound -- startled.

HELEN

I am!

PALLAS

Awakened.

HELEN

Awakened? You know, if I had left when I was supposed to, I would be back in New York filling myself up with "busy-ness," making believe I was being productive. And yet --

PALLAS

And yet, you're here with me.

HELEN

Here. And here with you. Decadencing my powers -- my new word. And things seem to be taking care of themselves. Now may I open it?

PALLAS laughs and pushes the gift towards her.

PALLAS

Christmas has arrived.

HELEN

Oh, Tannenbaum!

At this moment they hear a WOMAN's voice yelling at a young child. It is just audible under the dialogue.

WOMAN

Du bist sehr unerzogen. [You are being very bad.]

HELEN

What is that?

WOMAN

Setz dich! Setz dich! [Sit down! Sit down!]

PALLAS

Someone yelling - at a child, it sounds like.

HELEN

She must be screaming -- we can hear her in here. Something's not right --

HELEN gets up and goes to the café door.

PALLAS

Helen, don't, sit -- it's not your business.

HELEN opens the door; the WOMAN's voice become very clear. PALLAS joins HELEN. The following lines can overlap as needed.

WOMAN

Du kriegst keinen Luftballon, bis du aufhörst zu jammern. [You will not get the balloon until you stop crying.]

HELEN

What is she saying?

PALLAS

He can't have the balloon until he stops crying.

WOMAN

Und wenn du nicht aufhörst, gebe ich dir wirklich 'nen Grund zum Jammern! [And if you don't stop crying, I will give you something to cry about.]

HELEN

He really wants that balloon.

WOMAN

Ich schäme mich für dich. Nun kriegst du keinen Luftballon. [I am ashamed of you. And now you won't get the balloon.]

PALLAS

(to HELEN)

She's telling him he's being very bad and that she's ashamed of him. He won't get the balloon.

WOMAN

Du bist aber ein böser Junge! [You are being a naughty boy.]

HELEN

Look at him -- that's all he wants. Why is she so mad? I can't stand this!

PALLAS

Helen -- don't -- it's not your business.

HELEN

What do you mean --

PALLAS

Don't interfere.

HELEN

She looks like she's going to hit him!

PALLAS

Come back.

HELEN

Oh, look -- look -- she let go it -- she let the balloon go! She let it go.

WOMAN

Siehe dir an, was du gemacht hast! [Now look what you went and did!]

PALLAS

Now look what you did.

WOMAN

Warte bis wir nach Hause kommen! [Wait till I get you home!]

PALLAS

Wait till I get you home.

There is a silence: the WOMAN has gone.

HELEN

What he did?

HELEN walks back into the café; PALLAS follows. They sit.

PALLAS

Are you all right?

HELEN

She should have given him the balloon.

PALLAS

Yes.

HELEN

The child always, always, always deserves to get the balloon.

PALLAS

We can only speak out of our own experiences.

Very slowly PALLAS pushes the gift across the table to HELEN.

PALLAS

Now.

HELEN takes it and opens it. As she does, she smiles.

PALLAS

German on one side, English on the other. It's your balloon.

Without looking at PALLAS, HELEN holds out her hand. PALLAS takes it.

HELEN

Ain't it da truth?

Transition music: German cabaret music segues into rock.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 5

ORAL's apartment. The window is dark except for a soft glow, as if from street lights.

ORAL

Home again, home again, jiggedy-jig. Mr. Oral's apartment looks like the sty of a pig.

ORAL leafs through the binder.

ORAL

I'll be damned. Damn! "Was folgt schreibe ich sowohl als Erläuterung wie auch Erklärung." I like that internal rhyme: Erläuterung, Erklärung. "I write this as both an explanation and declaration."

ORAL closes the binder, thinks.

ORAL

"Rule #1: Who says something is as important as what they say. In fact, the two cannot be separated." Who is this Ms.? Frau? Fräulein? Sister? This Pallas Worte? Appraiser of photographs? Yes. Charming host to an American visitor? Yes. Poet? Inclined to "yes" on that. Lover? Hmmm. Ms. Helen Guild's future? Hmmm -- what would Rosa say?

ORAL goes back to reading. Appearing on stage and touching ORAL is PALLAS. She stays on only for several lines before she turns and leaves.

PALLAS

"As explanation, it will fall short of what my heart wants you to taste."

ORAL

And what, Pallas Worte, do you want Helen to taste?

PALLAS

"I can only hope your heart gives body to the silence that falls between one word and the next and the next after that."

ORAL

Okay, okay, not bad, not bad.

PALLAS

"As declaration, it is straightforward, arrow-like" --

ORAL

Interesting construction there, "aufrichtig wie der Pfeil" --

PALLAS

"I let go the bow string to erase the distance."

PALLAS leaves; ORAL closes the binder, nods in appreciation. The phone rings. Lights come up on JEFFREY a small table with a telephone on it. The tone is light-hearted and strained.

ORAL

Oral Timmins.

JEFFREY

Hello, my cunning linguist.

ORAL

Jeffrey! Jeffrey! Jeffrey! Oh, it is good to hear your voice.

JEFFREY

Nice to hear that it's nice to be heard.

ORAL

Everything okay?

JEFFREY

Just fine.

ORAL

What's that I hear, then?

JEFFREY

It's just so unusual to find you home. And in good spirits. The stars must be in their proper houses.

ORAL

I know, I know --

JEFFREY

Busy, yes.

ORAL

Well, I have a new job -- and as a writer I think you'll appreciate the "art" of this one.

JEFFREY

Do I get the story through this tinny earphone or a private reading?

ORAL

Private, of course -- but not tonight.

JEFFREY

Oh.

ORAL

Got to translate a hunk of this for tomorrow.

JEFFREY

A hunk? Who are you working for?

ORAL

That's for you and you alone. I meant pages.

JEFFREY

I know what you meant. It's just that I'd like you to send a hunk my way once in a while.

ORAL

You're right, we deserve a well-deserved break because we're so deserving. But not tonight. Breakfast tomorrow? I'll fill you in then.

JEFFREY

In public?

ORAL

Jeffrey --

JEFFREY

Just trying to see if the rise can still rise. Yes, breakfast tomorrow. An hour at a formica table with you is better than nothing. Actually, I'd prefer it on the table.

ORAL

Quite the condiment, wouldn't it?

JEFFREY

It's always good to use condom-ments.

ORAL

I'm laughing on the inside. Alishia's?

