

Untitled Series #7: A Comedy

By Ellen Struve

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SCENE 1

The play is set in the live/work space of Mariah and Chris. It is an artist loft, purchased before the neighborhood even thought about the word trendy. The detritus of dual careers in art competes for space. Mariah is an abstract painter. Chris builds Rube Goldberg machines. Mariah is furiously trying to zip a suitcase that is very clearly overstuffed.

CHRIS

Your baggage is oversized.

MARIAH

All I have to do is push harder.

Mariah uses her entire upper body to stuff it down.

CHRIS

You're going to have to check it.

MARIAH

I can't afford to check a bag on an overseas flight to ... Rhymes with banana.

CHRIS

I thought you were going to Beijing.

MARIAH

So did I. Levy explained. Beijing is yesterday. Like New York.

CHRIS

If New York is yesterday, why can't you get a show in the New York space?

MARIAH

It's a residency *slash* exhibition. I need to be international. The Chinese love art. Guaranteed sales.

CHRIS

According to Levy. You don't even know where you're going.

MARIAH
(struggles, remembers)

Xixuanbanha

CHRIS

That doesn't rhyme with banana.

MARIAH

It rhymes. Bah-nah-nah. Try not to kill my plants with your negativity.

CHRIS takes over the suitcase. He unpacks some stuff.

CHRIS

Your problem is you don't know how to compartmentalize.

MARIAH

Here.

MARIAH hands Chris a dry cleaning ticket.

CHRIS

No, Mariah, no. I don't pick up your dry cleaning. It's a perk of the divorce.

MARIAH

I'm going to be gone six months, Chris. Six months.

CHRIS

Not my problem.

MARIAH

I am going halfway around to world to prostitute myself to the global economy so one of us can afford a solution to the current living arrangements and you won't even pick up my dry cleaning?

CHRIS

I said no.

MARIAH

Wrong answer.

They have a ridiculous pleading, threatening, posturing stare off.

CHRIS

No.

MARIAH

What do you want from me?

CHRIS

Autonomy.

I have to be able to say no to you. Dr. Krasner says.

MARIAH

Dr. Krasner says you shouldn't do me One Favor? You shouldn't perform One simple Act of Humanity that any human being would perform for any other human being that they stood next to on the subway, much less a human being that he had been married to. Someone he had been intimate with time and time again over a multi-year history? Admittedly not so much at the end.

CHRIS

Enough.

MARIAH

Enough you'll be a human being and pick up my dry cleaning?

CHRIS

Enough you'll stop waxing rhapsodic about our broken lives and I'll pick up your dry cleaning?

MARIAH

Good. Now try to lift it. It's under 50 pounds right?

CHRIS

Wrong. It's an incredible burden.

It's really heavy. He drops it on Mariah's foot by accident.

MARIAH

Kill me. Kill me now.

Chris looks at the dry cleaning ticket. An idea dawns.

CHRIS

Huh.

SCENE 2

MARIAH

Artist Statement for International Exhibition.

The Bitter Place: These paintings use abstraction as a window into other worlds. This series, inspired by Dante's Divine Comedy depicts the stubborn, savage wilderness faced by those who wake, "Midway along the journey of our life" to find themselves stuck in a fucking forest.

Employing the device of parallel perspectives and last century materials, the series wanders off on alternate paths, any one of which, had I taken might have spared me the suffering that this exact kind of bullshit that I am spouting creates.

But no, here I am, writing another artist statement so that people can read it, take one look at my work and say, "Doesn't look like a forest to me." or the time honored abstractionist classic "My kid could do that."

Really, your kid could spend her whole stupid life learning how to draw, mastering a brush and then forgetting how to do any of that while watching people who never bothered spout this kind of bullshit and make millions of dollars stealing other people's pics on Instagram. Your kid could commit to her vision, even if painting is "Over" and abstraction has gone to hell. Your kid can persevere, knowing the whole time, there's easier ways to live than the scrap that is adjunct and fifty percent commission. Oh hey-- but your kid's a girl, so the odds against her getting gallery representation go up two-hundred, nope, three hundred percent. No worries. She's got a self-destructive streak that's Pollock, Picasso and Whitman, so she's never going to be able to do anything else even if painting is ruining what's left of her miserable life. If your kid can do that, that's great. That's fantastic. Congratulations on your totally fucked up kid

Have fun paying for art school.

SCENE 3

Christopher and Lisa enter from their second date. They've gone back to his place, so it's going pretty well.

CHRIS

And then when I got out of Art School, I/

LISA

Wait. So *you* went to Art School.

CHRIS

Yes.

LISA

And that's where you met your wife. In art school?

CHRIS

Yes.

LISA

(disappointed)

So you're an artist.

CHRIS

I guess, you could say that. Only, more in the way you could say that I'm Catholic.

LISA

(really disappointed)

You're a Catholic Artist?

CHRIS

No, I'm lapsed. I'm a lapsed Catholic. And a lapsed artist.

LISA

I get it.

CHRIS

Is that a problem? You sound disappointed.

LISA

I do.

CHRIS

Because I am employed.

LISA

It's too soon for this.

CHRIS

I did not mean to rush things. The other night. It seemed like you were into it.

LISA

I really didn't want to spoil this yet.

CHRIS

I can explain. I'm a little out of practice.

LISA

I know. That's what makes it so awful.

CHRIS

It was awful?

LISA

That's not what I meant.

CHRIS

You have to believe me when I say that I was not planning on things going as well or as awful as things did. I really thought it went pretty well.

LISA

Things did go awfully well.

CHRIS

They did?

LISA

Yes. Awfully, awfully well.

CHRIS

They did.

LISA

Which is why I hoped we could postpone this. I know you are new to this whole dating scene, what with your wife dying so recently and so violently.

CHRIS

Yeah, that.

LISA

So, I realize, you can't know what it is like, out here, for those of us who never found someone.

CHRIS

I'd like to know.

LISA

No, you wouldn't. I say this, speaking as a grief counselor who has listened to a lot of genuinely terrible circumstances. It isn't just rough. It's brutal.

It's not you. It's me.

CHRIS

This part of the dating scene I do remember.

He goes to let her out.

LISA

You asked if it was a problem that you are an artist.

CHRIS

Lapsed artist.

LISA

It is a problem.

CHRIS

Can I ask why?

LISA

You can. Let me explain. I have been dating for a quarter of a century.

LISA

And after the last nearly long-term apocalyptic catastrophe of a relationship, I decided I could go back and start over and eliminate what wasn't working.

CHRIS

I completely understand that.

LISA

There are two things wrong with dating after A Certain Age. Lies and the Internet.

CHRIS

That sounds... true.

LISA

Lies and the Internet are actually the two things wrong with dating at any age. But after A Certain Age, they just become unbearable. Like someone else's browser history.

I don't lie. Ever. And I don't use the internet.

CHRIS

So, like, you don't do online dating.

LISA

I don't do online anything. I don't use the internet at all.

CHRIS

At all? I don't understand.

LISA

You know old people, right? You have parents.

CHRIS

Yes, but my mom is addicted to Pinterest and is always forwarding scams.

LISA

Really old people.

CHRIS

Like Nana, before she died.

LISA

It works pretty much the same for me as it did for your dead grandmother. Like 1989, before it had anything to do with Taylor Swift.

CHRIS

How do you do anything? Like, if you wanted to get Chinese food but you didn't want to walk more than 400 feet.

LISA

Here. I might as well show you.

Lisa gets her incredibly heavy purse. She pulls out a map.

I have this.

CHRIS

A paper map of the city that isn't labeled ironically or a project on Etsy. I haven't seen one of these in ages.

He holds it like an object of wonder.

I had one, when I first moved here. When I lived here.

LISA

Shishi.

CHRIS

Not then.

LISA

No, not then. You should have bought a place, but then you wouldn't have this one I suppose. This a great place. No one could ever afford a space like this now.

CHRIS

It has very desirable light.

LISA

Is it hard for you, living here with all your memories of her?

CHRIS

Memories are easier to live with than M/ost people.

He tries to fold up the map.

LISA

Let me.

She folds it up easily and puts it in her incredibly heavy purse.

CHRIS

You must have a lot of maps.

LISA

Phone book.

CHRIS

Wow.

LISA

I guess you could say I'm an old-fashioned girl. Or you could just say, see you around.

Lisa starts to go.

CHRIS

So you don't use the internet. Big deal. I have friends who don't believe in climate change.

LISA

Really?

CHRIS

Not really. Relatives, but not friends. All my friends believe in climate change, well-- except for one. Although, technically he believes in it, but he also believes it is a corporate conspiracy to chain us to our capitalist overlords. Which it is, now that I think about it. I did tell you I went to art school.

LISA

You did.

CHRIS

You didn't tell me why that disappointed you.

LISA

I didn't.

CHRIS

Will you?

LISA

If you want to hear the truth. I meant it when I said I don't lie. I know everyone thinks they are pretty honest about stuff. But there is not "pretty" honest. There's mostly "painful" honest and ugly honest. It isn't difficult to tell the truth, once you get the hang of it, but hearing it is another thing.

CHRIS

Is that your way of telling me, "You can't handle the truth?"

Lisa laughs.

LISA

Okay. Here goes.

I used to date this guy. More like a quivering poisonous blob of flesh-eating bacteria disguised as an available, educated, age-appropriate non-felon and/

CHRIS

You know what, let's not talk about the past.

LISA

That's a great idea.

