

Bintl Briv

by

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CHARACTERS

- LOLA RIDGE -- 34, Irish/Scottish-American, poet
- ABRAHAM CAHAN -- 37, Jewish, newspaper editor
- HANNAH BRODSKY -- Young, but care-worn

SETTING

- Editorial office of the Jewish Forward [Forverts]

TIME

- 1906

MISCELLANEOUS

- A dialect coach for the Yiddish

Bintel Briv

Scene 1

The office of ABRAHAM CAHAN, editor of the Forverts. Table. Two chairs. Under the table is a sack full of letters.

HANNAH BRODSKY, care-worn, end of her tether, holding a letter, reads it to CAHAN out loud, but sounding as if she has memorized it and is not really reading it.

BRODSKY

Zum geerten Forverts redactor, Avruham Cahan, April, neinzehn hundert un seks. Ich shreib dos vun fertzveiflung, veil ich bin a fertzveifelte froi. Wider shvengedig -- un ich hob shoin tsvey. Un a brutaler man, ver veist nisht vus nein heist....

[To the esteemed Forward editor, Abraham Cahan, April 1906. I write this of desperation, for I am a desperate woman. Again pregnant -- and I have two already. And a brutal husband who doesn't know the meaning of "no"....]

CAHAN

You can give me the letter Frailin -- Froi -- .

BRODSKY

(not giving him the letter)

Neighbor down the hall said you were asking for letters for your newspaper, Her Cahan, she said you wrote, "People often need the opportunity to pour out their heavy-laden hearts," and she knows I need to -- Charged me a quarter, though, because while I can read I cannot write well -- everybody wants to take a piece! -- you know how much blood he would take out of me if he knew a quarter -- him only \$2 a day, me with the wash -- couldn't buy a stamp, that's why I'm here -- Froi Brodsky.

CAHAN

You can give me the letter, Froi Brodsky.

BRODSKY

(not giving him the letter)

They say the more you complain, the longer God lets you live, but I don't think that's going to be true, Her Cahan, at least for me, because if I complain to my husband about this baby, he is not

going to let me -- but if I have this baby --
sorry -- it will kill me, the two I already have
wring me dry, but if I don't have it, my husband
will -- hurt me -- kill me, I don't know, Her
Cahan, but hurt me, yes -- The rabbi tells me
it's my fault --

CAHAN

The rabbi.

BRODSKY

I'm supposed to listen to the rabbi.

CAHAN

Would you like to hear a joke?

BRODSKY

(puzzled)

About a rabbi?

CAHAN

We stand in the office of the Jewish Forward,
Froi Brodsky, a newspaper dedicated to the common
people -- to you. It's 1906 in the modern United
States -- we can tell any joke we like. To make
a point to you.

BRODSKY

All right.

CAHAN

A much respected rabbi is dying. His students
crowd around, and one finally asks, "Rabbi, tell
us the meaning of life."

(deepens his voice)

"Life is a fountain."

"A fountain? What does that mean?"

"All right," the rabbi groans, "so it's not a
fountain!"

And who should listen to a man like that?

BRODSKY hands CAHAN her letter.

BRODSKY

Are you going to print it?

CAHAN

I am going to print it. In that section of the newspaper already set aside: "bintl briv" I'm going to call it --

BRODSKY

And I'll be first?

CAHAN

Your letter will be the first.

BRODSKY

And what should I do?

CAHAN takes a quarter out of his pocket and gives it to BRODSKY.

CAHAN

As always, Froi Brodsky, whatever your heart tells you to do is what you should do.

CAHAN leads BRODSKY to exit. Lights. Transition.

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Scene 2

CAHAN, back at his desk, pulls the bag of letters from underneath and rummages among the letters.

CAHAN

But maybe I was a real yukel, Froi Hannah Brodsky, to send out that offer -- missives from the heart of darkness, such misery -- endless --

LOLA RIDGE enters, wearing a broad hat and a colorful vest, and a bag of elaborate design slung over her shoulder. Her dress is simple and bright. She holds a copy of the Forward.

RIDGE

Hello. Hello.

CAHAN

Yes -- hello -- sorry -- are you bringing in a letter?

RIDGE

Do I look like your postman?