JEFFREY

I'll grab the table by the window.

ORAL

Great. And Jeffrey?

JEFFREY

Yes?

ORAL

I miss you as well.

JEFFREY

I was beginning to wonder.

ORAL

Wonder no more.

JEFFREY

Took you long enough to read between the lines.  
Some translator you are. Bye.

JEFFREY hangs up.

ORAL

Bye.

ORAL hangs up. Light down on JEFFREY. ORAL looks at the phone for a moment, lost in thought. He rests his hand on it, pauses, then picks it up and starts to dial a number.

ORAL

(each letter matching a number)

J-E-F-F-R-E-Y.

But as soon as he finishes dialing he presses the hang-up button, then slowly lowers the handset to the cradle.

ORAL

Tomorrow.

ORAL takes the binder and opens it up. He flips a few pages, obviously looking for his place; he then leans back in his chair and begins reading, exclaiming occasionally about the writing. Enter PALLAS.

PALLAS

I write this as both an explanation and  
declaration.

ORAL

What?

PALLAS

As an explanation, it will fall short of what my heart wants you to taste. I can only hope your heart gives body to the silence that falls between one word and the next and the next after that. As declaration, it is straightforward, arrow-like -- I let go the bow string to erase the distance.

ORAL walks into PALLAS' light.

ORAL

I have a question for you -- Well, let me just plunge, then. You use "eine Bedeutung" when you say "gives body to the silence." Did you really mean die Bedeutung or did you want to use die Verkörperung? I mean, a world of difference, isn't there, between Bedeutung, "a meaning," and Verkörperung, "the incarnation, the embodiment"? I would have used die Verkörperung -- seems to fit better. "Meaning" is kind of anemic; "incarnation" -- almost sacred, doesn't it? A kind of thrill. You can answer anytime you want.

PALLAS

Rule #3

ORAL

Rule #3.

PALLAS

There are no synonyms.

ORAL

Right, right! I mean, you wrote in German to force her hand, correct? So it's important that I get it as right as I can if you want her to get your intentions. So what should it be?

PALLAS

Use the second.

ORAL

(makes a note in the binder)

I have to admit that this is one of the better translating jobs I've had. You write -- I mean -- lines just -- thrill me -- like here.

PALLAS

(not even looking at the binder)

"This is a journal, beginning with the day you left, of the time I spent mourning, missing, blaming, cursing you -- especially cursing, because you didn't let yourself take what I knew you wanted: the harbor of my arms, my breath, my

hands. I am glad the universe offered you to me,  
but the gladness bitters me because it measures  
what I cannot have. You will now know what I  
know."

ORAL

Luscious, really.

PALLAS

All a head game with you, isn't it? A puzzle.

ORAL

No --

PALLAS

It's in your voice: "Luscious, really." Grad  
student comment, self-congratulation. "Die  
Bedeutung" or "die Verkörperung?" You're showing  
off --

ORAL

Come on --

PALLAS

You don't know what you're digging into.

ORAL

Wait --

PALLAS

(indicating the binder)

That is someone's life. Two lives. Risiko.

ORAL

What?

PALLAS

Risiko.

PALLAS gestures for him to translate.

ORAL

Risk.

PALLAS

Verlust.

ORAL

Loss.

PALLAS

Schande.

ORAL  
Shame.

PALLAS  
All possible.

ORAL  
And, also possible -- liebe.

ORAL gestures for PALLAS to answer.

PALLAS  
Love.

ORAL  
Freundschaft.

PALLAS  
Friendship.

ORAL  
Verständnis.

PALLAS  
Understanding. No flies on you, it appears.  
Rule #2.

ORAL  
Yes.

PALLAS & ORAL  
"Who you are is as important as what the words  
say."

ORAL  
"No one can translate who doesn't know his or her  
own voice."

PALLAS  
"What, mein guter Bekannte, is your voice? What  
can it say about this covenant?"

ORAL  
(spins the binder as HELEN had done)  
This might be easier for some people, I suppose,  
if it were an American businessman being pursued  
by a German woman declaring her love. It would  
fit all the proper commercial -- even ideological  
-- even mythological -- story lines.

PALLAS  
No danger.

ORAL

Everything ready-made. Look, you may have meant to pierce her heart with this -- what's that phrase you used: "tipped with air and not steel, aimed not to kill but to pierce" -- but believe me, with the opening paragraph, two hearts in that room flew out the window. What does gender have to do with what you wrote, what you're feeling? Your words are a plate anyone can eat from.

PALLAS

How did she take them?

ORAL

When I make a spot translation for someone, I'm so focused on the words I don't really notice the person.

PALLAS

But she?

ORAL

After I translated the first lines to myself, I couldn't help it -- I had to watch what they would do.

PALLAS

Setting?

ORAL

Four o'clock-ish on a late autumn afternoon, greyish-blue light filling the room.

PALLAS

That light -- she said it made her feel outside herself --

ORAL

Had to tilt the page toward the window to get enough light. And the words just fell out so easily -- sworn I'd written them. Or at least had thought them somewhere deep in the bone.

PALLAS

But she?

ORAL

In profile to me, both of us facing the window. The words, slowly -- and I watched. She put her hand flat against the window and spread her fingers. Then raised it until only the fingertips touched the glass. I finished. A moment of profile. Then she turned on the light -- bam! -- and said she wanted to see more of it

tomorrow. That was all. Very snappy,  
businesspersonlike.

She takes his hand and places her fingertips against his. His hand  
automatically follows hers.

PALLAS

Like this?

ORAL

Yes.

PALLAS

(drops his hand)

We agreed to meet at a small restaurant for the  
preliminary discussions about the collection. I  
got there early. When she came in, she was  
blowing on her hands to warm them up. She  
apologized, saying she had forgotten to bring  
gloves because she hadn't known she would need  
them. I told her I had an extra pair in my purse  
and held up my hand to measure hers.

(PALLAS holds up her hand)

She hesitated at first, then put her hand against  
mine.

(ORAL puts his hand against hers)

And for some reason we both thought of the  
children's hand game about the spider --

They both cup their hands until only the fingertips are touching.

PALLAS

And laughed and laughed. A good beginning.

ORAL

So many questions --

PALLAS

You can't -- at least not of me.

ORAL

You're leaving.

PALLAS

I am gone.

She exits. He looks in her direction for a moment, then moves back to  
his desk as the light goes down. He suddenly looks up from the binder  
and looks around for PALLAS.

