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SF PERUSALS

# A Lifetime Burning

by Cusi Cram

A Samuel French Acting Edition



SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830
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**Originally developed with LAByrinth Theatre Company**

**World Premiere produced by Primary Stages, August 2009**

***A LIFETIME BURNING*** was first produced by Primary Stages in New York City on July 28, 2009. The performance was directed by Pam MacKinnon, with sets by Kris Stone, costumes by Theresa Squire, lighting by David Weiner, and sound design by Broken Chord Collective. The cast was as follows:

**TESS.** . . . . . Christina Kirk
**EMMA** . . . . . Jennifer Westfeldt
**LYDIA** . . . . . Isabel Keating
**ALEJANDRO** . . . . . Raúl Castillo

## CHARACTERS

**TESS –** late 30s

**EMMA –** late 30s

**ALEJANDRO –** early twenties, Latino

**LYDIA –** 40s, British

## EDITOR'S NOTE

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*Home is where one starts from. As we grow older*
*The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated*
*Of dead and living. Not the intense moment*
*Isolated, with no before and after,*
*But a lifetime burning in every moment*
*And not the lifetime of one man only*
*But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.*

– *T.S. Eliot,* East Coker

*(A well renovated and thoughtfully designed studio apartment on the lower east side of Manhattan on Mulberry Street.)*

*(It's the kind of place that rents for $3800 a month. It's clean in a way most New York apartments are not; the cleanliness comes from the newness of everything.)*

*(The apartment is tastefully decorated in a minimalist, mid-century modern way. Everything in the space is well-curated and carefully placed.)*

*(The walls are white but a perfect, not glaring white, white maybe with a touch of ice blue or very light pink.)*

*(Lights come up on* **TESS**. *She holds a newspaper in her hand. She shakes the newspaper at* **EMMA**.*)*

**TESS.** I can't. I can't. I can't. /I can't.

**EMMA.** /Since when do you have a stutter?

*(***TESS** *looks like she might hit* **EMMA** *with the newspaper.)*

**TESS.** You're off your meds.

**EMMA.** Maybe you need a prescription.

**TESS.** I mean. What. What. What. /WHAT?

**EMMA.** /Again with the repeating of/words

**TESS.** /This makes sense. More sense if you are.

**EMMA.** What makes sense?

**TESS.** Don't.

**EMMA.** Ask questions?

**TESS.** It's just. It's just. It's just.

**EMMA.** I'm concerned about this speech impediment.

**TESS.** *(calmly)* I would like an explanation. Detailed. Comprehensive.

**EMMA.** Comprehensive?

**TESS.** I am asking the questions, Emma. No tactics.

**EMMA.** Tactics?

**TESS.** I want an EXPLANATION.

**EMMA.** I think what you really want is an EXPLICATION.

**TESS.** No word games. I hate the word/games

**EMMA.** /Explication is more of an interpretation. More detailed.

**TESS.** I would appreciate details.

**EMMA.** Like an "*explication du texte*." That's where you go through the text word by word, parse every last syllable.

**TESS.** You're evading.

**EMMA.** I'm EXPLICATING.

**TESS.** Details. Facts. WHY! WHY!/WHY!

**EMMA.** /I thought this might irk you.

**TESS.** Thought? Might? Irk? IRK/ is what someone who bumps into you on the subway does.

**EMMA.** /But I didn't think fireworks would ensue. Interesting.

*(***TESS** *throws the newspaper to the ground.)*

**TESS.** I have an ethical obligation!

**EMMA.** I didn't know that "Luxurious Homes" magazine had a code of journalistic ethics?

**TESS.** I am your sister and I am responsible for you.

**EMMA.** I'm not five, Tess.

**TESS.**
I'm a journalist for
fucking fuck's sake.

**EMMA.**
You write about wallpaper
and fancy paperweights

**TESS.** At least I HAVE a job.

*(***TESS** *walks away from* **EMMA**. *She picks up The New York Times.)*

**TESS.** *(cont.)* Shall we just take a moment to peruse?

*(***TESS** *opens the paper.)*

It's you. Your picture. In The New York Times. On the COVER of the Thursday "STYLE" section! Look, there you are, *(to picture)* "Hello, Emma," talking about the upcoming publication of your heart rending MEMOIR. In this VERY apartment. *(***TESS** *looks around.)* And what is up with the apartment? Last time I was here, it was milk crate and futon central. What the fuck is going on?