CHRIS

You're truthful. That's good. I can handle it.

LISA

You're an artist. That's disappointing. I can handle it.

CHRIS

Actually, I don't make art anymore. Also, disappointing, but I can handle it. The past is past

LISA

What's done is done.

CHRIS

Kiss Today Goodbye.

Lisa hesitates.

Um, over and Out.

Chris realizes this still sounds wrong.

LISA

Dead and Gone. OhmyGod. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to say that. I didn't think.

CHRIS

It's okay.

LISA

No it isn't. I can't think of anything worse that I could've said. Except maybe Dead and Buried or Dead as a Doornail or Dead on Delivery. Oh my God that isn't even a thing. I can't stop. It's a side effect of telling the truth all the time. It fucks with your filter.

CHRIS

It's okay. It gets better. You breathe in and out all day long. You get out of bed every morning. Then, after a while, you don't have to remind yourself to get out of bed every morning and breathe in and out

He is totally stealing this from Sleepless in Seattle and thinking he can get away with it.

LISA

That's beautiful and familiar. She must have been incredible.

CHRIS

Incredible is one word.

LISA

I um, saw her once, at an opening. I didn't really care for the work.. It seemed desperate.

CHRIS

Which show?

LISA

Ahab in Drag

CHRIS

The figurative phase was a tough one.

LISA

I should go.

CHRIS

Stay.

LISA

I want to see you again, but I've already told you I'm disappointed in you and criticized your late wife's work--- which seems like more of a fifth date thing. I should go before the crazy completely dawns on you.

CHRIS

I like it. What man doesn't want a woman who says exactly what she's thinking?

LISA

All of them, in my experience.

CHRIS

Plus-- no technology. I don't have to do any follow up. No texts . No emails. No maintenance.

LISA

True.

CHRIS

After all, how often do you meet a stranger at a party and/

LISA

57 times. I told you. I don't lie. Ever.

CHRIS

57 times?

LISA

I go to a lot of parties and at heart I'm a deeply optimistic person.

CHRIS

57 times. So, before, when you said things went/

LISA

Awfully well.

CHRIS

Where does that put me? On a scale.

LISA

It's not a test.

CHRIS

But if it were a test, where would I rank?

LISA

Eighty ??? Fifth? (*reconsiders*) Eighty-second percentile.

CHRIS

I can live with that.

LISA

You can?

CHRIS

Because I know I can do better.

His move is made. She accepts. They exit off to the bedroom. Perhaps to the sound of Taylor Swift's "22".

SCENE 4

1 month later. Chris is preparing a romantic evening. Chris and Mariah's wedding picture is displayed along with pictures of their youth and more of her work. It's like a memorial.

Mariah enters, dragging her suitcase.

MARIAH

LIAR!

CHRIS

You're supposed to be in China.

MARIAH

Am I? Am I? Am I supposed to be in China, sipping MaiTais and shaking hands with the new global economy? “Ni How Shen Du!”

CHRIS

Are you having a stroke?

MARIAH

It’s Mandarin. It means “pleased to meet you” Or “my gallery won’t fucking SPIT on me in Chicago so they sent me here because they are too cheap to pay for my ticket to hell” AND because my gallerist Rueben Maldecott Levy is the world’s biggest Liar.

Hell, by the way, is a 4 by 6 foot exhibition space in the industrial waste center by the river Styx, where you are expected to do all your own installation and the gallery attendants ask “why so ugly” and you can’t tell if they are asking about you or your work.

Thank you for not picking me up at the airport, by the way. I called five million times.

CHRIS

I’m on a technology break.

MARIAH

I hope that doesn’t mean you ignored my reminders to pick up my dry cleaning. And water my plants.

CHRIS

They are your plants. I was planning on reviving them over the next four months.

MARIAH

You live here too.

CHRIS

I do and I was promised a 6 month reprieve from the pleasure of your company. Did you sell anything.

MARIAH

No. No one is more disappointed than I am.

CHRIS

What does Levy say?

MARIAH

My gallerist did not see fit to return my calls. I left a few messages.

CHRIS

He'll just get a restraining order. Again.

MARIAH

Terrorist threats are going to be the least of his concerns when I get my hands on that lily livered, forked tongued, asshole aesthete.

Mariah helps herself to wine and snacks.

Yummy. I'm going to bed. I've got a big day tomorrow and anatomically impossible acts to execute.

CHRIS

You can't go to bed here.

MARIAH

Why not?

CHRIS

Because you.. You... You've been wronged. You should find Levy, now. Confront him.

MARIAH

It's First Friday in WickerPark. He's out swilling Chardonnay and seeking sacrificial lambs.

CHRIS

You can catch him while his defenses, and possibly his pants, are down.

MARIAH

I just got off a 17 hour flight which required a cocktail of sleeping aids and actual cocktails. I'm done.

CHRIS

That's what he thinks. Sending you to China rather than putting up a show in River North. Remember how he promised you the Biennale, then said he forgot it was the wrong year.

How he was going to get you that show at the Drawing Center, but-- well, really that was on you because you should know they don't show paintings at the Drawing Center, but still/

MARIAH

What's going on? You're all outraged about this.

CHRIS

Of course I am. You're being taken advantage of by that... that...

An oven timer goes off.

MARIAH

Demon spawn.

CHRIS

For Christ's Sake!

Chris exits to get dinner out of the oven.

MARIAH

And this upsets you?

CHRIS

(off) Of course it does.

MARIAH

You aren't enjoying the slightest bit of schadenfreude? You once told me you hoped Levy and I ended up on a deserted island together, but you hoped it would be far enough away that you couldn't hear my screams while he gnawed off my face.

Chris returns.

CHRIS

That doesn't sound like me.

MARIAH

It was at the height of the divorce.

CHRIS

Things were different. Things were "fraught".

MARIAH

You're being weird.

CHRIS

I'm allowed to want the best for you.

MARIAH

Something's up. I know you. Out with it.

She finishes the glass of wine, indicates she'd like a refill. He isn't happy about it, pours her another glass. She notices that he is wearing her wedding ring. Spit take..

While he is on the floor with a dishcloth, Mariah realized her ex-husband has made a romantic dinner. And she is drinking wine. She puts the glass down, as if it might contain a kind of poison. She looks around the room. She finds the wedding portrait. Oh yeah, she's freaked out.

Chris gets up.

CHRIS

On second thought. Maybe bed is the best place for you. Are you jet-lagged? You should take something-- probably a lot of something-- to help you adjust, relax. If you don't have something, I have some stuff that works.

MARIAH

No. No thank you.

CHRIS

Come on. Here. Take one. Or two. Take a bunch.

MARIAH

I know what's going on.

CHRIS

Shit.

MARIAH

And I get that it can't always be easy for you living in such close proximity to me.

CHRIS

Great. So you'll go to bed.

MARIAH

Chris, you can't just give me a handful of E and think everything is going to turn out like 1995. Did you stop seeing Dr. Krasner?

CHRIS

Who do you think prescribed those?

MARIAH

Dr. Krasner prescribes ecstasy? How often? How much?

CHRIS

You are making zero sense right now.

MARIAH

I am not having sex with you.

CHRIS

I'm going back to my initial diagnosis. You are having a stroke. Stick out your tongue. I want to see if it lolls to one side.

MARIAH

(through clenched teeth)

My tongue stays in my mouth. And so does yours.

Chris reaches for Mariah. Mariah pulls away.

They dance around a bit.

We. Are. Divorced.

CHRIS

Yeah. So?

MARIAH

So why are you wearing our wedding ring?

Chris instantly covers his hand.

CHRIS

I wanted to see if it still fit.

MARIAH

And?

CHRIS

It doesn't. It's now three sizes too small- like your heart. I can't get it off.

MARIAH

Why is my wedding portrait out?

CHRIS

I'm working out some stuff in therapy.

MARIAH

Is that why you are making a romantic dinner and trying to roofie me?

CHRIS

I'm not trying to roofie you. Well, I am trying to roofie you, but not for the reason you think. I met someone. She's coming over. You can't be here.

MARIAH

I live here.

CHRIS

I haven't really gotten around to that "Living" "Here" part yet. I really like her. It's our one monthiversary.

MARIAH

Oh vomit.

CHRIS

I don't want to wreck it. Believe it or not, most women get kind of suspicious when you tell them you are still living with your ex.

MARIAH

I date guys who still live with their exes all the time. It's no big deal. Sometimes they spring for hotels and if that doesn't work you can have sex in their car. You know, I used to really look down on people who drove an SUV in the city, but you go on enough of these dates and an Explorer starts to make sense.

CHRIS

Mariah, I'm, like, a thousand percent sure those guys are actually married. Or valets. You can't be here, you'll scare her off.

MARIAH

I'll be nice.

CHRIS

You don't know how.

MARIAH

You won't even know I'm here.

CHRIS

You snore. You forget to close the bathroom door.

MARIAH

Then you go out. Call her and tell her you burnt the casserole or whatever and you're taking her out for dinner.

CHRIS

No.

MARIAH

You could rent a car.

CHRIS

She is probably already on her way, so I can't call her because she doesn't have a cell phone.

MARIAH

What is she some kind of.. Christian Scientist?

CHRIS

Pretty sure Christian Scientists use cell phones.

MARIAH

Mormon?

CHRIS

Really big cell phone users.

MARIAH

What am I thinking of?

CHRIS

Amish.

MARIAH

Aaaahmish. What is she Amish?

CHRIS

No.

MARIAH

She sounds weird.