CAHAN

Not in the least --

RIDGE

I didn't think so, unless they'd changed their uniforms lately and acquired a sense of humor.

(holds up newspaper)

I brought myself here because you posted a notice. For an editor. Of letters. For the "bintl briv."

CAHAN

You read the Forverts?

RIDGE gives him an "look," then answers in her accented Yiddish.

RIDGE

Avade, ich lein die tzeitung jedern tug. ["Of course I read the newspaper every day."]

CAHAN

Wiezoy kennt ihr Yiddish? ["How do you know Yiddish?"]

RIDGE

(switching to English)

I know Yiddish because I bunk on Hester Street. You can't live on Hester Street and not --

CAHAN

But your accent --

RIDGE

My accent was born in Dublin and raised in New Zealand and Australia -- inflected by a Scottish step-father who spat Shakespeare from his drunken heart as he smashed the furniture. Is my accent bothering you?

CAHAN

No --

RIDGE

Yes.

CAHAN

Only it makes it clear you're not Jewish --

RIDGE

No Jews abide in Ireland, Mr. Cahan? She has him thinking on that one. I can give you a history, brief or long, of Irish Jews --

CAHAN

So you're Jewish?

RIDGE

I haven't said that.

CAHAN

Then why are you here?

RIDGE

The busy man asks. Do you mean "here" in this office? On Hester Street? In this city? In this life? Because I write, Herr Schreiber, like you, about all of it -- right now about the Hester Street Jews and the everyone-else there, including me, the whole polyglot gob-stopping density of the place.

CAHAN

So are you Jewish or are you not?

RIDGE

What I am, Her Cahan, is immensely interesting -- in part because I have read Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto.

CAHAN

You've read my Yekl?

RIDGE

And The Imported Bridegroom. Three, if I include The White Terror and the Red.

CAHAN

Either you're a perceptive reader or a glutton for punishment.

RIDGE

I enjoyed them all -- would I lie to you, my prospective employer?

They hold each other's gaze.

CAHAN

Perhaps you should give me your name.

RIDGE

Perhaps you should ask for it. Go ahead.

CAHAN

May I have the pleasure -- I assume it's a pleasure --

RIDGE

Oh, it is.

CAHAN

Then the pleasure of knowing --

RIDGE

Rose Emily Ridge. Call me Lola.

CAHAN

Right now I'll use Miss -- Mrs.? -- Miss, then.
Miss Ridge.

RIDGE

Accepted. Does the position pay?

CAHAN

But not much --

RIDGE

Can it be done in the evenings?

CAHAN

Yes, but --

RIDGE

"Yes, but" usually means "no" where I come from.
Must be that non-Jewish accent inflecting my gob
that's the sticking point!

CAHAN

Gob?

RIDGE

Look, there's only one way to come to terms about
this.

RIDGE lifts the sack to the floor and sits at the desk.

RIDGE

I read your paper -- good practical socialism! --
your editorials -- good practical assimilation! --
- your books and stories -- just gut! -- so let's
say that you now have to read me.

RIDGE pulls a wooden case from her bag, opens it, and extracts a
beautiful fountain pen. CAHAN stares at it.

CAHAN

That is a Waterman pen.

RIDGE

Gold nib.

CAHAN

Gold nib. Where did you get -- how did you --

RIDGE

I got it from where I got it. Pick a letter.

CAHAN hands a letter to RIDGE. RIDGE opens it, unfolds it, reads it, finishes it.

RIDGE

So, review. She gives in to him -- "he is one of those who do not retreat until they've accomplished what they want." So he accomplishes her. They live together, unmarried --

CAHAN

"Freethinkers" --

RIDGE

And now she cannot stand his voice -- "as if a saw were rasping against my bones."

CAHAN

But when he is near her "I lose control and become his slave."

RIDGE

"If I stay longer I'll surely take my own life."

CAHAN

I get many letters with endings like that.

Without hesitation RIDGE begins to write a response on the letter.

RIDGE

Read over my shoulder.

CAHAN leans over to read as RIDGE writes. RIDGE hands him the letter. CAHAN reads.

CAHAN

In Yiddish --

RIDGE

"Americanized" -- as used in your own paper.

CAHAN

Gut -- a little harsh -- but, I think, correct.