**EMMA.** Calm down, Tess.

**TESS.** No. No. No. I will not be calm until. Until. Until. Until, I can wrap my head around THIS lunacy, this aberration, this, this calum…calum…FUCK HOW DO YOU SAY IT!

**EMMA.**
Calumny. Is the accent on the first part of the word…CALumny? Or is it, calUMNY?

**TESS.**
Fuck the word. Just fuck it. Fuck you. It's a fucking fucked up disaster, is what it is.

**EMMA.** It's a story. You always liked stories.

**TESS.** WHY!

**EMMA.** You were always a sucker for a "tall tale."

**TESS.** Bottom line it, Emma.

**EMMA.** A "gothic yarn."

**TESS.** You CANNOT masquerade fiction as TRUTH.

**EMMA.** And I would answer to that, "what is truth"?

**TESS.** No polemics, you didn't finish college.

**EMMA.** In this day and age is there an objective, or indeed absolute truth?

**TESS.** It's always the people without DEGREES that throw philosophy at you.

**EMMA.** Wanna Gibson?

**TESS.** No. No. No. I do not want a GIBSON. I want an escape hatch from the nightmare of being related to you!

**EMMA.** Cocktail hour just arrived early!

*(**EMMA** gets up and goes to her stainless steel kitchen and takes out the ingredients for a Gibson. She takes vodka out of the freezer. She pulls vermouth from a cabinet. She finds a shaker and ice crusher. She carefully measures vodka and vermouth into the shaker.)*

*(**TESS** looks at her Blackberry and shakes her head. She dials.)*

**TESS.** *(into the phone)* No. No. No. No ice cream. *(a pause)* I am NOT being tyrannical, or…or…like Hitler. Because…because you are lactose intolerant. Have Marisol get you some Rice Dream. I know it's unfair but Harry isn't lactose intolerant and I cannot have this conversation again. Talk to you at bed time.

*(**TESS** hangs up.)*

**EMMA.** Since when is Charlotte lactose intolerant?

**TESS.** Don't pretend you know anything about Charlotte.

*(**EMMA** leans in to her fridge and pulls out cocktail onions. **TESS** eyes Emma's coffee table. She taps it, then kicks the leg. She gets on her knees and looks underneath the table.)*

**TESS.** This is vintage Eva Zeisel!

**EMMA.** You're good.

**TESS.** Where did you get this?

**EMMA.** E-bay.

**TESS.** Don't lie to me.

**EMMA.** Don't worry, Mom didn't leave me a secret table in a secret will you never read.

**TESS.** That's like three thousand dollars of coffee table.

**EMMA.** More. It's the larger size.

*(**EMMA** smashes the ice with an old fashioned ice breaker and adds it into the shaker.)*

**TESS.** How much did you get?

**EMMA.** For what?

*(**EMMA** shakes the cocktail shaker.)*

**TESS.** How much?

**EMMA.** Enough to INVEST in a few things.

**TESS.** *(taking in the surroundings)* Ok. Ok. I spy with my little eye, two Globus chairs, a Saarinen Pedestal table, a custom ottoman re-upholstered in a hip FEMININE fabric. Sofa. Definitely from Design within Reach.

*(***TESS** *sits on the sofa. She bounces.)*

Funny, how comfy sitting on a pack of LIES is.

**EMMA.** They're LIFE pieces.

**TESS.** Who's life?

*(***EMMA** *shakes the cocktail shaker.)*

Sofa and ottoman, lets say six thousand with delivery fees, reupholstering another two grand. Was the fabric expensive?

**EMMA.** Italian.

**TESS.** Lets just round it up to ten grand. *(taking in more of the room)* And THEN. The Kitchen. The paint job. The floors. You dropped a hundred thousand on this place. And I'm lowballing. You sold your book for at least a quarter of a million! *(beat)* Good, all this stuff has re-sale value.

*(***EMMA** *pours her Gibson into a martini glass.)*

**EMMA.** I think I'm becoming a drunk-o-rexic.

**TESS.** What?

**EMMA.** Girls who drink and don't eat. I've been cutting down on the eating because of the book tour.

**TESS.** You're not going on a book tour.

**EMMA.** My editor sent me this study, I think it was on Gawker, that thinner writers sell more books. Like that woman who wrote the eating/praying/living book – REALLY thin.

**TESS.** Kill me now.

**EMMA.** Must be the stress…

**TESS.** Of lying?

**EMMA.** I find that word reductive.

**TESS.** You said you were part INCA.

**EMMA.** I could be part Inca. It's possible.

*(***EMMA** *sips her Gibson and adds some more vermouth.)*

**TESS.** No it isn't, not possible. You're Irish. One hundred percent. Both sides. Not even English. Or Scottish. Just "top o the morning, potato munching" Irish.