CHRIS

She isn't. Maybe a little. Weird in a way that's good. She's good weird, in a way that makes me almost happy. So she's chosen a life that's a little more/

MARIAH

Crazy.

CHRIS

Cloistered.

MARIAH

How old is she?

CHRIS

Age appropriate. The plants are mostly alive and I did pick up your dry cleaning.

MARIAH

Fine. Have fun with your 40 year old virgin. I'll go hunt down Beelzebub.

CHRIS

She's actually very promiscuous.

MARIAH

You have until 3 a.m. to enjoy the ramspringy.

Mariah exits.

CHRIS

Rumspringa.

SCENE 5

Midnight. Maria sneaks into her apartment badly. Clothes are scattered about. Chris catches her.

CHRIS

Why is it, when you snuck out in the middle of the night when we were married, I never heard you, but now you're a bull in a china shop.

MARIAH

I had a weird night. Something is going down at the gallery.

CHRIS

Shh!

They have to get closer. Mariah finds an undergarment.

MARIAH

Looks like somebody went down here.

CHRIS

The Misery has been calling here all night. Did you assault him? Will the police be coming for you? Again.

MARIAH

You talked to Levy, what did he say?

CHRIS

I silenced my phone.

MARIAH

I think that miserable fuck is going to drop me. After all these years. After everything I've done for him.

CHRIS

He wouldn't. You've been his client from the beginning.

MARIAH

No one knows where he begins. The portrait in his attic was painted with blood and a thigh bone. How many of our friends has that man has swindled and screwed over?

CHRIS

Considering his screwing was a main factor in the great swindle that was our divorce, I'm guessing all of them.

MARIAH

You're such a baby. Everybody sleeps with their dealer at one time or another.

CHRIS

Drug dealer maybe. Art dealer?

MARIAH

Same difference. (*new realization*) I'm gonna have to get a new dealer. Do you know what that's going to be like at my age? I'm going to have to take appointments and viewings and studio visits. I'm gonna have to serve herbal tea and debase myself.

CHRIS

That shouldn't be too hard.

MARIAH

You don't know how low I've had to go to get here.

CHRIS

I know you have to go--

MARIAH

He's gonna push me out. I'm gonna have to go back to murals. We'll never be able to afford our own spaces now. We'll have to sell this place and move into some studio--together.

CHRIS

Stop talking crazy.

MARIAH

This is why he sent me to China. He thought I'd be halfway around the world when he threw me in the dumpster.

CHRIS

What happened at the gallery?

MARIAH

No one was there. My work was piled in the corner and the last series was lined up against the wall.

CHRIS

Maybe he's hanging them.

MARIAH

Or executing them. He hates that series. Not a single one sold. He was probably out buying matches.

CHRIS

He doesn't need matches. Fire does his bidding, remember.

MARIAH

Call him back.

CHRIS

I'm busy.

MARIAH

Tell her to leave.

CHRIS

You need to leave first.

There is a crash off-stage.

CHRIS

She cannot see you here. (to Lisa) You okay?

MARIAH

It's not like she hasn't seen my picture.

Mariah thrusts the wedding picture at Chris.

LISA (O.S.)

I'm okay.

CHRIS

I will move out if you leave right now.

MARIAH

Can I get that in writing?

Chris and Mariah look for pen/paper. Chris is still holding picture.

LISA

Are you okay?

Mariah and Chris give up. Mariah hides.

I saw you weren't in bed. And you weren't in your bathroom. So I rifled through your medicine cabinet.

CHRIS

Oh.

LISA

You're holding on to a lot of things that are past the expiration date and maybe the other night wasn't a fluke after all?

CHRIS

Heh

LISA

I heard you talking to someone.

CHRIS

Lisa, I feel like there's something I should tell you.

LISA

I think I understand. It's perfectly natural.

She takes the portrait from behind his back.

You were talking to her.

CHRIS

Actually *(he can't bring himself to do it)* I was.

LISA

She was lovely.

CHRIS

Once.

Mariah's head pops up from where she's hiding.

LISA

I think it's healthy that you talk to her.

CHRIS

I'm not so sure.

LISA

But it might mean you aren't ready to move on.

CHRIS

No no. No no no no no. That's not it.

LISA

Do you want to talk about her.

CHRIS

I don't think that's a good idea.

LISA

You loved her. She's a part of you. She's with you all the time. She's here now.

CHRIS

That's more true than you know.

LISA

When you talk about her, it's easy to hear how much you loved her

CHRIS

Is it?

LISA

When you told me about the time you two installed the dead pigeons in that one piece, I could hear it in your voice.

CHRIS

I think we were just really, really young.

LISA

Her death was a tragedy.

Mariah makes a noise. Chris tries to cover.

It's okay to cry. It must be terrible to lose someone so suddenly and so violently.

Mariah stands up, threateningly moves toward Chris. Chris pretends to sob, holding lisa both as a shield and so she can't see Mariah.

CHRIS

I don't think we should talk about it. Or her.

LISA

Why not?

CHRIS

I'm afraid... of the feelings it might stir up.

LISA

That's understandable.

CHRIS

Would it be alright with you if we called it a night?

Mariah hides in the doorway to the kitchen.

LISA

Yep.

CHRIS

I don't want to kick you out.

LISA

It's okay. Your bed is all sweaty and gross now anyway. Besides, I have the feeling if I stay we're going to get into a long, deep conversation about our feelings and I've got a full appointment list and yoga in the morning.

She begins the hunt for her clothing. Mariah holds some of it out for her at one point. Chris tries to get it from Mariah, it snaps back on him.

CHRIS

You're sure this is okay.

LISA

I wouldn't lie, remember.

CHRIS

I'm having a really, really good time with you. Not right at this moment, but in general.

LISA

Me too.

She kisses him

I can't tell you what a relief it is to find a man who has nothing to hide.

Mariah pops her head out.

CHRIS

I made you something. Here, before you go. In case I don't see you again.

LISA

Again.

CHRIS

Again, tomorrow.

He gets out a hand drawn map.

I drew you a map of all the places we've been together and places we could go together, so you wouldn't have to carry so much baggage. In your purse. I ranked all the restaurants and theaters and clubs and parks between our apartments. There's a box that explains all the symbols.

LISA

You drew me a map. A map with a key.

CHRIS

Can I see you tomorrow?

LISA

Yes. Maybe. It depends on if I get my period.

CHRIS

I'll call.

LISA

I'll answer.

Lisa exits.

MARIAH

You're dead meat.

CHRIS

Technically, you're the one who is dead.

MARIAH

You told her I DIED?

CHRIS

Not exactly. It was more of a referral. She's a grief counselor. We were at a party. One of her friends told her I was a widower.

MARIAH

And how did her friend get that idea?

CHRIS

I may have misled some prospective dates about my marital history.

MARIAH

Well, Mr. Rochester, you've got tonight to get your story straightened out for your little governess, because this crazy lady is not getting locked in the attic and come tomorrow morning, I will rise again.

Mariah exits.

SCENE 6

CHRIS

Rube Goldberg can suck my dick.

You ever see *The Way Things Go*?

It's a film. These two Swiss guys build a Rube Goldberg machine the size of a giant warehouse. The water tips over so the tire runs downhill and sets off the rocket that lights the match. You make one decision, it makes another for you.

I made one decision. I went to the dry cleaner to pick up my ex-wife's clothes.

I got there and the gal tells me, "Not our ticket."

I check the address. Right address.

She says, "Old name." I give her all the different names my ex-wife's dry cleaning could possibly be under. Her name. My name. The hyphenate. The ill-advised combo. "Old Store" she says, "Not us." And I realize, even the Dry Cleaners has moved on.

And that Mariah gave me the wrong ticket. Which is just like her to screw up a detail she can't be bothered with, nevermind me wasting my time. How can one person be so impervious to the lives of others? How does she do it? She's covered in Teflon, dipped in neoprene and shellacked and poured into plexiglass like a goddamned Damien Hirst.

And as I trek back to the apartment, it starts raining and the wind picks up and I get scared by a flock of pigeons and I'm rehearsing this story for therapy, like I'm rehearsing this story right now, when I say the thing you say, but you don't mean.

I could kill her.

I say it under my breath. Just another crazy Chicagoan caught in the shitstorm talking to himself. But once I've said it out loud it feels different. It feels possible.

I could kill her.

Because if she were dead. I wouldn't be this guy standing out in the cold.

I wouldn't be a 43 year old designer still paying off his art degree, living with his ex-wife, masturbating in the shower in quiet desperation.

If I were a widower, I'd be different. I'd be less angry. I'd be more noble. I'd be the hero.

SCENE 7

The next morning. Mariah comes out, brushing her teeth.

MARIAH

So, let me see if I understand, killing me, makes you the hero.

CHRIS

If not the hero, at least the romantic lead.

MARIAH

No. Killing me makes you Blackbeard or Claus Von Bulow. Killing me makes you Phil Spector.

CHRIS

Your death was an accident. With you dead I am pitiable, but not pathetic. I am a guy in his forties who is capable of a loving successful relationship that ended through no fault of his own.

MARIAH

You're demented.

CHRIS

With you dead, I'm deep. I'm David Dukovny without the sex addiction. I'm that guy on Sex in the City. I am Admiral Von Trapp. I am goddamn Tom "He gets the girl, the guy and the Oscar despite average talent and weird looks" Hanks. That's who I am.

MARIAH

I think watching Lifetime movies, musicals and Sex in the City reruns might provide some insight as to why you've struck out with the ladies thus far.