ORAL

Am I the philosopher or the butterfly? I could  
love that woman if I could love a woman. Why  
couldn't I love her?

ORAL puts his two hands together, then cups them so that only the fingertips touch.

ORAL  
Spiders. Why not, indeed?

ORAL picks up the phone but hesitates a moment too long and does not dial. He tosses it instead, makes a catch, then puts it back.

ORAL  
Your earful tomorrow, Jeffrey.  
(takes the binder)  
Come on, Pallas -- back to the covenant.

ORAL turns off the desk lamp. Transition.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 6

Alishia's. Diner sounds and conversations. ORAL has his hands together like the spiders.

ORAL  
And this -- this I saw in my waking dream.

JEFFREY  
Uh-huh.

ORAL  
C'mon, like a spider doing push-ups on a mirror.

JEFFREY  
A child's game.

ORAL  
I don't know if it's true, that they actually did that. I mean, it was just a dream.

JEFFREY  
Uh-huh.

ORAL  
Uh-huh what?

JEFFREY  
Been sitting here now for, oh, almost twenty minutes watching your face, and I would swear you'd had some kind of religious experience. You actually look excited.

ORAL  
Is that, like, an accusation?

JEFFREY

No -- it is, like, jealousy. See the green eyes?

ORAL

Like hot emeralds! About -- ?

JEFFREY

That would take us through lunch and dinner.

ORAL

We've gone through lunch and dinner before.

JEFFREY

I don't have lunch and dinner. Just tell me some more about these hand-crossed lovers.

ORAL

Jeffrey --

JEFFREY

It's all right.

ORAL

Sure?

JEFFREY

Who can resist?

ORAL

Maybe I shouldn't really be revealing any of this to you.

JEFFREY

You don't reveal things to me -- you share them. That's the nature of our nature. "Reveal" implies a surprise, something nasty, like "I've been seeing someone else much hairier than you -- and I like it." "Reveal" is what someone ugly does when they take off their clothes.

ORAL

I'll agree with you there.

JEFFREY

"Share," on the other hand -- respiratory, linked breaths. You're a linguist -- you should know these things. Didn't they teach you all this in Words for Nerds?

ORAL

I made a promise to Ms. Guild, that's all -- act with some discretion. You are familiar with discretion?

JEFFREY

Doesn't that require moral fiber? Your moral fiber: polyester -- in flame the moment something hot touches it. Now, tell me or not.

ORAL

Well, let me share it with you.

JEFFREY

(flame erupts)

Up it goes!

ORAL

Ah, but who basks in the heat?

JEFFREY

Flushed, I'm sure. Now, on to the sororal story of Ms. Guild.

ORAL

Guild! You have guilt, I have Guild.

JEFFREY

I do not have guilt -- You have guilt, I have a refined moral nature.

ORAL

I am so lucky to be in the presence.

They both pause. They both relax.

JEFFREY

Proceed: the story.

ORAL

I could only put together a little of the event. That this woman, Pallas, made it known how much she wanted Ms. Guild. That Ms. Guild is quite ambivalent but not turned off. That they seemed to have had a wonderful time.

JEFFREY

That's all?

ORAL

It's a start.

JEFFREY

I could have told you all that without reading the thing.

ORAL

How?

JEFFREY

Why else would our Ms. Guilt want it translated except to know the bottom? Could have chucked the thing -- gone! -- but she aches to know.

ORAL

The first of many yieldings?

JEFFREY

Oral, don't you remember -- I distinctly remember a very reluctant "opening up" when I made my first overture to you.

ORAL

I was in the limbo stage --

JEFFREY

But what helped you finally accept the witty man standing in front of you? The excitement of giving in to the desire? My Argyle socks?

ORAL

You've never had Argyle socks!

JEFFREY

That means you looked me over from top to toe. "I like this man because he doesn't wear Argyle socks." Maybe all of that. But there was something else.

ORAL

What?

JEFFREY

What made you stay up until four AM in the bird-singing morning to work on this stuff?

ORAL

It's a job.

JEFFREY

A job. I've seen you finishing your "jobs" on the subway ten minutes before you arrive. You've never been quite this diligent.

ORAL

It's very well written. You can appreciate that.

JEFFREY

Well, if you won't give me the straight answer, I'll go straight to it --

JEFFREY stands behind ORAL, leans over to him, and punches a finger in his left pectoral, over his heart.

That. JEFFREY

What? ORAL

That -- JEFFREY

Jabs him in the left pectoral again.

My logo? ORAL

Cold. JEFFREY  
(jabs)

My pencil protector. ORAL

Colder. JEFFREY  
(jabs)

Adam's rib. ORAL

Luke, as in warm. JEFFREY  
(jabs)

The seat of all passions. ORAL

JEFFREY  
Ah! The night you had dinner with me, and we went to the movies and held hands as timidly as any freshman jock and princess?

JEFFREY feints another jab at ORAL but instead place his hand over ORAL's heart.

JEFFREY  
That was where you sat. I know you well enough to know that whatever demons haunt you, your heart eventually tells you enough truth to keep you honest. Your problem now --

My problem? ORAL

JEFFREY  
What makes you and mars you, my sweet prince, is that of late you seem deaf to your heart. Which

is why I feel like I'm watching my best friend stand on a ship as it disappears over the horizon. It's not jealousy, really -- You've become cautious. With everything. With me especially. And when I see a glister of it as you tell me this story --

ORAL looks hang-dog, apologetic.

JEFFREY

That's not what I want.

JEFFREY reaches for the binder and takes out the manila folder with typed pages in it. Ruffles through the pages.

JEFFREY

Where's that part you read to me? Here: "Today you were late for our morning coffee. You rushed in flushed and emphatic, breathing out apologies. But behind your 'I'm sorry' your face cleaved the light with your happiness at being there." Can you remember the last time your face "cleaved the light" in just that way?

ORAL takes the folder from JEFFREY's hand and puts it back in the binder.

JEFFREY

Not over the guilt coals -- really, I'm not. But I'd be lying -- taking us at a discount, really - - if I didn't tell you how angry I feel inside. I'm just telling you my heart.

ORAL

Just translating, huh?

JEFFREY

Toughest language to work with.

ORAL

I've got to go --

JEFFREY

Yes, right -- at that point. But I want you to remember something.

JEFFREY puts his hands together as the spiders.