**EMMA.** Maybe I feel part Inca?

**TESS.** What. What. What…could that possibly mean?

*(***EMMA** *puts the cocktail onions away and pops a few in her mouth.)*

**EMMA.** Are cocktail onions caloric? The camera adds ten pounds so I figure if I'm twenty pounds under my comfortable weight, on camera I'll look ten pounds too thin – or skinny which is all anyone wants to be in this fine country of ours. (*She raises her glass.)* Chin. Chin.

*(***EMMA** *sits.)*

How are the twins? The almost ex? The Puggle?

*(***TESS** *gets up and goes to the freezer pulls out the bottle of vodka and pours a large amount of it into a glass. She smashes a tray of ice into the sink and plops several cubes into her glass.)*

**TESS.** Vermouth is sixty calories a shot. That was a very generous pour. You double dipped. Adds up. Especially if you are on a liquid diet.

**EMMA.** Are you "counting points" again? Because you look thinner.

**TESS.** In the future when you are trying to compliment someone, just say you look thin. The ER takes the compliment away.

*(They sip their drinks.)*

**TESS.** *(cont.)* So…I'm very curious how exactly you feel Incan? Or I believe in the article it said you were a quarter Inca and a quarter Cherokee. Just couldn't be indigenous from one hemisphere, had to take on the plight of two native peoples?

**EMMA.** There was also some mention of my other "Irish" half.

**TESS.** Funny, how that slipped my mind. I guess I was just absorbing so much new information, the true stuff didn't register. I'm all ears.

**EMMA.** Well…I've had this job for the last three years…

**TESS.** I thought you were volunteering a couple of hours a week.

**EMMA.** Ten hours a week. And I treated it like a job.

**TESS.** That's not a job. Go on.

**EMMA.** Anyway, at my volunteer JOB, I tutored and mentored at risk Latino youth.

**TESS.** I have a cleaning lady from Honduras but I remain Irish. I am not even a tenth Honduran.

**EMMA.** A lot of the kids I work with are of South American descent, from Ecuador and Peru. And I got to know them and they seemed really…kindred.

**TESS.** Kindred?

**EMMA.** They're struggling with similar…issues

**TESS.** Like whether to spring for an original Eames chair or settle for the knock-off?

**EMMA.** This is pointless, Tess.

**TESS.** Please, I am aching to know what makes you feel "kindred" with at risk Latino youths.

**EMMA.** Well.

*(***EMMA** *sips her Gibson.)*

A feeling of displacement.

**TESS.** How are you displaced?

**EMMA.** I don't feel like its possible for me to thrive in this culture. I live perpetually outside of it.

**TESS.** You were on the cover of the Style section today. That's pretty inside things.

**EMMA.** I'm talking about my connection to these kids. I shared a sense of profound alienation with them. I think it's that essential quality that is at the root of my…you know issues.

**TESS.** You mean, illness.

**EMMA.** Terminology.

**TESS.** So…let me get this straight, because you share a general sense of malaise with some South American kids, through some magical power of transference, you miraculously became Inca-ish.

**EMMA.** It's much more complex than that, Tess.

**TESS.** Then EXPLICATE it to me.

**EMMA.** I just wanted voices like theirs to be heard.

**TESS.** Can't they write their own books?

**EMMA.** No. They can't and that is the very heart of the problem. No amount of tutoring I do, is going to empower them enough to tell their stories to a wider audience.

**TESS.** So, you are in essence speaking for a speechless population?

**EMMA.** I wouldn't phrase it like that. Through my book, maybe my readers will see that difference is a social construct, it exists in the mind. And perhaps if we dig deep enough, we all have a little Inca in us.

**TESS.** And a little Cherokee?

**EMMA.** Do you know the percentage of native kids with juvenile diabetes?

**TESS.** No I don't, Emma. But I do know enough about native South Americans to know that they call themselves Quechua, not Incan.

**EMMA.** You sure about that?

**TESS.** Positive. My editor at "Luxurious Homes" is FULLY and REALLY a first generation Peruvian with REAL Quechua blood running through her veins, not Irish American blood posturing

as-all-the-oppressed-indigenous-peoples-of-the-world blood. And FYI, you are lecturing me about diabetes and natives peoples from a five thousand dollar sofa.