CHRIS

I have told you before, I'm not gay.

MARIAH

Your dvr says otherwise.

CHRIS

Sexuality is a spectrum. You want me to be gay for the same reason I want you dead. So there's no one to blame. Face it, we are not every other divorced couple that met in art school.

MARIAH

We could be. If you'd just come out.

CHRIS

I'm not coming out.

MARIAH

And I'm not dead. Yet. How did I die? Cancer? Heart attack? One armed man? Did I suffer?

CHRIS

No. It was/

Furious pounding on the door.

Sudden.

LEVY (O.S.)

Christopher, let me in?

CHRIS

Levy

MARIAH

Motherfucker.

CHRIS

Should I let him in?

MARIAH

Oh, I'll let him in, alright.

Mariah opens the door. It flies open knocking her behind it. LEVY flings himself at Chris and clings to him.

LEVY

Forgive me.

CHRIS

No.

LEVY

You can't know how distraught I've been. This is a nightmare.

CHRIS

I agree.

LEVY

I didn't believe it at first. I wouldn't. I couldn't. I thought it was just an art world rumor, but it wasn't about sex or money so I ignored it. When the gallery assistant I hire to ensure that I never have to speak to a living artist and/or poor person told me what had happened, I thought she was lying. I thought it was a ploy to get around caller i.d. When I think, I was the reason she was there to begin with.

CHRIS

And the reason she isn't there now!

LEVY

I thought it was just Mariah being beautiful, feisty, unreasonable, crazy insane good old hysterical Mariah. I thought it was her period. (*Mariah is outraged*). I thought it was menopause (*Mariah picks up a weapon.*) I thought it was the language barrier. I called China and, you have to believe me, when they said "She lost her head" I had no idea they were being literal. You must be in shock. We all must be in shock.

CHRIS

Yes.

LEVY

Every time you turn around you must be in agony.

As Chris tries to get Levy to turn to avoid seeing Mariah who is threatening to hit him over the head with something.

It isn't healthy, you living here, surrounded by her, her essence. Her life's work. Her art.

CHRIS

Um, well, I've been living with it.

LEVY

Let's not dwell on the past. It's too painful. Too full of misunderstandings.

CHRIS

Like that time I misunderstood what the tow of you were doing in the hot tub at ArtMiami.

LEVY

That was Mariah? Ecstasy is so the aughts. Leave memory in the pharmaceutical haze where it belongs. Or join it. That's right. I have something. Several things here, if you need them.

CHRIS

No thanks.

LEVY

God she was good. I mean, that too, but mostly her work.

CHRIS

That's weird. It sounded like you meant that.

LEVY

I did.

Mariah settles down in the corner and just watches.

CHRIS

You might get the chance to see more of her work.

LEVY

There's more?

Not that's its commercially viable, it isn't. She wasn't. Too clever. Not intellectual enough. Too romantic. Not enough heart. Amateurish but Professional--in the worst way. I told her time and time again she'd never make the 15%. Also, you realize, she was a woman.

CHRIS

Mostly.

LEVY

But I'm a purist, you know. I'd like to keep some pieces. As a memento. You never know, I might be able to pawn off a few of her more middling works onto unsuspecting couples from Michigan.

CHRIS

You should go.

LEVY

Let me make you an offer. Of assistance. I want to help. The funerary costs are bound to be astounding. Getting her body back from China alone will cost a fortune. And that's if they send it in one piece. Imagine if they ship it in two.

Let me do something for you. You've been trying to have this place to yourself for ages. The shipping-- though there'd be no one to ship it to, correct? No family, no siblings, no pesky second cousins. No survivors?

CHRIS

No one survived Mariah.

LEVY

I'll wrap up all these pesky details and paintings. It's the least I can do.

CHRIS

I don't want your money, Levy.

LEVY

I've been in the art world my entire life and I've never heard that colloquialism before. What does it mean?

CHRIS

It means go.

LEVY

Let me dispose of Mariah's work. I feel responsible for her demise.

CHRIS

Are you talking about her career or the accident?

LEVY

Both.

CHRIS

Perhaps if you are very, very good and very, very penitent, you'll get the chance to make it up to her.

LEVY

I don't believe in heaven.

CHRIS

I don't see that being a problem for you.

Levy hands him his card.

LEVY

This is my direct line. Call me.

LEVY exits.

MARIAH

His direct line? He is distraught.

CHRIS

He thinks you've been de-. *(stops himself)* In an accident.

MARIAH

Don't think I didn't catch my method of death. Say it.

CHRIS

Decapitated.

MARIAH

Yeah, that marriage counselor totally had you pegged. You've got a lot of pent up rage.

CHRIS

No I don't. You just think that because you run around with your rage all un-pent all the time.

MARIAH

You took my head off.

CHRIS

It was a detail. It made it more..

MARIAH

Misogynistic.

CHRIS

Believable?

MARIAH

Face it, you're the Red Queen.

CHRIS

I didn't want to see you suffer.

MARIAH

Too bad you never said that to your attorney.

CHRIS

Would you have given up this place?

MARIAH

It's where I make my work. I understand the light here. You gave up on art. Right before you gave up on me.

CHRIS

I quit when I ran out of room.

MARIAH

I need go to the gallery and deal with Levy.

CHRIS

The more things change, the more they stay the same. The minute you start to lose an argument you leave. For Levy no less.

MARIAH

I'm DEAD, Chris. I've been hovering around my mid-career mortality for years and now, thanks to you, it has actually happened.

CHRIS

You could have cleared it up here.

MARIAH

I was going to, but then for a minute there it looked like Levy might actually be suffering and I just didn't want it to end. I need to catch him before my work is thrown in the back of a truck and hung in a Howard Johnson.

CHRIS

At least it would be sold.

MARIAH

Do you want me to stay or do you want me to go?

CHRIS

I want you not to screw things up. What if Lisa were to see you on the street?

MARIAH

She'll realize you aren't the man she thought you were. It's bound to happen sooner or later. Then she'll have to decide whether or not she's willing to accept the man you are. You just saved yourself seven years of marriage.

You should have told her everything last night.

CHRIS

I couldn't face her disappointment. Maybe it will be easier in the daylight.

MARIAH

It won't be. The light here never makes anything easier.

SCENE 8

That afternoon, CHRIS is boxing up the photos of Mariah and trying to tell Lisa the truth.

CHRIS

I appreciate you coming over here when I called.

LISA

I like seeing you and I also wanted to get out of going to the gym. Are you sure you're ready to move on? I don't want you to feel pressured. But I still want you to do it.

CHRIS

I need to tell you something.

LISA

No one has ever used those words as a preface to something amazing. You don't need to tell me.

CHRIS

I do.

LISA

Am I on fire?

CHRIS

No.

LISA

Do you have crabs.

CHRIS

No. Do you?

LISA

Not anymore.

CHRIS

Lisa

LISA

Just, just breathe in and out. All day. It gets better.

He falls for this. Ridiculous. They kiss a deep passionate reenactment of some kind of movie kiss. Mariah crashes in. Lisa screams. Chris screams Mariah doesn't seem to notice. She's in shock.

CHRIS

Lisa, I'm sorry. I'm so so so so sorry that this is how you had to find out about this. I can explain.

LISA

I'm sorry.

MARIAH

No, I'm sorry.

CHRIS

You're sorry?

LISA

I wasn't expecting someone to come in.

CHRIS

I wasn't expecting someone like you to come along.

MARIAH finds some booze and a glass. She unscrews the top and gestures with the empty glass in her hand. Every time she starts to pour the drink she gets distracted and just drinks out of the bottle.

MARIAH

I never thought. Never. Never never. Maybe once or twice. I didn't expect. Not really. Okay, I thought about it. Who doesn't think about it. I mean, come on.

LISA

She's in shock.

CHRIS

I know what I should do right now is explain.

MARIAH

I don't understand anything.

CHRIS

If only there were someplace else to begin.

LISA

I understand.

Mariah looks at her own work. Then at her picture.

MARIAH

Who am I? Who is she?

LISA

Hello. I'm Chris's new girlfriend. I knew who you were the moment I saw you.

MARIAH

Me?

CHRIS

You. You said girlfriend.

LISA

I know. There's no good word. Lover- ick. Partner-- clinical. Companion-- hello it makes you sound like a Golden Retriever.

Lisa wrests the bottle from Mariah, wipes it on her own shirt and pours some in the glass, gives the glass to Chris, takes a swig from the bottle, passes it back to Mariah.

CHRIS

You know who she is and you still said girlfriend.

LISA

Of course. I recognized her from the Wedding Photos. And even if I hadn't it would be hard not to see the resemblance. You look so young. What do you use?

MARIAH

I try to moisturize.

LISA

It's working. Chris, introduce us.

MARIAH

You know, she's really very nice.

CHRIS

I know. She's my girlfriend.

LISA

And you must be Mariah's mother.

Mariah freaks out, the way you do when your ex-husband's girlfriend mistakes you for your own mother.

CHRIS

Mariah's mother is deceased.

LISA

I'm so sorry. What a tragedy.

MARIAH

There's gonna be a tragedy alright.

CHRIS

This is all a simple misunderstanding.

LISA

I feel awful. It must have been terrible for you, losing your sister and your niece.

MARIAH

Worse things happen.

LISA

I'm sure it's a shock seeing me here with Chris and not your niece.