RIDGE

A fool, but nothing gained by telling her what she probably knows about herself. Better to

frame it as liberation -- especially for a letter sent to the Forverts. Forward! Well?

CAHAN gestures toward the pen.

CAHAN

May I?

RIDGE hands it to him. CAHAN handles it like a jewel.

RIDGE

May I back?

CAHAN hands it back to her.

RIDGE

On board am I, Mr. Cahan?

CAHAN gets up.

CAHAN

I can find another desk to work at.

RIDGE

I am sure you will. What?

CAHAN

Jewish.

RIDGE

Hester Street -- now let me earn.

RIDGE readies herself, opens another letter, reads.

RIDGE

My God on a bicycle --

She waves CAHAN away as she reads. Lights. Transition.

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Scene 3

RIDGE enters the office. She finds a letter on CAHAN's desk, which angers her. CAHAN enters, letters in hand.

CAHAN

Ah, guten morgen.

RIDGE

You changed what I wrote.

CAHAN

I edited what you wrote.

RIDGE

You changed what I wrote.

CAHAN

Because what you wrote --

RIDGE

Was what?

CAHAN

Not to the point.

RIDGE

What would you know what's "to the point" when it comes to a woman and her body?

CAHAN

Miss Ridge, in the three months you've been here I have trusted your judgment -- mostly hands off, let you say what needed to be said.

RIDGE

And why not?

CAHAN

But I am the editor. I edit. My name on the masthead.

RIDGE

The boss --

CAHAN

And this boss says you can't tell her that having children is a form of suicide for women.

RIDGE

(brandishing letter)

You make it seem that motherhood makes a woman, makes her whole, complete, intact, human --

CAHAN

It does.

RIDGE

And how does it do that?

CAHAN

Because women give life, and without life --

RIDGE

And how do you square that with the Forverts' take on the emancipation of women? Forget that -
- let's take this right to the gut: Do you and Mrs. Cahan have any kinder?

CAHAN

That -- is none of your business.

RIDGE

You would've answered yes if you did, so you don't, and you do love Froi Cahan, don't you, of course you do, so would you throw her to the curb like he wants if she doesn't ever? And what if it's not a matter of can't have children for Froi Cahan but I won't, eh? -- there are ways, always have been, that we can keep our bodies our own from men.

CAHAN

That's absurd, she would never --

RIDGE

But you don't know, do you? See? And what if that was what she chose to do, still loving you as she chose to do it -- would you think of her as broken as she kept on loving you?

CAHAN

Looking at you, maybe I am wrong -- maybe not all women give life, can give life --

RIDGE

(with a laugh)

Ah -- attack the [messenger] --

CAHAN

-- maybe that is what the husband you threw over would say about you if I were to ask him. Did you two have children?

RIDGE

I see what the boss [is doing] --

CAHAN

You would've answered yes if you did, so you don't.

RIDGE

It didn't matter to me.

CAHAN

Did it matter to him? Or didn't it matter to you if it mattered to him? What kind of letter from you to the Forverts about Mr. Peter Webster -- that he couldn't keep up with you, match your matchless intellect -- his voice -- "as if a saw were rasping against my bones" -- and so, flick, gone --

They both just stop.

RIDGE

You crossed a line.

CAHAN

I was the second to cross a line.

RIDGE

But you'd agree that we both [crossed] --

CAHAN

I would agree with you completely.

RIDGE

Then we agree on something.

RIDGE goes to exit. CAHAN stops her. He takes a pencil and the letter, and offers it to her.

CAHAN

Go on.

RIDGE sits, takes up the pencil and the letter. She crosses out something, writes something else. She puts the pencil and the letter on CAHAN's desk. He sits, reads, then makes a few changes. RIDGE reads his changes, makes one small change.

CAHAN

Gut.

RIDGE

Agreed.

Lights. Transition.

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Scene 4

Late at night. Two desks, two sacks of letters, two people reading and making notes. They speak as they read.

CAHAN

You should go home. I should go home.

RIDGE

You could have, a long time ago. The paper is bedded, isn't it?

CAHAN

"Put to bed" -- yes --

RIDGE

So go put yourself to bed. Put your wife to bed, put yourself to bed with her.

CAHAN

Ah, it's late at night, and the talk turns to sex.

RIDGE

So go.

They read -- and read.