**EMMA.** You're just obstinate in your desire to not be able to imagine a life different from your own suburban nightmare, Tess.

*(***EMMA** *get up and picks up the phone.)*

Sushi?

**TESS.** Absolutely not!

**EMMA.** Hola Ernesto, yeah the usual but no maki combo. Rice makes me gorda. Ha. *(She looks at* **TESS***.)* And an extra mixed sashimi. Si. Mi hermana. Bueno y COMPLICADO. Gracias to you, Ernesto.

*(***TESS** *charges toward the phone and takes it out of* **EMMA***'s hands and speaks into it.)*

**TESS.** Yeah. Hey, Ernesto. Cancel that order. Mi HERMANA has been a very bad girl and doesn't get sushi today. Adios.

**EMMA.** Jesus Christ, Tess! I'm hungry.

**TESS.** I thought you were a DRUNK-O-REXIC?

**TESS.** How long have you been off your meds?

**EMMA.** Why am I the only one who has to answer questions?

**TESS.** Because this seems like a manic bender of EPIC proportions.

**TESS.** Are you, or are you not taking your meds?

*(***EMMA** *grabs the bottle of vodka out of the fridge. She holds it up to* **TESS***;* **TESS** *nods yes.)*

**EMMA.** I'm on a new pill.

*(She refreshes both of their glasses.)*

**TESS.** Well, we should sue the fuck out of the company that makes it.

**EMMA.** We live in a world where passion is medicated.

**TESS.** I can't have this discussion again.

**EMMA.** Good, because this discussion depresses me more than my depression.

*(Both sisters take a swig of vodka.* **EMMA** *winces.)*

**EMMA.** How can you drink this stuff straight?

**TESS.** Why didn't you talk to me about this, Emma?

**EMMA.** Seems like the twins always have strep.

**TESS.** I'm sorry…I wasn't more…the last six months have been…

**EMMA.** Don't. Please. It doesn't suit you. I didn't tell anyone, really. The whole thing was muy complicado. I needed to write something.

**TESS.** Why not write a novel?

**EMMA.** Memoirs sell better. Fiction isn't real enough anymore.

**TESS.** That makes no sense.

**EMMA.** I agree with you.

**TESS.** You're like a…maze…a maze inside a thimble. You can't pretend to be a race…a race that is not your own. It's racist.

**EMMA.** Is it?

**TESS.** Yes.

**EMMA.** But isn't my imagining what it would be like to be a quarter Cherokee and a quarter Inca…or rather Quechua, doesn't my desire to understand that reality transcend race?

**TESS.** Race is not transcendable. Race is a fact.

**EMMA.** Is it?

**TESS.** Don't look at me, I'm not Cornell West.

**EMMA.** It was just the way I wanted to tell that particular story.

**TESS.** I don't even know how I feel about people writing about worlds, even fictionally, that they barely know. It seems… presumptuous and smacking of fakery.

**EMMA.** You did NOT just say smacking of fakery?

**TESS.** Isn't art truth?

**EMMA.** Art is beauty.

**TESS.** Fine. *(beat)* I think beauty is truth.

**EMMA.** How Greco-Roman of you.

**TESS.** Why are truth and beauty so elusive?

**EMMA.** 'Cause they don't matter anymore.

**TESS.** THAT makes me want to string somebody up by the BALLS and make them ACCOUNTABLE.

**EMMA.** You're a buzzkill, Tess.

**TESS.** You and my almost ex are on the same page about that.

*(The sisters drink.)*

**EMMA.** I know that world.

**TESS.** After ten hours a week?

**EMMA.** For three years.

*(silence)*

**EMMA.** There is another story, Tess.

**TESS.** Always is with you.

**EMMA.** A story I didn't tell.

**TESS.** A true story?

**EMMA.** Some stories are too true to tell.

**TESS.** Tell me.

*(Lights comes up on* **ALEJANDRO**. *He sits at a table. He listens to his iPod while doing exercises in a workbook. He tries to write but gets lost in the beat of what he is listening to. He taps the table with his hand. Throughout the following he drums on the table.)*

**EMMA.** Alejandro made me laugh. It was that simple. Or complicated. He was oddly joyful, in spite of his circumstances. I was only supposed to tutor him once a week but there was no way he would ever pass his GED without more time, so I started meeting him for extra sessions at a coffee shop near the center. I wasn't supposed to have outside contact with my clients and I never did. Not before Alejandro.