JEFFREY

Remember skiing in Vermont? Remember how you wiped out so badly you lost your gloves in some glove-sucking mound of snow? And I sandwiched your hands between mine to warm them up, and gave you my gloves to wear back to the lodge? During that late afternoon light I like so much?

JEFFREY stands, takes out money.

JEFFREY

There are no synonyms.

ORAL

Wait.

ORAL holds up his hand, palm facing JEFFREY. JEFFREY hesitates, and then hands the money to ORAL and exits. Transition music.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 7

HELEN GUILD's office. HELEN is looking over ORAL's typescript. The binder sits conspicuously on the desk. ORAL waits.

HELEN

(absently)

A journal, yes -- the dates, other things --

ORAL

I need to check some alternate word choices, but I think it's fairly faithful to the original --

HELEN

How did you come to do this? Translating?

ORAL

Excuse me?

HELEN

How did you arrive at doing the work you do?

ORAL

Do you mean because of my name?

HELEN

Why freelance with an agency for -- whatever it is they pay you? Why not one of those people behind the president as he travels around the world, whispering diplomacies into his ear? A translator at the U.N.? Working overseas?

ORAL

I don't know -- I like this work -- it gives me a certain kind of freedom.

HELEN

Limited.

ORAL

Limited?

HELEN

Your work -- good, done quickly and well -- and you'll make enough for next month's rent. You haven't asked me to explain the work I do. Appraiser of photography -- not a collector or producer, just an -- accountant. Not what I would call the most essential of professions.

ORAL

I'm sure it has its merits --

HELEN

The diplomat -- appraising photographs has no use whatsoever. People frame what I tell them to buy, trade them like stocks, sometimes even admire them -- but all in a series of consciously small concentric orbits. It wasn't something I planned. Actually, I wanted to be on the stage -- my picture --

(mimics Brando)

"Coulda been a thespian." But that one high school drama teacher --

ORAL

And you believed him.

HELEN

Doesn't matter. So what else was I fit for?

ORAL

Things are fragile.

HELEN

Fit for dealing in second-hands. You didn't answer my question. Why not the foreign service, etcetera, etcetera?

ORAL

I don't know [exactly] --

HELEN

How much freedom really, Mr. Oral Timmins? Always hustling for work, never producing something of your own --

ORAL

I'm quite -- happy with [my life] --

HELEN

-- relegated to translating -- things -- like this --

ORAL

I haven't had as much enjoyment with language in a long time as I have had with a "thing" like this.

HELEN

And what is this "thing," Mr. Oral Timmins?

ORAL

I'm not sure I under[stand] -- it's --

HELEN

How can it be trusted? I often have to make judgments about authenticity -- money, money, and more money rides on the outcome. And with dispatch, I bring my best learning to bear, and people nod, say "um-hum," and pay. But so often -- nothing more than a good guess because nothing signs the air "Fake" or "Real." I dread that day when I say "Real" and someone -- rubbing his hands like a fly and smirking -- steps up and says, "Sorry, Fake, and here's the smoking gun." And then shoots me with it. So this "thing" -- where's the gun, what's to trust?

ORAL

The "gun" is in the words.

HELEN

Not an exact art, you said. What if you --

ORAL

Ms. Guild, either you trust what the messenger brings or you don't. There's not much in-between. It's also good not to kill the messenger.

HELEN

Tell me again what you think of the writing.

ORAL

The writing is the "gun."

HELEN

You already said that -- surface. Shoot me, I guess -- put it through my brain -- go on --

ORAL

I read it out loud -- to myself -- trying to forget a woman wrote it, as if it were some lost text, a scrap of a fragment of some buried scroll from a ghost with no fingerprints, okay? And -- no gender -- simply heart to heart, to any heart, without a tilt to the X or Y chromosome. The

gun? Why I trust? It spoke to me about me. It  
-- gave me -- pause --

HELEN  
You trust that?

ORAL  
I don't have a choice.

HELEN  
It's a woman --

ORAL  
I know.

HELEN  
Don't you wonder --

ORAL  
Wonder what?

HELEN  
Ball in my court?

ORAL  
Yes.

HELEN straightens the typescript.

HELEN  
By the end of the week?

ORAL  
By the end of the week.

HELEN gets up and moves toward the door, as if to let him out.

HELEN  
On Friday, then.

ORAL doesn't move immediately to the door.

HELEN  
What?

ORAL  
Do you remember our covenant?

HELEN  
I do. You said --

ORAL  
I said that I would promise you the best my head  
and heart could offer.

HELEN  
So --

ORAL  
I had --

HELEN  
Go on.

ORAL  
I had a dream about her last night.

HELEN  
A dream.

ORAL  
Actually, more like a visitation, I think. I  
worked late, fell asleep at my desk.

HELEN  
And?

ORAL  
She spoke English in the dream --

HELEN  
What did she look like?

ORAL  
Funny -- I don't remember her face, but her voice  
--

HELEN  
Her voice --

ORAL  
Saturated. Like a white -- like a white  
porcelain bowl filled with these scarlet  
raspberries. I remember feeling that her voice  
wouldn't hurt me. And the hands.

ORAL walks to the window.

ORAL  
When you stood here yesterday, when I was  
reading, you did this.

ORAL demonstrates the "spider."

ORAL  
Now, tucked that away under the stairs because it  
came back in the dream -- only she told me it  
happened because you didn't have any gloves and  
your hands were cold. She said you'd put your  
hands together like this, like spiders --

HELEN

We never did anything like that. We never did anything like that.

ORAL

Ah -- it, um, it must have come from somewhere else - I'm sorry --

HELEN

No, no -- this far, why not more?

ORAL

You don't have to --

HELEN

On the last day, as I was getting on the plane, I walked through the gate and down the runway to board --

ORAL

It's none of my --

HELEN

-- I did not want to turn around, but I did. She was standing to the side of the door, which had a full-length window in the wall. She had her hand pressed against the glass. I turned around and walked back against the press of people. And I placed my hand against the glass as well. That moment --

HELEN stops. A silence descends. HELEN moves to the door.

HELEN

On second thought -- on more than second thought -- I don't want you to finish this.

ORAL

Don't finish this?

HELEN

Are you a parrot?

ORAL

I can't just stop --

HELEN

I'll make sure you're well paid.

ORAL

It's not the money -- I want to finish [it] --

HELEN

I don't. I know enough --

ORAL  
You don't know the half of what's unfinished!

HELEN  
And that means what, Mr. Timmins?