MARIAH

I'm getting over it. But I could use something to calm my nerves. Perhaps you could go down to the corner and get me a tea latte.

LISA

Oh, of course.

MARIAH

Herbal tea. Soy milk- heated to 128 degrees. Two teaspoons raw honey. My doctor says it's good for my arthritis. Hurry back.

Lisa exits.

To be honest, I didn't think I'd like her.

CHRIS

She's great isn't she?

MARIAH

I'm gonna kill that bitch.

CHRIS

When you look at me with all that hate in your eyes, you really do look just like your mother. Save your strength. I'm sure Lisa will be gone once I tell her the truth. It's gone on too long as it is.

MARIAH

Or perhaps it hasn't gone on long enough. If you tell her now, she'll never forgive you. But if you wait until the right moment...

CHRIS

When exactly is the right moment to tell someone your beloved decapitated wife is alive and well and living in your apartment?

MARIAH

During sex.

CHRIS

I think that's bad advice.

MARIAH

Your problem has always been over-romanticizing things.

CHRIS

That was not our problem.

MARIAH

I told you all kinds of stuff while we were having sex and you always forgave me.

CHRIS

What are you talking about?

MARIAH

See, you don't even remember.

CHRIS

She's a lot smarter than I am. She's going to figure it out.

MARIAH

Are you kidding me? She's over twenty-five and falling in love. That woman is a moron. You could have a collection of clown paintings and an assortment of human hair in the freezer and she'd think it was fascinating.

CHRIS

You know there actually is an assortment of human hair in the freezer.

MARIAH

I'm still thinking about using it in something.

CHRIS

Back to me. Do you really think she is falling in love with me.

MARIAH

Ugh, her pupils are all dilated and her voice is all (*mimics her*). Both of you are like (*she imitates Lisa looking into Chris's eyes.*) Don't you remember what it was like?

CHRIS

No.

MARIAH

Then you'll have to trust me.

CHRIS

I've made that mistake before and it cost me 14 years.

Chris moves to the door.

MARIAH

You can't.

CHRIS

I have to.

MARIAH

You don't get it. I'm dead. I went to the gallery.

CHRIS

(sighs) Levy got another injunction didn't he?

MARIAH

He wasn't there. Just some Christie's wannabe succubus behind the desk replete with tattooed arm band and five hundred dollar shoes. She must be new, because when I inquired about the price of the painting on the wall, she told me.

CHRIS

Do I even want to know?

MARIAH

Three times more than I ever made, then add a zero.

CHRIS

Let me guess. MFA fresh out of Yale or RISD. Conceptual, shit technique, hot button issue.

MARIAH

Not one of them.

CHRIS

Then it's an accent. Anything but American.

MARIAH

Wrong again. The painting was mine.

CHRIS

Wait. What?

MARIAH

Levy wasn't dumping them. He was hanging them.

CHRIS

Which painting?

MARIAH

Year 13.

CHRIS

That's a good painting of a terrible year. Well, if he thinks he can sell it for that.

MARIAH

He did. Somebody bought it. That was the sale price.

CHRIS

Congratulations, Mariah. That's great! You've been trying to sell something for ages.

MARIAH

Congratulations??? Congratulations?

CHRIS

You've raised your price. You always thought Levy was underselling you and now/

MARIAH

And now?

CHRIS

You should celebrate?

MARIAH

They are the same paintings.

CHRIS

Sure.

MARIAH

Same fucking paintings I starved my way through grad school for. Same fucking paintings I whored my way through mixed media with 8 year olds on Saturday afternoons at Gymboree. Same fucking paintings I couldn't TRADE for a bus ticket to LA.

And all these years, that asshole is telling me, I can't sell you because, "You need to pay your dues." "You're not contemporary anymore" "You have a vagina."

And now, NOW he triples the price and they hop off the walls.

Explain that to me. Explain the one thing that he thinks has changed.

CHRIS

Your work is more mature.

MARIAH

Not it.

CHRIS

There's a market?

MARIAH

Don't you use that word with me. Markets are just a way for assholes to play make believe. WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT ME?

CHRIS

You're homicidal.

MARIAH

I said different. You're on track. There was a homicide.

CHRIS

Oh my god he thinks you're dead.

MARIAH

And so I am. Heaven is selling.

CHRIS

But you're not dead.

MARIAH

I am dead.

CHRIS

No you're not.

MARIAH

Yes I am.

CHRIS

No you're not.

MARIAH

I'm dead.

CHRIS

It's a lie.

MARIAH

An incredibly lucrative one.

CHRIS

It's fraud.

MARIAH

It's the contemporary art market.

CHRIS

You can't stay dead. You can't keep this going.

MARIAH

I can and I will.

CHRIS

Lisa saw you.

MARIAH

I am my own aunt.

CHRIS

You could leave. We'll pretend it was a mix up. Go back to China. You know nothing.

MARIAH

Beijing can suck my sable brushes. I'm not going back. I've arrived, Chris. I've ARRIVED.

CHRIS

Congratulations, now come out of the cave and let them crucify you.

MARIAH

No.

CHRIS

I won't lie for you.

MARIAH

Hey, toasty pants on fire, who lied about me to begin with? You always have to make me the bad guy. Like it's me that's the problem. Like it's me that breaks shit.

CHRIS

You did break our vows. And my will to live. But I have that back now, with Lisa. And I'm not giving it up. I need to come clean. If I have to, I will out you as a living artist.

MARIAH

Not until I get what I want.

CHRIS

What do you want?

MARIAH

I want a retrospective.

A solo retrospective at the gallery. Every “unimportant” piece he undersold, back on the wall. I want museums making offers. And I want every single collector, curator and dealer who ever dismissed me or downgraded my work to pay. Through the nose.

CHRIS

Oh. Is that all?

MARIAH

And a review from Roberta Smith.

CHRIS

Your death has gone to your head.

MARIAH

I don't even have a head anymore. Somebody tore the roof off this Mothasucka.

CHRIS

Roberta Smith doesn't review shows in Chicago.

MARIAH

She'll review mine. It's gonna be in Artnews and Art Forum.

CHRIS

Try Psychology Today. Levy can't get Roberta. If he were the kind of dealer that could get the Times to review a show, he would've dropped you years ago.

MARIAH

He can do it. He just hasn't been properly motivated.

CHRIS

He gets one glimpse of you and the jig is up. His gallerista probably already told him you're alive. You can bet you'll wind up owing him on the works that you sold.

MARIAH

She couldn't recognize me. I wore a disguise.

Mariah wraps a scarf around her face.

I was very subtle.

CHRIS

I don't believe you.

MARIAH

You don't have to. You have to help me. We're going to make an installation.

CHRIS

We don't work together well, you and I.

MARIAH

Not true, we worked together beautifully. It was just everything else.

CHRIS

Divorce. Agony. Acrimony.

MARIAH

But no alimony.

CHRIS

When you begin and end with nothing.

MARIAH

You call it even. Until now. Now you owe me. You started it. I'll finish it. And when I finish it, we'll have money enough for two places. Two studios. Two totally and completely separate lives. Isn't that what you want? Isn't that how this whole thing started? I'm giving you a do over.

CHRIS

Is that a promise or a threat?

MARIAH

I am offering an opportunity.

CHRIS

You sound like Levy.

MARIAH

Good. Because for this work of art, I'm gonna need to squirm my way into that desiccated cavity he calls a head.

CHRIS

Will this involve body parts?

MARIAH

Possibly.

CHRIS

Dead animals?

MARIAH

Probably.

CHRIS

I don't like where this is going.

MARIAH

I'm going to get some rest. Tell your girlfriend my aunt has had a long day.

CHRIS

Tell me the title first.

MARIAH

The title gives it away. Think Hieronymous Bosch, Salvador Dali. Think Blake. Think Goya.

CHRIS

I'm afraid to ask.

MARIAH

Reuben Maldecott Levy Gets A Significant Buyer Preview... of Hell.

ACT 2
SCENE 1

Out of time. Spotlight.

LISA

Other worlds exist. It's true. They explained it on Cosmos-the series Not to be confused with Cosmo the magazine. That is a magazine of lies. On Cosmos the series they say there is a Multiverse and it is made up of thousands of billions of millions of other worlds and looks a lot like a Hostess sponge cake. Which makes Twinkies eternal.

It's easy to be skeptical. But once you give up the internet, you understand the theory better, because everyone else is living in a different world than you are. They know about things that sound like things you know about. Clouds, mines, crafts, farming, streams, trolls. There are concepts completely foreign and alarming. Yelp. And a lot of it sounds vaguely gynecological. UTube.

There are worlds within worlds. Levels. Circles. Layers. The paths are not straightforward.

It's easy to get distracted by what's going on in all these other worlds. Clearly it is something big. Something worthy of stars and millions and millions of views. And the inside worlds that we used to have to imagine, we can peek into. See someone you like. You don't have to imagine. You don't have to ask. See that guy? I know his favorite kind of ice cream and probably that he drinks too much. We haven't met. Maybe that one? Or maybe that one. Or maybe...

I needed to look up. I wanted to see real stars.

You only get the one world. It's the one you're in.

Until you die, then who knows?

ACT 2: SCENE 2

MARIAH and CHRIS have created Hell in their apartment. It is an incredibly scary/fun/ridiculous/appalling/self-serious hodge-podge created from a yard sale of MFA shows gone bad.

MARIAH

What are we going to do about the blood?

CHRIS

It's too thick.

MARIAH

I know. Nail polish remover?