*(***EMMA** *gets up and plops down beside the table next to* **ALEJANDRO**.*)*

**ALEJANDRO.** Hola, Emma-lemma. You're late. I'm like all fucked up about these antonyms.

**EMMA.** I saw how hard you were working.

*(***ALEJANDRO** *puts an ear piece in* **EMMA***'s ear and in his ear. He sings really loud.)*

**ALEJANDRO.** Check it out. Boricua, morena, dominicano, colombiano, boricua, morena, cubano, mexicano!

*(***EMMA** *takes the ear piece out.)*

**EMMA.** OK. What specifically don't you get about antonyms?

**ALEJANDRO.** What no chatting? I like my little *bochinche* with my fine tutor before I strain my brain.

**EMMA.** Come on, Alejandro.

**ALEJANDRO.** So it's like all bizness and no playness?

**EMMA.** I was just working with Berto and…

**ALEJANDRO.** That dude is dumb.

**EMMA.** I don't like that word.

**ALEJANDRO.** How 'bout "challenged"? Like that word?

**EMMA.** Better. Berto's dyslexic and has never been given the correct therapies.

**ALEJANDRO.** And he's crazy dumb.

**EMMA.** Alejandro.

**ALEJANDRO.** Come on, I know no one can be retarded any more but Berto, he's like…the opposite of quick.

**EMMA.** Antonym. Slow is an antonym of quick.

**ALEJANDRO.** So you're admitting Berto is slow?

**EMMA.** No I am not…at all. I was…

**ALEJANDRO.** Come on. Admit it Emma, a chunk of Berto's cerebral cortex is on permanent leave.

*(***EMMA** *stifles a smile and looks at* **ALEJANDRO***'s workbook.)*

**EMMA.** So…the common mistake people make with this section is to give up if they don't immediately know the word in capital letters.

**ALEJANDRO.** Know another common mistake people make these days is they let people off the hook. You can't just be dumb, you're like dyslexic or ADDish, or "special" or "challenged." Why can't people just fess up and admit they got problems. Wanna know what I am?

**EMMA.** What, Alejandro?

**ALEJANDRO.** Lazy. And as far as I can see, there is no treatment, or pill or special term for that but in this neighborhood it's an epidemic.

**EMMA.** I don't think that's the case.

**ALEJANDRO.** I know it is. You know how many hours there are in a week? 168. So my stupid job takes up 35 hours outta 168. Then, I sleep like 49 of those hours. And then there are like 84 hours every week where I'm basically doing dip shit. I mean, nada. I am like staring at the wall thinking about how many hours a week I do nothing. That's pathetic. I'm just gonna say it out loud…I am a lazy motherfucker.

**EMMA.** I don't think you're lazy.

**ALEJANDRO.** You know what my ancient peeps did with their free time?

**EMMA.** Uh…Built Machu Picchu? Got slaughtered?

**ALEJANDRO.** In between all that, they invented brain surgery and built roads from Colombia all the way down to the bottom of Chile. What have I invented? Or built?

**EMMA.** I mean…that was a different time.

**ALEJANDRO.** Yeah, like there were no cell phones, or electricity OR cars and like some Inca dude still thought about how to fucking drill a hole in someone's head.

**EMMA.** You can't let history get you down, Alejandro. You do a lot.

**ALEJANDRO.** What?

**EMMA.** You spend three hours a week with me.

**ALEJANDRO.** That's different.

**EMMA.** You wanna take the GED, so you can get a better job.

**ALEJANDRO.** Like I'll ever be a brain surgeon?

**EMMA.** Who knows? If we look to the power of the antonym, it could happen.

**ALEJANDRO.** What do you with your 84 hours?

**EMMA.** I have more than 84 hours. I don't sleep much.

**ALEJANDRO.** You have another job, right – I mean, this tutoring is like a volunteer job, right? Wait, let me guess. Maybe you work at the Metropolitan Museum, you like give tours all about old statues, or buy paintings at auctions…or…like you're in charge of kick ass parties, where everyone is in fucking ball gowns and like Angelina Jolie kisses your ass.

**EMMA.** I wish Angelina Jolie would kiss my ass.

**ALEJANDRO.** Mine too. Those big fat juicy lips…what I wouldn't give for an ass hicky from Angelina.

*(***EMMA** *laughs.* **ALEJANDRO** *laughs. A moment.)*

**ALEJANDRO.** So what do you do…with your extra hours?

**EMMA.** Oh…it's not very interesting, whereas ANTONYMS are riveting.

**ALEJANDRO.** Tell me.

**EMMA.** I worry.

**ALEJANDRO.** For a living?

**EMMA.** If that were a job, I'd be a billionaire.

**ALEJANDRO.** So…what do you do, for real?

**EMMA.** Um. Well…I don't have a job per se at the moment. I have had jobs in the past. I worked as an underling at a fashion magazine, which was a not so subtle form of torture. Then at a non-profit which was stressful. I had to raise money – no skills in that arena. It's not really my forte, holding down a job.