ORAL  
You don't know what "this" is, do you?

HELEN  
What are you talking about?

ORAL  
When you left, you had a piece of glass between  
you. In that last moment --

HELEN  
Your dream continues --

ORAL  
-- it wasn't flesh, it was separation -- this  
breaks the glass --

ORAL takes her hand and presses it against his.

ORAL  
"This" is a hand, her hand --

HELEN snaps her hand back. ORAL retreats.

ORAL  
I'm sorry -- I don't have -- Damn! Damn! I'll  
send an invoice --

ORAL leaves. HELEN stares. She then crosses to the desk and places  
the binder on one corner of her desk. Then she picks it up, spins it,  
then puts it back down in the same place, but slams it down. She  
makes a gesture as if she had just let go of a balloon. She sits,  
then gets up and exits, carrying ORAL's translation. Transition.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 8

JEFFREY's workplace -- an office shared by three people who work for a  
children's book publisher, which includes a bunch of stuffed animals  
on JEFFREY's desk, including a teddy bear, preferably blue in color  
and wearing a cape like a superhero. Workspaces for UTILITY 1 (PIPER)  
and UTILITY 2 (SID), JEFFREY's co-workers.

JEFFREY enters. PIPER and SID look up. JEFFREY slams something down  
onto his desk. PIPER and SID look at each other.

PIPER & SID

An "Oral."

They nod simultaneously, like Laurel and Hardy. JEFFREY struggles out of his overcoat, slams it down onto his chair.

JEFFREY

What are we working on?

PIPER

We are working up the story of Crusty Bonecrusher.

SID

Crusty B.

JEFFREY

Crusty -- Crusty Bonecrusher --

SID

That's what we are working on --

PIPER

But you are working on --

SID

Working out --

PIPER

Working in and out --

JEFFREY

Ha. Ha. Ha. Piper. Diaper.

PIPER

Stones and sticks --

SID

Notice he ignores me.

JEFFREY

Ha. Ha. Ha. Sid. Retar-did.

SID

May give their licks --

SID & PIPER

But names'll never hurt us.

JEFFREY picks up his coat, hangs it straight on the back of his chair, then sits. He fidgets. PIPER and SID watch, amused. JEFFREY knows they're watching. He gets up, hesitates, then walks around to the front of his desk, drops to the ground, and starts doing push-ups.

Not very well. And not very many until he belly-flops to the ground, spent, arms out to side.

SID gets up, goes to JEFFREY's desk and picks up the teddy bear wearing the superhero cape.

SID

It's time for Crusty Bonecrusher to come to the aid of his creator.

SID kneels, puts CRUSTY on the floor next to JEFFREY's head so that JEFFREY can see it. JEFFREY and CRUSTY eye each other for a moment. They stare. Then SID moves CRUSTY's arm so that CRUSTY punches JEFFREY in the face, then sits back, waits. CRUSTY does it again.

By this time, PIPER has drifted over to watch the action.

JEFFREY still does not respond. Instead, he levers himself up to do, at most, two or three more push-ups, then collapses. CRUSTY waits, then punches JEFFREY again.

JEFFREY

All right you flea-bitten bag of synthetic --

JEFFREY grabs CRUSTY. CRUSTY resists. And the two of them roll on the floor in a wrestling match, with JEFFREY switching voices between CRUSTY and himself. CRUSTY's voice, if described in a phrase, would be a cigar-and-whiskey voice.

JEFFREY

(own voice)

I'm not gonna take --

(CRUSTY)

Yer gonna take it and like it --

(own voice)

Yeah, booger breath?

(CRUSTY)

Yeah, weenie toast!

(own voice)

Blue punk.

(CRUSTY)

Dweeb dick.

(own voice)

Cotton crotch.

(CRUSTY)

Suck face.

Finally, they come to a stand-off -- that is, JEFFREY holds CRUSTY at arm's length, and they eye each other warily.

SID gets up, goes to JEFFREY's desk, and grabs two more animals, tosses one to PIPER. Now the three toys face JEFFREY, and when SID and PIPER speak, they speak for the toys, using any kind of voice they want.

JEFFREY  
(to them all)

What? What?

SID  
It looks like him and Oral --

PIPER  
Had another quarrel.

SID  
(to PIPER)  
Good!

JEFFREY (AS CRUSTY)  
You been shakin' and he ain't been bakin'.

JEFFREY  
Crusty!  
(to the other animals)  
Cut it out, you guys --

JEFFREY (AS CRUSTY)  
Get wise, shmuck -- yer outta luck --

PIPER  
Let's get choral --

SID  
For Oral --

SID & PIPER  
The luckless shmuck who needs a --

JEFFREY (AS CRUSTY)  
Yer offendin' my ears!

The tune for the following "ballad" has to be improvised, just as it might be in an improv performance -- it's not based on any known song.

SID  
I've got a linguist in my heart

PIPER  
But I want his tongue in my ear

SID & PIPER  
I want some multilingual lingering  
'Round my front door and my rear

JEFFREY  
My sentence he can diagram

JEFFREY (AS CRUSTY)  
My clause he can subordinate

JEFFREY, SID, & PIPER  
I want a good irregular verb  
That we can conjugate

JEFFREY (AS CRUSTY)  
But you only get shit  
From this little twit --

JEFFREY  
I do, my Crusty, I do --

JEFFREY (AS CRUSTY)  
So dump the little chump  
Get yerself a hump --

JEFFREY  
A little whoop-ti-doo?

SID & PIPER  
Yoo-hoo!

JEFFREY looks at them all.

JEFFREY  
No can do.

PIPER  
You love him?

JEFFREY  
I do.

JEFFREY (AS CRUSTY)  
You just need a screw.

JEFFREY  
That's true.

SID  
The world according to Crusty -- a screw makes  
everything new.

JEFFREY (AS CRUSTY)  
(holds CRUSTY aloft)  
'Sbetter than a poke in the eye with a sharp  
stick!

JEFFREY  
And it's better than a poke in your stick with a  
sharp eye.

Show over. SID, PIPER, and JEFFREY hold their animals, look around.

JEFFREY  
Sorry.

SID  
Not a problem. Is it a problem, Piper?

PIPER  
Not a problem, Sid.

JEFFREY  
I'm always bringing it in --

PIPER  
Look, if we ever do a Crusty for adults, we got  
the show all mapped out. And besides, at least  
speaking for myself -- at least you have someone  
to kvetch about.