CAHAN

I can't.

(shuffles letters)

"The Lonesome Orphan." "A Perplexed Mother."
"Suffering and Lonely." "The Unlucky One."

RIDGE

What?

CAHAN

Too much success with this, this "bintl briv."

RIDGE

You don't like success?

CAHAN

I mean that I wish people didn't have so much -- to write about.

RIDGE

If they're alive, they'll be in pain. It is a heart of darkness out there -- you of all people should know this -- and you did ask them --

CAHAN

I know.

RIDGE

And you can't expect them, once they've a chance to unburden, to keep their burdens nailed to their backs. Believe it or not, this is a good thing.

(laughs)

Though, to be honest, we'd have to be a Jesus Christ tag-team to turn some of this darkness into light -- though I suppose Jesus the Christ is not the preferred model for Hebrew sons.

CAHAN

So you're not Jewish!

RIDGE

Hundreds of letters deep we've gone into this expedition, Mr. Cahan, you and I are in for hundreds, which puts us way beyond that silly "Jew Yes/Jew No" question mark. Besides, "Jew No" is a place in Alaska. That's all right, you don't have to laugh at my geographical humor.

CAHAN looks over at RIDGE, back at the letters, back to RIDGE.

RIDGE

What?

CAHAN

Nothing -- it's just -- nothing.

RIDGE

"Nothing" said like that where I come from always means "something."

CAHAN

You're right -- yes, you and I have been in for hundreds -- so may I show you something?

RIDGE

(smiling)

It's late at night, and the talk turns to sex. Am I going to have to show you mine?

CAHAN

(smiling)

Yes you are, Miss Ridge.

RIDGE

And this from the married man.

CAHAN

No -- well, yes -- but this request come from the writer.

RIDGE

Ah, I love it when people let their "writer" loose. Consider me ready to be shown.

CAHAN pulls out manuscript pages, hands them to RIDGE.

RIDGE

Title -- "The Rise Of" -- but "rise of" what? of whom? You've only given it a long underscore -- you've left out the reference.

CAHAN

It'll be a character's name -- but not important -- that underscore really underscores me.

RIDGE hands the pages back to him.

RIDGE

Read to me -- go on. My ears are better than my eyes for this sort of thing.

CAHAN

All right -- to set the stage for Mr. Underscore: immigrant from Lithuania with four cents in his pocket, now a successful businessman worth two million.

(finds the page)

But this -- from the character's growing up -- a sixteen-year old Talmudic boy alive and terrified by that fact, in chapter two --

RIDGE

Read!

CAHAN

"Satan kept me busy in those days. It was not an easy task to keep one's eyes off the girls. I would even picture myself touching a feminine cheek. But dancing with a girl, or even taking one out for a walk, was out of the question. To be sure, there were young 'modern' Jews in our town who called the girls 'young ladies' and danced with them. To me they were sinners in Israel. And yet I could not think of them without envy. Their social relations with girls piqued my curiosity -- and, I had to admit, things other than mere curiosity. Satan indeed kept me busy in those days."

RIDGE gestures for the page. CAHAN hands it to her.

RIDGE

You're still a busy man.

CAHAN

Yes. This is keeping me rather busy.

RIDGE

When did you start this?

CAHAN

That page? This morning.

RIDGE

No, the whole project.

CAHAN

When you and the letters came in.

RIDGE

Simultaneous foundlings on your doorstep --

CAHAN

No one else has seen any of this.

RIDGE

Not even Mrs. Cahan.

CAHAN

No. What do you think? Does it promise enough?

RIDGE

Well, like a cake, it's the middle that makes the cutting-into work it. These are just notes -- show me the middle when it's been middled out.

CAHAN

(reaching for the page)

Fair enough.

RIDGE

Hang on! Know that I like the ingredients -- I like that your young Talmudic man struggles to keep himself intact against what the stifling conventions tell him is sinful -- I like that your young man wants to follow his heart --

CAHAN

So you do get it --

RIDGE

Of course I do get it. That's why you showed it to me.

RIDGE hands him back the pages.

CAHAN

Yes. Good. Now you.

RIDGE

I have nothing to show.

CAHAN

In your bag. I've seen it -- out and back in, out and back in. You've got notes, too -- from the letters -- your Waterman has not only been speaking to "Disappointed" and "Greenhorn."