CHRIS

Too harsh. Maybe an astringent?

CHRIS pours a vial into the mix. He is holding a soup pot of blood. He uses a wooden spoon to see if it drips convincingly.

Give it a minute. I like what you did with the scrim.

MARIAH

I think it'll really add to experience. The fog is better.

CHRIS

Dry ice is too difficult to control.

MARIAH

I forgot what a perfectionist you are.

CHRIS

I like it when things work well.

MARIAH

You like it when you control things.

CHRIS

Not always. I can appreciate unpredictable outcomes.

MARIAH

Name one.

CHRIS

This. (*He gestures to the installation.*) Genuine Mariah. It's awful.

MARIAH

That's the point.

CHRIS

It's ridiculous, offensive and self-indulgent. But I like it.

MARIAH

Do you think it'll work?

CHRIS

You're taking a risk.

MARIAH

You're right. It probably won't work.

CHRIS

That isn't what I said. It's good when you take risks with your work. It's your best quality as an artist. You put yourself out there, entrails and all.

MARIAH

Why didn't we ever make anything together?

CHRIS

You think there is a market for installations of hell? No living room in America is complete without one. Oh wait, everyone has already made their own. We did our part.

MARIAH

It wasn't all bad.

CHRIS

No. If it were all bad, it would have been easy. We could have made a fortune, like Thomas Kinkade, painter of light.

MARIAH

He went bankrupt you know. There was a divorce.

CHRIS

Yes. Painter's wife scenario. Lifetime of dedication to someone else's career. Then they divorce you for someone younger in the midst of killing themselves with booze and pills.

MARIAH

Not always. Gala saved Salvador Dali. He signed his paintings with her name.

CHRIS

I remember the quote. "As it is mostly with your blood, Gala, that I paint my pictures." Romantic or a total nightmare.

MARIAH

Every career requires a human sacrifice. A career in art requires two. I'm a painter.

CHRIS

I'm not a painter's wife.

MARIAH

Few men are. How fair is that? We should have majored in Performance Art and been collaborative. This is the most fun we've had together in an eternity.

CHRIS

Dismemberment, torture.... regret. I guess that's our thing.

MARIAH

Is the blood ready?

CHRIS

Let's see.

Chris sticks his fingers in the pot and rubs them together.

CHRIS

Your blood or mine?

MARIAH

Ours.

Mariah takes his hand and drags the bloody fingers across her throat. She makes a throat gargle of death. They laugh.

CHRIS

You kill me.

They kiss. It gets pretty messy. The apartment buzzer rights. They ignore it. They try to move to a safer place.

MARIAH

Not on the animal fetuses.

The apartment buzzer is still going off.

CHRIS

Was there an alarm on any of this stuff.

They continue trying to make out and trying to identify the sound.

MARIAH

It sounds like a siren. A warning. It reminds me of something Like youth.

CHRIS

Yeah.

MARIAH

C.d. stores. Smoky bars.

CHRIS

Blockbuster. Oasis.

MARIAH

What is it?

CHRIS

We're being buzzed.

MARIAH

Who the hell buzzes anymore? Nobody buzzes. They text.

CHRIS

Lisa. She can't see this!

MARIAH

Then ignore her.

LISA (O.S.)

Chris, are you in there? Chris!

CHRIS

What if she needs me?

MARIAH

What if she sees you? You look like an ax murderer.

LISA

Chris!

CHRIS

She sounds upset. I've got to see her.

Chris opens the door Lisa flies in. It takes her a moment to take it all in.

LISA

Have I interrupted something? Like a horror movie?

CHRIS

We were just. Mariah's aunt and I were, well, it's a little difficult to explain. What's wrong?

LISA

I ran into my ex.

MARIAH

There's a lot of that going around.

LISA

I had seen him lurking around your building a couple of times and at first I thought it was just my imagination. I see this in my clients all the time. Here I finally meet someone decent and my ex starts appearing in my subconscious. But then I saw him holding a Jamba Juice and figured it was for real.

MARIAH

This sounds like a long story, I'll go wash up.

LISA

Don't go. The whole scene here has me a little freaked out and frankly I'd feel safer if you stayed.

CHRIS

I can explain.

LISA

I can guess. Are you an Aztec ritualist reenactor?

CHRIS

No.

LISA

Because I dated one of those once. PETA Protestor?

CHRIS

No.

LISA

I guess that leaves axe murderer. This has been the worst possible day. First I run into Levy and then I find out I'm falling in love with Lizzie Borden.

CHRIS

Levy?

MARIAH

Not Rueben Maldecott Levy, the gallerist?

LISA

He who must not be named.

CHRIS

Tell me you're lying.

LISA

About Levy or falling in love?

CHRIS

I can't believe you kept this from me.

LISA

You're covered in blood. Mind if you dial down the outrage? I've bounced from one psychopath to another. I say the L word and all you want to talk about is my ex.

MARIAH

I feel terrible for you. What was Levy doing here?

LEVY

Gloating mostly, telling me how he's secured the attention of some top ten billionaire arts patron and he's going to be fabulously rich forever and won't I be sorry I dumped him.

CHRIS

I hate him. I hate him more than I did before. How is that possible?

LISA

He can live in Qatar for all I care. Sheikha Al-Mayassa bin Khalifa Al-thani, my ass.

CHRIS

You kept this from me. I thought you didn't do that. I thought you were honest.

LISA

We agreed it was a bad idea to talk about this.

CHRIS

You slept with Levy.

LISA

Not that much. Mostly we just had sex. Sometimes I took a shower and other times I put on my old clothes and went home.

CHRIS

So it was just sex. Fine. Levy sleeps with everyone. Animal Vegetable Mineral. Let's face it, I've seen Levy fuck a fern. That's all it was, right? You weren't in love with my wife's gallerist were you?

LISA

You're overreacting.

CHRIS

I need to know if you were in love with him or if it was just some kind of weird masochism, self-punishing thing.

MARIAH

Those aren't mutually exclusive.

CHRIS

Apparently nothing is mutually exclusive with Levy.

LISA

This was over before we even met.

CHRIS

Did you give up the internet because of Levy?
Google maps, facebook, imdb, all for him?

LISA

Yes.

CHRIS

You were in love with him!

LISA

Yes and no.

MARIAH

No and yes.

CHRIS

I can't handle this.

MARIAH

I want to go back to the thing about Sheikha Al-Mayassa.

CHRIS

No. None of us get to go back. That's The Way Things Go.

MARIAH

Now we're in for it.

CHRIS

The WAY THINGS GO.

MARIAH

It's an art film from the 80's. He's obsessed with it.

CHRIS

Because it tells the truth. The real truth. Not the "I don't lie, but I leave the truth out on a technicality truth." The Sir Isaac Fucking Newton truth. An object in motion stays in motion, unless acted on by an unbalanced force. The tire knocks over the tower so the blocks fall into the water so the water spills over the edge to set off a chain reaction.

Unless it gets stuck. That happens. Then the Swiss guys making the film have to roll another tire into the tower. A brief cut, then the film goes on.

I was stuck. I thought you were my Swiss guy, putting me back on track. But you're just another unbalanced force.

Chris exits.

LISA

What's going on here?

MARIAH

I don't think I should be the one to tell you. For legal reasons.

LISA

That was unfair. Irrational. Crazy. Everything I said I wasn't going to do again.

MARIAH

I should probably wash my hands if this is going to take a while.

LISA

It's not like I didn't know the whole thing was doomed from the start.

MARIAH

Doom is strong word. He might have some quasi-kind-of-legitimate reason for that crazy pants rant he went off on. It sounds like this Levy guy is pretty terrible. You should tell me more about this Sheikha woman. Like, did Levy actually see her in the gallery and how did he know it was ArtReview 2013's Most Powerful Person of the Year? Remembering exactly what Levy said to you might give you some insight into Chris's behavior.

LISA

What a lunatic I've been! Believing things could be different.

MARIAH

Total crackpots. Both of you. You're meant for each other. So when you ran into Levy?

Lisa gets out the map.

LISA

Look at this. Chris made this for me. And I understand it. It's like we're standing in the same place and time. All the symbols and signs add up. Where there's color. That's us. That's life. Everything else. All the gray buildings and streets and surroundings, that's just background. Just noise. Just history. Just atmosphere.

MARIAH

It's interesting perspective drawn here. I like the use of color. Chris made this, huh.

LISA

I thought this map meant we had more than a snowball's chance in hell, but no, he is clearly still in love with his dead wife!

MARIAH

I think you're mistaken.

LISA

No, I'm dead on. I think she is very much alive, in his heart. You should hear him talk about the way they met, about art school, about how they bought this place and turned it into this/ love nest

MARIAH

/hell hole?

LISA

They were young and in love. They snuck into second acts and got drunk on gallery wine. They pierced each other, badly.

Mariah puts her hand over her boob.

Do you remember them, like that?

MARIAH

I remember there was a lot of suffering at the end.

LISA

I thought the (decapitation motion) was instantaneous.

MARIAH

Oh no. It took years.

LISA

Oh.

MARIAH

And years.

LISA

How is that even possible?

MARIAH

She had a rare condition. Chris didn't like to admit it. It made her vulnerable.

LISA

To decapitation?

MARIAH

Yes. Toxic exposure weakened her (*gestures to her neck*). Sometimes it made her hard to be around.

LISA

I can't compete with a ghost.

MARIAH

Everyone has to compete with a ghost. That's how love works. There are ghosts of the people before you . And there are ghosts of the people you were.