SID  
You sentimental fools!  
(speaking as his pet)  
Oh my, he's so full of --

(as SID)  
Don't listen to her!  
(as pet)  
-- braggadocio and bravado, don't it just make  
you wanna weep for his lonely --

JEFFREY (AS CRUSTY)  
Cut it out, youse wimps! Life ain't nothin' but  
a bump and grind, with mostly not enough bump and  
too much grind -- you'd think ya kept yer brains  
in yer pelvises -- just suck it up and die with a  
hard chin and no pee stains on yer underwear --  
what more do ya want than that?

PIPER  
So saith.

The three of them do a "belly bump" with their animals, and then  
animals dance around as if they are all in the end zone after a  
touchdown. Lights out. Transition.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Scene 9**

Park and bench. HELEN enters with ORAL's translation and sits.  
PALLAS enters. The convention is that what HELEN reads becomes what they are saying to each other.

HELEN

Pallas -- I need you to talk again.

PALLAS

Talk.

HELEN

Very cunning of you -- force me to find a translator who cares enough to make a fool of himself, just to make sure I go the whole distance to you.

PALLAS

I didn't plan that.

HELEN

I doubt it.

PALLAS

But he has turned out well. Read.

HELEN

"May."

PALLAS

May.

HELEN

"You had just arrived."

PALLAS

You had just arrived.

HELEN

Ah, yes -- set me. Soothe me.

PALLAS

You had just arrived.

HELEN

I had just arrived. I tried a few German phrases  
--

PALLAS

And you looked immensely relieved when I comforted you in English.

HELEN

Comforted, yes.

PALLAS

Out of all the details in that moment --

HELEN

So many details, Pallas --

PALLAS

What struck me was the way your cheekbone slightly rouged caught the sunlight off the leaded windows.

HELEN

A moment of tenderness.

PALLAS

A moment saved from the mercenary logic of the moment. Have you ever felt anything like that?

HELEN

I did with you. "Here. Now. Here and now -- "

PALLAS

"This is what it's about."

HELEN

My cheek, sketched by the light --

PALLAS

Lifted me in just that way, said "Now."

HELEN

Passion, yes.

PALLAS

Passion, yes! I admit --

HELEN

I admit, too -- that for the rest of the meeting I had to force myself to concentrate on that other business between us.

PALLAS

But also, surprisingly, patience --

HELEN

Yes.

PALLAS

As if a siege had been lifted --

HELEN  
And all the anxiety could escape.

PALLAS  
Dissolve.

HELEN  
Passion and patience --

PALLAS  
It made for an interesting afternoon.

PALLAS takes the pages and selects one; HELEN reads.

PALLAS  
Remember the child and the balloon? We didn't  
talk about it when we sat down again at our  
table, but I had learned something about you from  
reading your face as you watched. This above  
all: You could be reached.

HELEN turns to the last page in the stack. This is the most intimate  
time in the scene.

PALLAS  
I can only guess how hard it is to trust a  
stranger to know you by translating me. But if  
you have taken that chance -

HELEN  
-- then a deeper chance to know much deeper.

PALLAS  
This is not easy love -

HELEN  
-- this opening of solitudes. Sex, gender, the  
entire constructed self --

PALLAS  
-- all lean against the offer. But here it is.  
It makes no difference in the beginning and the  
end --

HELEN  
What shape the skin takes or how the equipment  
works.

PALLAS  
What matters --

HELEN  
What matters is the company we choose --

PALLAS

The company that keeps our hearts alive and our eyes full of light.

PALLAS

I want you for this journey --

HELEN

I want this journey --

PALLAS

Do you assent?

HELEN

Do I assent? Thank you.

PALLAS

For the company.

HELEN

And the light.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 10

Park and bench, this time with a payphone nearby. Sitting on the bench is ORAL. In the background are muted traffic and park sounds. JEFFREY comes in and sits beside him.

JEFFREY

Twice in one day.

ORAL

Will miracles never cease.

JEFFREY

You sounded very upset on the phone.

ORAL

I've been sitting here for the better part of the morning. This phone has been used exactly four times: twice to make lunch dates (I -- you -- you and I -- were one of those), once to make conversation so low I couldn't hear it, though the caller laughed a lot. And once to yell at someone in a foreign language that spit a lot.

JEFFREY

What happened?

ORAL

Great device, the telephone. Closes the distances, opens the world. Puts people in touch.

JEFFREY settles back. ORAL gets up, goes to the phone, picks up the receiver.

ORAL

Such a hopeful device, really. Bell -- what a great name, really, for a guy dedicated to making something that would allow deaf people to hear -- you punch in a code, and in the flicker of an electronic moment you suddenly have a path open up to exchange yourself with someone else. A translator's dream. Simple physics. Simple, simple physics. It's what lies at either end that mucks up the elegance.

(hangs up the receiver)

I mucked up, Jeffrey, pure and simple. I really mucked it up.

JEFFREY

What happened?

ORAL

Straight lines open, number dialed. I told her about the dream. But it was all wrong -- the hands touching, it didn't have anything to do with gloves. When she was leaving, Pallas put her hand on a window that separated them, in a gesture of goodbye. Ms. Guild put her hand against the other side of the glass. Semaphore of farewell. How was I supposed to know --

JEFFREY

Know what? Am I feeding you the right lines to keep this conversation going?

ORAL

It's all because of you.

JEFFREY

You must explain my wonderful influence.

ORAL

After she told me about the hands, she followed up by saying that she didn't want me to finish. I don't know exactly what happened -- but something in me became very -- fierce.

JEFFREY

Crusty Bonecrusher.

ORAL

I couldn't accept her -- dismissal. So, I said something like "You don't know what's unfinished," and I grabbed her hand --

JEFFREY

You grabbed [her hand] --

ORAL

Right -- put it against mine, and proceeded to lecture her that what Pallas -- as if I know her! -- that what Pallas was doing was giving them a way to break the glass. A little sanctimonious?

JEFFREY

Hmmm. And I --

ORAL

This morning, at Alishia's. One thing you never do, you gunsel, is give up. I swing between a bit moody and a lot moody, and you just keep knocking on the door and saying "But there's this matter of a man I love -- "

JEFFREY fidgets.

ORAL

When you wouldn't take my hand this morning, it stung -- but it also made me realize how long it had been since I had actually felt you. So when Ms. Guild decided to end it, it was your hand that made me grab hers.