RIDGE

Research --

CAHAN

Thievery? Come on -- you have to show me yours.

RIDGE hesitates, then pulls a leather-covered journal from her bag. CAHAN gestures. RIDGE hands it over.

RIDGE

It's rough, it's -- really, just hand it back -- it's rough, it's raw, it's --

CAHAN

It's like you, then.

RIDGE

No compliments. Please, give it --

CAHAN

(opening)

The Ghetto. A good Jew word.

RIDGE

You should know -- you've used it. Give it back.

CAHAN

Too late --

(turns the page)

-- we're in the ghetto.

RIDGE

Christ --

CAHAN

"No breath stirs the heat
Leaning its ponderous bulk upon the Ghetto
And most on Hester Street -- "

RIDGE

Hell roast you --

CAHAN

"-- The heat...
Nosing in the body's -- "

CAHAN can't read the word.

RIDGE

Overflow --

CAHAN
(overlapping)

"Overflow

Like a beast pressing its great steaming belly
close,
Covering all avenues of air..."

Steaming belly?

RIDGE

Too sensual -- please --

CAHAN

No. No.

RIDGE gives him a salute, but it is not playful.

RIDGE

May the cat eat you, and the devil eat the cat.

CAHAN
(overlapping)

And the devil eat the cat. I know that one.

(CAHAN reads)

"Young women pass in groups,
Their heads are uncovered to the stars,
And they call to the young men and to one another
With a free camaraderie.
Only their eyes are ancient and alone...
Bodies dangle from the fire escapes
Or sprawl over the stoops...
Upturned faces glimmer pallidly --
Moist faces of girls
Like dank white lilies,

And infants' faces with open parched mouths that
suck at the air as at empty teats."

CAHAN leafs through more pages.

CAHAN
Bellies and teats and body's overflow --

RIDGE
Give it back.

CAHAN
I would like to read the middle of the cake.

RIDGE
Just scribbles, notes --

CAHAN
Am I the only one who's seen this?

RIDGE
Who else could I show it to?

CAHAN
I don't know who passes through your life.

RIDGE
Only you -- have seen it. Give. It. Back.

CAHAN hands it back to her.

CAHAN
So, we both have our yet-to-be finished
masterpieces. It could use more Yiddish.

RIDGE
So could yours.

CAHAN
(points to letters)
The whole world could use more Yiddish. The
great steaming belly -- body's overflow --

RIDGE
Straight from the heart of darkness --

CAHAN
But -- this is important, isn't it? -- they're
not hearts of darkness themselves --

RIDGE leans toward CAHAN. He leans toward her.

CAHAN

That we not make them into --

RIDGE

No -- no! Not at all! To love all this -- music
-- to love them --

CAHAN

And to struggle to shape the words -- shape that
love, shape them, into words --

RIDGE

What we are writing: not the unfinished
masterpiece -- what we are doing here -- with
these letters -- that's the true unfinished
masterpiece --

CAHAN, perhaps, touches her forearm. RIDGE, perhaps, touches his.
They catch each other's eyes -- let go -- catch again. RIDGE leans
back. CAHAN leans back. RIDGE stands, starts to neaten the letters.

RIDGE

It's getting late.

CAHAN

Yes -- late. As a good labor unionist, I'm going
to have to start paying you overtime!

(no response from RIDGE)

Yes --

They finish neatening while silence hangs in the air.

CAHAN

At least let me walk you home --

RIDGE

You've not offered before, and I don't see any
need to start offering now.

RIDGE readies herself to leave: jacket, hat, bag.

RIDGE

I can get to Hester Street by myself, thank you -
- I've been doing it all these nights --

CAHAN

The streets aren't safe.

RIDGE

They're safer than temptation.

RIDGE goes to leave, hesitates, turns back.

RIDGE

And how should this be signed, Mr. Cahan?

CAHAN

"Yukel" [fool]: certainly for me.

RIDGE

Not that -- really, not that at all. Unless --
you name me "fool" as well -- I should go --

RIDGE doesn't go.

RIDGE

We shared words -- only words --

CAHAN

For which we would live and die to set them down
right, Lola Ridge. Yes? True?

RIDGE

Yes!