You fall in love and every day forward you have to decide if you are bigger or smaller than the shadow you cast. Although it is easy to see how you might feel intimidated by living up to her. She was more attractive.

LISA

Not in photos.

MARIAH

Less photogenic, but a lot better looking in person. And a very, very, very very good artist.

LISA

I didn't get her work.

MARIAH

And smarter. And a lot more generous than people give her credit for. When she died, she was working on a new series, based on Dante's Divine Comedy. Have you read it?

LISA

I haven't.

MARIAH

And she was better read. Dante gets a lot right. His hell is gray and cold. And lonely. Everybody is stuck in their own little realm and nothing ever changes. Kind of like that map without the color. And in the ninth circle of hell are the betrayers, people who used to love each other, but wound up consuming each other instead. Do you love Chris?

LISA

Yes.

MARIAH

Come back late tonight.

LISA

I still don't understand what is going on here.

MARIAH

Isn't it obvious. We are performing an exorcism.

ACT 2: SCENE 3

LEVY

This is a piece of fine art.

It's... fine. I guess.

What is it worth? Don't answer, poor people.

I really can't tell you. The cost of materials? The artist's time-- or fragment of mortality, as it were.

Checks his watch.

Don't think about it.

Consider the training or innocence, depending on the artist's evolution. Old people, you are evolved. or raw, unspoiled talent --Young people, you are raw--and your consumption may increase the risk of food poisoning. Value is based on expert inexperience or intuitive reasoning. Art is comfortable with duality.

Appreciation, for example.

We treat our art like an election. Ranking it by funds raised at auction. How much is one person willing to pay?

Or--the other side of appreciation.

How much are two people, an artist, a viewer, willing to give to one another? Can you appreciate it?

Forgive my vulgarity. Does it make you feel something? Or does it lie in your heart, cold and flat like a cement gallery floor? No right, no wrong answer. No duality even. Value depends on the person and on the painting. Of which there are a multitude of possibilities. Infinite. Illogical.

Like love, I imagine.

ACT 2: SCENE 3

Lights are down. Mariah is behind the scrim, looking kind of like she might be decapitated. Ugh. I'm not sure about the stage magic. There will be weird stage magic. As yet unknown. It might be video. It might be something else. Spooky music. Horror. Something like that.

Chris passes in front of Mariah.

MARIAH

Boo!

Chris jumps.

MARIAH

Don't do that.

CHRIS

Don't do That!

MARIAH

You can't flinch. It's only going to work if he thinks you can't see me. You have to ignore every word I say.

CHRIS

I know.

MARIAH

Pretend I'm not here. Can you do it? Can you imagine I'm not here and ignore every single word I say?

CHRIS

Yes. You just described the last two years of our marriage.

MARIAH

After this works you need to apologize to Lisa.

CHRIS is very successfully ignoring her.

MARIAH

Your tantrum this afternoon was mid-century patriarchal bullshit and you know it. Lisa showed me that map you made her. It's a work of art. A departure for you. Risk taking. New.

Lisa told me Levy thinks Sheikha Al Mayassa is interested in collecting my work.

CHRIS

Are you kidding me? That gallery assistant saw you in a scarf and thought you were Sheikha Al Mayassa?

MARIAH

Not only did she mistake me for one of the top ten art collectors in the world, she thought I was 30!

CHRIS

I would've guessed Queen Noor.

MARIAH

I could kill you right now and not be prosecuted. Habeas corpus. Dead people can't be prosecuted.

CHRIS

Art school didn't serve you well. I think we could both be prosecuted for perpetrating a fraud. Also, you aren't dead.

MARIAH

If this doesn't work, I might as well be. My work will be dead.

CHRIS

That's not true.

MARIAH

It is. Levy has been on the brink of dumping me for years.

CHRIS

Would it be the worst thing? You could find someone else.

MARIAH

I've already made that mistake once.

CHRIS

I guess we're both afraid of making the same mistake twice.

Ridiculously pompous arrhythmic knocking.

MARIAH

Levy.

CHRIS

You're sure about this?

MARIAH

Hell yes.

CHRIS turns out the lights and answers the door holding a flashlight.

LEVY

Christopher so good to ... I can't quite see you.

CHRIS

It is good not seeing you.

LEVY

What is the significance of the flashlight?

CHRIS

The power is on the fritz. Let me try flipping the switch.

CHRIS flips the switch. Some kind of lights/fire/special effects extravaganza goes off in the installation of hell.

LEVY

What the hell?

CHRIS

It was worth a shot. Can I get you a drink?

There is a red hazy glow emanating from the hell space.

LEVY

It's red.

CHRIS

I know but that's all we have left.

Some really beautifully lit theater fog is happening. It is hypnotic. Like all theater fog It is the fog that saves us from ourselves.

LEVY

I really do think I see smoke! Don't you see it?

CHRIS

No. Maybe I should check the box. See if it's electrical. If it's a fire, the sprinklers will go off.

LEVY

They'll destroy Mariah's work!

CHRIS

Concerned about that are you?

LEVY

Someone has to consider Mariah's legacy.

Lights up on Mariah. Or, rather, Mariah's head, floating in the space.

MARIAH

Glad to know you still have my back, Levy. Even if I don't.

Lights off Mariah. He just misses seeing her.

LEVY

Did you hear that? It sounded like Mariah.

CHRIS

It could be the pipes. Sometimes they make a whiny, high pitched sound. Not very much like Mariah.

MARIAH

Whiny and high pitched sounds a lot more like you, Levy.

LEVY

I think I'm hallucinating.

CHRIS

That isn't news. You're always on something.

LEVY

It doesn't feel right. It's too normal. It's like a leather bar in Milwaukee. I'm scared.

MARIAH

You better be scared.

LEVY

There. I heard her. Did you hear her?

CHRIS

No. Did you come here to taunt me. Mariah and I had our differences, but she was still my wife.

MARIAH

Ex-wife!

LEVY

That's her. I know that's her.

CHRIS

What do you want?

LEVY

The remains of her work.

CHRIS

All of it?

MARIAH

All of it?

LEVY

All of it. Some of her collectors want to express their regrets. They are sentimental. Her work was always strong. With her death, interest is piqued.

MARIAH

I'm about to show you piqued.

LEVY

You can't hear that?

CHRIS

And there's no other reason.

LEVY

You won't have this opportunity again.

MARIAH

None of you will.

LEVY

I've.. I've fielded several inquiries.

CHRIS

From who?

MARIAH

FROM WHOM!

CHRIS accidentally acknowledges her, but Levy has spun around.

LEVY

The usual suspects.

CHRIS

I should go check the box.

LEVY

Don't go.

CHRIS

Here.

CHRIS hands LEVY the flashlight.

LEVY

I'll go with you.

CHRIS

No. You won't. Try not to mess yourself.

CHRIS exits. LEVY stands alone very frightened.

LEVY

It's just an animal fetus.
Oh, a fern.

I don't believe in ghosts. I don't believe in

MARIAH

And everyone knows you don't believe in advanced payment. How do you feel about eternal repayment?

LEVY

Mariah. It can't be you. It's unbelievable.

MARIAH

Like a 50% commission on everything you sell?

LEVY

Well, now that you're dead, that contract is terminated. In the new one, I get more.

*Lights up on Mariah in her full, beheaded, red
smoked, crazy art installation nightmare
crazytown.*

LEVY screams

MARIAH

I AM GOING TO HAUNT THE FUCK OUT OF YOU!

LEVY

What do you want? Do you need to do a good deed or are you looking to make amends?

MARIAH

I am looking to exact REVENGE!

LEVY

I was your greatest supporter. Who propped you up all those years? Who helped you scrape by? I gave you the money for that surgery you needed.

MARIAH

That wasn't surgery, that was electrolysis. And you recommended it.

LEVY

Who knew Frida would have such a renaissance?

MARIAH

I want the name of every opportunistic, solipsistic bloodsucking prospector trying to cash in on my demise.

LEVY

I don't disclose client information.

MARIAH

Don't make me go all Goya on your ass. Give up the collectors.

LEVY

The Havemores, The Morrisons, The Gorgers.

MARIAH

The same Bill Gorger who asked for a discount when he got cancer? Only I didn't realize Cancer was the name of his new yacht. I'm sure I'll be seeing him eventually.

LEVY

Seeing him ...where?

MARIAH

Where do you think? Hockney was right. You can't take a photograph of hell.

LEVY

Is it terrible?

MARIAH

It's like the Whitney Biennial 1994. Mestrual blood, pig feces and rich people.

LEVY

Anyone I know?

MARIAH

Everyone you know is here. The line at the bar goes on forever.

LEVY

I told you what you wanted to know.

MARIAH

Don't piss me off, Levy. Remember that bad trip in New Mexico, when you thought an army of Louise Bourgeois spider sculptures coming to get you?

You really want to find this in your shower drain?
I'm just getting started.

Chris enters.

CHRIS

I called the Super. He says he'll look into it, but you know how it is with those guys.
Always telling you one thing and not following through.

CHRIS looks at Levy.

You'd make a great super.

LEVY looks from Mariah to Chris and back.

LEVY

Go away.

CHRIS

It's my place.

MARIAH

I won't go away, Levy. You can't block my calls or send me Sis-wan-banana. Your life
is going to look like a Matthew Barney installation when I'm through with you.

LEVY

I did what I could for you.

MARIAH

You're using the wrong tense.

CHRIS

You ruined my life. Twice.