JEFFREY

Sanctimonious? Naw! Naw. Mawkish.

ORAL

What?

JEFFREY

(in a Big Daddy voice)

"I smell the odor of mawkishness." Believe me, I love the compliment, and it's true, I do keep knocking because I love what's behind Door Number Three. But please! Not opera. What do you want me to do now? A little gush? A hand on your shoulder and a squeeze? So you can come away a little humbled? You think a little hand-touching this morning would have made up for -- I want to see you next week, when this moment has passed.

ORAL

So I'm not sincere --

JEFFREY

Always sincere. But always hedged around, guarded, until it busts -- and then drowns all unsuspecting bystanders. Sincerity comes daily - - not a gesture, not an explosion --

A MAN walks into the scene and to the phone. Not slovenly, not neatly dressed.

MAN

Either of you gentlemen have coins for the phone? I got fifties and others but no silverado for the jingle.

JEFFREY

I think -- here --

MAN

Many and mighty thanks.

Picks up the phone, dials, waits, gets an answer. He speaks very loudly during the scene and draws all attention to himself. The MAN should pause wherever it feels comfortable in the speech to simulate a phone conversation, but the conversation should move rapidly.

ORAL

What should I do?

MAN

Jimbo?

ORAL

Should I go back and -

MAN

Get Jimbo for me.

ORAL

-- properly abase myself?

JEFFREY

You've already reached demeaning. By all means, move on to abasement.

MAN

Hey, my man -- Yeah, yeah, my action is crap, too, my Carib amigo. Look, I got to cut out today --

ORAL

I want to finish what I started --

MAN

What?

JEFFREY

Sounds like she needs to as well.

MAN

Now, look, I've covered your sawtoothed ass many times, and I think you owe -- yeah, owe!

ORAL

(making a "T" with his hands)

Time out.

MAN

Don't pull sanctimony on me. I know your secrets, and they'll die with me, unless of course you try to take my head off, and then I'll puree your life quicker than ginsu knives -- Call waiting? You got fucking call waiting? -- All right, take it.

(waits)

Jesus Christ's Buddha tits.

(looks over at JEFFREY and ORAL)

The quality of help today.

JEFFREY

It's horrible.

MAN

He's from St. Croix, St. Crotch -- what more do I need to say?

ORAL

What more?

The voice comes back on. From here on in, the MAN can, through facial and body gestures, include JEFFREY and ORAL in the conversation.

MAN

Are you done with your fancy-dick call waiting? Who was it? Oh, now you got secrets you ain't puttin' in the hopper. Fine, fine. I don't have time to help you feel more important than you really are. I just got to cut out today, and I need your lyin' ass to sing a song to the boss. Wait, wait, wait just a minute for the love of the Virgin Mary's gynecologist. Are you refusing? Call waiting again? How fucking convenient.

(to JEFFREY and ORAL)

He'll give in --

JEFFREY

Yeah?

MAN

He always does. Just watch.

MAN makes a gesture with his hand as if he's holding something.

MAN

The magic of his balls in my hand. Watch.  
(conversation returns)

No more call waiting, all right. Listen closely,  
my friend -- I only got four words to say to you:  
Jo-se-phi-na. Actually, let me add two more  
words to that: under-eighteen-Jo-se-phi-na. Just  
six little words. That's better.

MAN makes a squeezing gesture to ORAL and JEFFREY.

MAN

I only need about an hour. Yeah, yeah, I'll call  
you when I'm done.

MAN hangs up and turns to ORAL and JEFFREY.

MAN

You know, sometimes you gotta make a move to make  
sure you don't have to do something later that's  
worse.

MAN balances a quarter on the tip of one of his fingers.

MAN

Got this left over -- want it?

JEFFREY

Put it in your trust fund.

MAN

Well, then, this is how I'm gonna go spend my  
hour, right out to the fingertip. She'll love  
it.

MAN exits.

JEFFREY

Another visitation?

ORAL

An annunciation.

JEFFREY

Of what?

ORAL

I don't know. But there it is -- with a dirty  
joke.

JEFFREY

Single entendre. What are you going to do?

ORAL

I don't know. Anything salvageable?

JEFFREY

I don't know. Why would you want to go back?

ORAL

Moral fiber? Okay, okay, I want to convince her not to give up listening to Pallas.

JEFFREY

Because -- ?

ORAL

Because I want to tell her -- because I want to tell her -- and talk about sanctimonious lingo! - - I want to tell her not to let caution defer the sunlight.

JEFFREY

Whew!

ORAL

Because knowing is better than regret.

JEFFREY

Better. But translate.

ORAL reaches into JEFFREY's pocket, takes out a quarter, and balances it on his finger.

ORAL

Right out to the fingertip.

ORAL palms the coin in JEFFREY's hand.

ORAL

I love Jeffrey. And Helen for Pallas.

JEFFREY

Brief. Succinct. No stitch dropped. And gives me back the quarter. Lunch?

ORAL

(goes to phone, dials his number)  
I am famished.

JEFFREY

You have been famished a long time.

ORAL

And you, too.

JEFFREY  
Then I declare it's time for health.

ORAL  
I agree. Messages.

ORAL listens.

ORAL  
She wants to see me this afternoon, at two o'clock.

JEFFREY  
Oh? Lost appetite?

ORAL  
(hangs up handset)  
Actually, no. Sharper. Let's go.

They leave. Transition.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 11

HELEN in her office.

VOICE  
Oral Timmins to see you.

HELEN  
Send him in.

ORAL enters, sheepish and curious.

HELEN  
Sit down. It's all right -- nothing's rigged. I want you to deliver something for me.

HELEN takes out a letter from the desk, indicates for him to read it.

ORAL  
Are you sure?

HELEN  
Yes -- sure. At least sure that that is what I want to say. Or what I want our common German poet to say for me. Not so sure of the rest.

ORAL  
You said, "Deliver"?

HELEN  
To Berlin.

ORAL

You want me to go to Berlin?

HELEN

Expect you to go. I know you don't have any other clients at the moment because I called the agency and had them re-assign your other work. I told them that I needed your undivided attention for a very important project.

HELEN she takes a piece of paper and writes on it while she talks.

HELEN

You see, I've been busy since we last -- engaged. There's a ticket waiting for you at the airport for a late afternoon flight. Included in that package are two return tickets.

(slides the paper over to ORAL)

This is an important phone number and address -- don't lose it.

ORAL

Should I eat this once I'm done with it?