CAHAN

Rare to find someone moving along the same road -
-

RIDGE

Rare it is.

RIDGE goes to leave one more time, comes back one more time.

RIDGE

I'll take your walk to Hester Street. I'm not
giving up the job.

CAHAN grabs a coat and hat.

CAHAN

Good choice. I wouldn't want such a good editor
to give up her research.

They exit. Lights and transition.

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Scene 5

Busy office. BRODSKY is now reading letters. CAHAN at his desk.
RIDGE enters -- new hat, new jacket, same bag, letter in hand.
BRODSKY throws her a look, goes on reading -- but keeps an ear cocked.
RIDGE takes her hat off.

RIDGE

"Satan indeed kept me busy in those days."

CAHAN

(smiling)

"Young women pass in groups,

Their heads are uncovered to the stars -- "

CAHAN

And so she comes bearing quotes.

RIDGE

And he bears quotes in return.

CAHAN

It's good I have such a good memory since I haven't seen your face since I last saw your face. All I find are these wonderful traces of advice neatly arranged on my morning desk.

CAHAN indicates BRODSKY.

CAHAN

This is Froi Brodsky.

BRODSKY nods -- not friendly, not unfriendly.

CAHAN

Even a night shift isn't enough to keep up -- which is why I now have Froi Brodsky cataloguing for me -- it brings her in a little money. So what about the light of day brings you here?

RIDGE

My pay.

CAHAN hands RIDGE an envelope.

RIDGE

And I bring a letter this time.

RIDGE hands him the envelope in her hand.

RIDGE

It's not a formal notice -- but I'm going to go try some other things to feed -- painting, I used to paint -- most likely factory work --

CAHAN

To get closer --

RIDGE

To it all.

CAHAN

Shouldn't be hard for you to do.

CAHAN hands her a letter.

CAHAN

I have been waiting for this chance -- in person.

RIDGE

Shall we?

CAHAN

Let's.

They open their respective letters, read them, re-fold them, put them away. BRODSKY watches all of this. They stand.

RIDGE

Yes -- well --

CAHAN

Tricky thing, words --

RIDGE

I like how you signed yours.

CAHAN

Yours, too.

RIDGE holds out her hand.

RIDGE

Zol zayn mit mazl.

CAHAN shakes her hand.

CAHAN

Good luck as well.

RIDGE turns to leave.

RIDGE

Sei gesund, Froi Brodsky.

RIDGE leaves, re-reading CAHAN's letter as she exits. CAHAN re-reads her letter. BRODSKY looks at the retreating RIDGE, then at CAHAN.

CAHAN

Froi Brodsky -- did you get good advice with your letter?

BRODSKY

Enough to get me by. Lots of people read the letters. What you said to me got said to a hundred like me, at least.

CAHAN

And yet people still suffer.

BRODSKY

They expect to do that.

CAHAN

And are you getting by?

BRODSKY

I am getting by.

CAHAN

And are the hundred others getting by?

BRODSKY

They read the newspaper, they get by, just like I did. What other choices would they have, Herr Cahan?

CAHAN

I don't know, Froi Brodsky. I don't know.

CAHAN stares. BRODSKY continues to read, throwing a glance at CAHAN. CAHAN gets up.

CAHAN

I'm going for a walk.

BRODSKY watches CAHAN exit. BRODSKY looks at RIDGE's letter on CAHAN's desk, looks back to her own work, looks at the letter.

BRODSKY

If she's done something to hurt him --

BRODSKY gets up, hovers over the letter, looks around, then puts a hand on it, only to take her hand away and leave the letter unread. Then, unable to resist the temptation, she picks up the letter, reads it, puts it down.

BRODSKY

Okay, then -- I guess that's all okay --

BRODSKY goes back to her letters, picks one up and scans it.

BRODSKY

My God -- these poor people --

BRODSKY puts the letter on a certain pile.

BRODSKY

(shaking her head)

"If you want to know what God thinks of money,
look at the people he gives it to" --

BRODSKY picks up another, scans. Lights. Transition.

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Scene 6: Epilogue

RIDGE enters with a book. CAHAN enters with a book. They exchange them. They start to read.

CAHAN

"The Ghetto and Other Poems."

RIDGE

"The Rise of David Levinsky."

BLACKOUT