MARIAH

I'm going to ruin your life and your afterlife if you don't start asking what you can do for
me.

LEVY

I did you a favor.

CHRIS

You slept with my girlfriend. I mean, wife.

MARIAH AND LEVY

Ex-wife.

MARIAH

You were supposed to represent my interests. You were supposed to serve me.

LEVY

It's supposed to be Mutually beneficial.

CHRIS

I don't see the benefit.

MARIAH

There won't be any benefits. No donated works for silent auction. But there is going to be a show. A retrospective. Everything you can get your hands on. From MFA to midlife crisis. It's going up.

LEVY

I can't just pull that together.

CHRIS

Pull it together. There's nothing there.

MARIAH

And Roberta Smith is going to review.

LEVY

Stop it! Stop it!

You're torturing me. For a split-second, I doubted. But now I know it's true. If anyone ANYONE could come back from the dead it would be you, Mariah. Part banshee, part battle-ax, all bitch. You aren't a ghost. You are the Mariah of my mind's eye.

Ambitious. Outrageous. Willing to take risks. God, how I miss you.

I can see her, Chris. It's like I've conjured her here.

MARIAH

Are you seriously going to take credit for me haunting you?

LEVY

I've had a vision. Her work was just about to take off. A retrospective. It only makes sense.

MARIAH

You are. You are taking credit for this.

CHRIS

So, you're saying you saw/

LEVY

An angel.

MARIAH

Not an angel. A scary, scary frightening she-devil.

LEVY

She speaks to me. She tells me the way. The way to So Much Money. Chris, we have to have a retrospective of Mariah's work. Something important has happened.

CHRIS

I thought you said the demand was down. The work was a burden.

LEVY

It is/was a terrible burden. Dragging you down. Don't you want that burden lifted? Put on someone else's shoulders-- or walls?

MARIAH

I'm going to eviscerate you.

LEVY

Even now. She spurs me onward. Help me realize this mission.

MARIAH

You motherfucker. How dare you turn my haunting into some kind of Livestrong event.

LEVY

Help me raise her from the ashes.

CHRIS

What do you need me for?

LEVY

I didn't want to tell you this, while you were in mourning.

CHRIS

You mean, on Tuesday.

LEVY

Time heals. There is the possibility that Sheikha Al-Mayassa bin Khalifa Al-thani is interested in collecting Mariah's latest, I mean, last, work.

CHRIS

You don't say. Are you certain it was her?

Mariah glares at Chris.

LEVY

Absolutely. Now, we have a great deal of work to do. I'll want to get all the early work together.

MARIAH

Even the figurative phase.

LEVY

God help me, even the figurative phase. I'll need to see everything from beginning to end. We'll have the work from China back in a week. It isn't much time.

The Dante stuff she was working on before she left. It had a last gasp quality that speaks volumes now that she's dead. It's very resonant.

MARIAH

Ahem!

LEVY

What? I said I liked it.

Levy staggers.

CHRIS

What's wrong.

LEVY

My heart. She's magnificent. She's a fury. You never appreciated that about her.

MARIAH

You never appreciated that series. You said they were better off upside down and untitled.

LEVY

I was right about those paintings at the time. You didn't know what you were doing. An untitled series understands that.

In retrospect, the paintings are very good. It's going to be a hell of a show. I promise you that. We're going to line it all up from beginning to end in the very same room. And the terrible magic of the retrospective will take over. All the weird, random crap that I always thought was keeping you from getting somewhere better, will start to look like genius. And everything you always thought was so original will take on a pattern. And the big shit. The statements, the fuckups, the life stuff will fall into order. It will all seem inevitable. Magic, I tell you.

Roberta Smith is going to fucking love it.

LISA enters.

MARIAH

Oh shit, you're early.

LEVY AND CHRIS

Lisa!

LISA

Levy.

LEVY

What are you doing here?

LISA

I've come for the exorcism. How's it going?

MARIAH

Fair?

LISA

You're doing it wrong. What you want to do is sever the relationship to the netherworld. Levy being here is strengthening ties.

LEVY

You can see her?

LISA

(to Chris) How blind do you think I am?

LEVY

So you can't see her.

CHRIS

Lisa, about this afternoon. Even though it, I mean he, repulses me, I overreacted. The past is..

LISA

Very much alive.

MARIAH

I should be getting back to the underworld. Remember the retrospective!

MARIAH tries to recreate the smoky smoke, the strobe light, whatever. It's all very awkward.

CHRIS

Mariah isn't dead. She lives here. With me. We are divorced, but we created this amazing space and it was too hard to take everything apart. So we stayed. Stuck. I met you and I... I...

MARIAH enters as herself, defeated.

MARIAH

Lost my head.

CHRIS

Mariah, I had to tell the truth.

LEVY

You're alive!!!!

MARIAH

I'm dead.

LEVY reaches out, uncertain if he should touch her.

LEVY

I could

LEVY wraps his hands around her neck. Is he going to kill her or kiss her?

YOU'RE ALIVE!!!!!!

Mariah, my dystopian fantasy. You're alive!!!

Kiss her.

MARIAH

I'm doomed.

CHRIS

Lisa, I would like to try again with you. Without all the lies. Will you let me?

LISA

I lied.

I knew she was Mariah from the moment I saw her. After you gave me the map,

CHRIS

On our monthiversary.

LEVY

Oh vomit.

LISA

I went the library. But they don't really have anything on microfiche any more, so.. well... I... you know... I did what you do when you meet someone you think is exceptional.

MARIAH

You googled him.

LISA

Oh yeah, I googled him. Facebook stalking. LinkedIn lurking. I even went to MySpace. I can tell you the date you filed for divorce, the page your senior picture is on in your high school yearbook.

LEVY

For your sake, I hope you don't have a Ferndlr account.

LISA

I broke every rule. I lied. I used the internet. We're screwed.

CHRIS

I started it. I told the first lie.

MARIAH

Too much truth is terrible for a relationship. What you want requires the really, really big lie. One that can only be told in parallel perspective. Impossible. Human. Beautiful.

LEVY

Like a market bubble.

CHRIS

Lisa, I love you.

LISA

Like you loved Mariah?

CHRIS

No. Mariah and I tried, but this is what we ended up with. MFA Fire Sale. It turns out we do our best work apart. It turns out, I make my best work for you.

LISA and CHRIS kiss.

MARIAH

That's the one.

LISA

You are a lapsed Catholic artist, but when I look at you, I see stars.
And you (Mariah) are the best aunt ever.

MARIAH

The best, oldest, poorest, most struggling artist aunt in history.

LEVY

Poor. Don't be stupid. You're alive! You've got work to do.

MARIAH

The retrospective is off. The only reason my paintings sold was because I DIED!

LEVY

Mariah, Sheikha Al Mayassa is interested! You could be an inanimate object and no one would care. I could make paintings scattered with your ashes and they would still sell as long as they came with a certificate of authenticity.

MARIAH

Levy, I hate to tell you this. I mean, I really, really hate to tell you this, but whatever your gallery girl uses to touch up her roots, soaks through straight to the brain. Sheika Al Mayassa isn't interested in my work. That was me in the gallery last week. Wearing a scarf.

LEVY

You came in the gallery and the girl didn't recognize you? She's fired.

CHRIS

You don't understand. The gallery assistant mistook Mariah for Sheikha Al Mayassa.

MARIAH

She isn't interested in my work. She isn't even in the U.S.

LEVY

You're right. She's flying in next Tuesday with the work from China. She loves it. She'll be so pleased to meet you. Surprised, but pleased. We'll have to kill ourselves getting the entire retrospective on the walls. I doubt we'll have time to get Roberta.
But, let's face it, who gives a fuck about critics. It's not like they're rich people.

MARIAH is silent, then sniffing, then sobbing.

CHRIS

Mariah?

LEVY

Mariah darling?

MARIAH

Everything I've done. All of the terrible, backstabbing, degrading miserable horrible things I've done.

LEVY

We probably can't fit everything. The figurative phase will have to go.

MARIAH

All of the suffering, the blood from my veins, the sacrifice I've made. The children I didn't want. My marriage. My youth. It's all just going to be up there, for people to stare at while they swig Chardonnay and think about where they're going after and wonder if it will appreciate.

LEVY

Exactly

MARIAH

And some of them will buy it. Some of them without even seeing it. Most of them without understanding it. And from here on out, I can just make my art, make whatever the hell I want and people will collect it.

CHRIS

Are you going to be okay?

MARIAH

We got everything wrong.

CHRIS

Not everything. We didn't know what we were doing. We loved each other, but we weren't the right people. We were better off as an Untitled Series.

MARIAH

I'm sorry. .

CHRIS

I'm sorry too.

MARIAH

And I'm not sorry. I 'm not sorry too. I'm not sorry I made you so miserable that you murdered me in cold blood. I'm not sorry I slept with my gallerist. I'm not sorry my gallerist is a terrible person who ruined your life. Dante was right. This is how you get out of hell. The perfect woman loves you. (TO LISA) You're perfect.

CHRIS

(To LISA) You're Perfect.

MARIAH

(To LEVY) I'm perfect.

LEVY

(To Mariah) I'm perfect.

MARIAH

I'm perfect. And the perfect woman loves ME. The fourteenth child of the former Emir of Qatar loves ME!!! The ARTNEWS Collector of the Year loves ME!!! And it's all just so worth it! I don't know how it happened and I don't care. When the right person loves you, it doesn't matter how.

END OF PLAY