HELEN

You mean eat my words?

ORAL

Just kidding.

HELEN

Neither of us have time for that.

ORAL

Stupid question, maybe --

HELEN

It is a day for them.

ORAL

Why send me? Why not go yourself?

HELEN

She sent me a journal -- now I'm sending one back.

ORAL

Me.

HELEN

You. I don't want to make it too easy -- and besides, I need to ease [into] --

ORAL  
Turned into someone else's words -- what an  
appropriate [fate] --

HELEN  
Will you go?

ORAL's body language says "yes."

ORAL  
But what if she's not there?

HELEN  
I called.

ORAL  
You spoke with [her] --

HELEN  
No. A message left -- so, it's a crap-shoot.  
But no more hedging. Besides, you said you  
haven't been to Germany in a while -- here's a  
trip, gratis.

ORAL  
When do I leave?

HELEN  
In four hours. Sorry. Impulse commanded.

ORAL  
And I will be staying --

HELEN  
Booked you into the same hotel where I stayed.

ORAL  
And what did you tell her?

HELEN  
That you would meet her at high noon at the café,  
bearing an important gift -- that being you, of  
course.

(indicates letter)  
That is your letter of introduction to Pallas  
Worte from the Court of Helen Guild. Note the  
coat of arms: two blue flames. We're crossing  
borders here, so you will get to do some  
diplomatic work after all.

ORAL  
And my portfolio?

HELEN

Up to your discretion. You know all you need to know.

ORAL

Something more specific, please. I really don't want to screw this up.

HELEN

This, then: I want her to finish translating the journal to me. I like your work, but --

HELEN indicates the letter.

HELEN

Might as well bring in the heavy artillery.

ORAL

You won't need to lay in much of a siege.  
"Kunst-Werke sind von einer unendlichen  
Einsamkeit..."

HELEN

"Works of art are --

HELEN & ORAL

" -- of an infinite solitariness."

ORAL

"Only love can apprehend and hold them." I guess  
I better get going.

HELEN

Yes.

HELEN gives him the binder. ORAL offers her his hand in a handshake. Instead, she takes it and puts it against hers in "spider style."  
Transition music.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Scene 12

ORAL's apartment; JEFFREY is there. ORAL has a small suitcase.

JEFFREY

Three times in one day.

ORAL

I've heard good things come in threes.

JEFFREY

This doesn't feel so lucky.

ORAL

I don't know what the flight times are, but I will call you and let know when we're coming back.

JEFFREY

It'd be a shame to go to all this trouble and come back with the same baggage you left with.

ORAL

(laughs)

I've been stung by a metaphor.

JEFFREY

Isn't this a little above and beyond?

ORAL

I don't know -- just feels right. Why not take the charge and follow it through? Jeffrey, Jeffrey. Love of my life. Yes, love of my life. I am going to return.

JEFFREY

To me.

ORAL

To you. Not a question. But I also want to come back to something else. I don't know what, but - clean. Simple. Simpler. Less. And it can't be done without you. I have to go. Lock up, okay?

ORAL picks up the suitcase.

ORAL

I will call you with all the details about arrivals and stuff. I want you there to welcome me home.

They embrace, kiss. ORAL leaves. JEFFREY looks at the "door" where ORAL left for a moment, then takes a coin out of his pocket and flips it, catches it, and slaps it on the back of his hand. He looks at the result, smiles slightly, puts the coin at the end of his finger, and then pockets it. Transition music.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 13

An airport terminal for international arrivals. There can be announcements overheard and other ambiance sounds. HELEN is seated; JEFFREY enters and sits, takes out a magazine but then immediately gets up and starts pacing around. He tries to read the magazine while pacing but gives it up and sticks the magazine in his coat pocket.

JEFFREY  
(to HELEN)

I do not wait well.

HELEN acknowledges him but does not answer.

JEFFREY  
It also makes me talkative. I hope you don't  
mind. I'll keep it low and to myself.

HELEN again acknowledges him but does not speak.

JEFFREY  
(singing, breathily)  
"Danke schön, ooh darling, danke schön..."

HELEN looks at him.

JEFFREY  
"Edelweiss, edelweiss..."  
(pause)  
"Wunderbar, wunderbar..."  
(pause)  
"Welcome, bienvenue, welcome..."

JEFFREY's momentarily at a loss for another song, then starts singing again.

JEFFREY  
"Danke schön, ooh darling, danke schön..."

HELEN  
You're singing German.

JEFFREY  
I'm trying to remember all the songs I know with  
German in them. Do you know any?

HELEN  
I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you.

JEFFREY  
I wish I knew more songs. I only know parts of  
songs.

HELEN  
I can't seem to distract myself when I'm nervous.

JEFFREY  
I can't seem to do anything else when I'm  
nervous. I hate how everything inside feels like  
a Slinky going downstairs.

HELEN  
You're waiting for someone.

JEFFREY  
Impatiently. You?

HELEN  
For friends. From Berlin.

JEFFREY  
So am I. What a coincidence.  
(starts pacing again)  
How does that go: "Du bist mein..."  
(stops pacing)  
From Berlin?

HELEN  
Yes.

JEFFREY  
Berlin. Do you like word games?

HELEN  
What?

JEFFREY  
Could I try a word association with you?

HELEN  
What?

JEFFREY  
A word association. It'll pass the time -- and  
keep me from singing.

HELEN  
I suppose airport serial killers usually don't  
sing German show tunes. All right.

JEFFREY  
(emphasizing the words)  
Oral hygiene.

HELEN  
What?

JEFFREY  
Oral. Hygiene. What does it make you think of?

HELEN  
You know -- ?

JEFFREY  
-- Helen Guild? Not directly.

HELEN  
I don't know you.

JEFFREY

Jeffrey Mitchell. The significant other of one Oral Timmins.

HELEN

He never told me -- That's why -- !

JEFFREY

We share some common ground here.

HELEN

Yes, we do.

JEFFREY

(quietly)

"Danke schön -- "

HELEN

(chiming in)

"Ooh, darling, danke schön -- "

JEFFREY

Sing it to me, Wayne Newton.

VOICE

Flight 422 from Frankfurt, with connections from Berlin, has arrived at the International Terminal. Passengers will be passing through customs shortly.

HELEN and JEFFREY look at each other, then face the audience, as if facing the doors through which ORAL and PALLAS will come. The sounds of the airport rise in volume as the lights quickly go to black.