**ALEJANDRO.** So…like your parents are rich?

**EMMA.** My parents are dead.

**ALEJANDRO.** Man, I'm sorry.

**EMMA.** Being an orphan has its perks.

**ALEJANDRO.** Like what?

**EMMA.** Life insurance. My dad left me some extra money. Drives my sister nuts. I told her I would split it with her but I think she would rather be angry than rich. She is rich, but my money seems better than hers.

**ALEJANDRO.** So you don't have to work?

**EMMA.** Not at the moment. If I continue to be unemployable and live in Manhattan, I will eventually run out of money. It's one of the things I worry about.

**ALEJANDRO.** Wow.

**EMMA.** Yeah.

**ALEJANDRO.** So you're loaded?

**EMMA.** No.

*(a long, uncomfortable pause)*

When I'm not feeling wretched about myself and how lazy I am and how pointless my life has become, I figure I lost both my parents when I was sixteen within eight months of each other, so…

**ALEJANDRO.** So?

**EMMA.** So…it's what I got instead of parents, money.

**ALEJANDRO.** My brother was shot but no one wrote me a check.

**EMMA.** I'm lucky, Alejandro. I squander my luck.

**ALEJANDRO.** What does squander mean?

**EMMA.** To waste. I waste my luck and time.

**ALEJANDRO.** Yeah.

**EMMA.** Can I ask you favor?

**ALEJANDRO.** Sure.

**EMMA.** Just keep what I told you to yourself. I just…if the other students…I dunno.

**ALEJANDRO.** I get it. No problem.

**EMMA.** Thanks.

*(a beat)*

**ALEJANDRO.** After Luis got shot, I was all like, I can't ever let anything like this happen again to my mom. And I gotta be a man and every day is gonna be all precious and shit. And I got my stupid-ass job and signed up at the center for tutoring. And like I try to avoid trouble and all, no matter what and that means hanging out a lot by myself. Cause in the old days if there was trouble within a five block radius, I would be like humping it. But even after the world comes down around you and you think you're all reborn and shit, you're not, you're still the fucked up lazy you, staring at the wall counting hours until the next thing you don't want to do.

*(***EMMA** *begins to cry. She sobs.)*

**ALEJANDRO.** Hey, it's not so bad. At least you don't gotta work at Best Buy.

**EMMA.** *(crying)* Freedom is overrated.

**ALEJANDRO.** I could get you a job at Best Buy. My cousin is a manager.

**EMMA.** *(crying harder)* That's so sweet.

**ALEJANDRO.** You've obviously never been in a Best Buy.

**EMMA.** No.

**ALEJANDRO.** Thought so.

*(***ALEJANDRO** *hands* **EMMA** *some napkins.)*

I don't like to see a pretty girl's face all wrecked. Breaks my heart.

**EMMA.** Sorry.

**ALEJANDRO.** It's OK. *(beat)* I'm kinda glad you don't like work at the Metropolitan Museum. I mean, I'm glad you told me, you know…

**EMMA.** I'm a sucky tutor.

**ALEJANDRO.** Nah uh.

**EMMA.** In the training they tell us to limit the details of our personal lives, to stay focused on task-based activities.

**ALEJANDRO.** It's not your fault I'm not into ant-o-boring-nyms.

**EMMA.** There gonna be on the GED. I want you to pass the GED. You should go to college.

**ALEJANDRO.** Did you?

**EMMA.** For a year and a half. But do the opposite of what I did, you'll be happy that way.

**ALEJANDRO.** Stop.

**EMMA.** Alejandro, I've worked with a lot of kids in the last three years and I try, I try to be hopeful and encouraging to them but the truth is, I look at a lot of them and I don't see their futures. But I look at you and see… possibility.

*(***ALEJANDRO** *smiles. A moment.)*

**ALEJANDRO.** So do you like have friends?

**EMMA.** I'm not a total loser.

**ALEJANDRO.** I know, I just wonder what you do with them?

**EMMA.** We go to movies, sometimes the theater, sometimes bars. The ones that live in Brooklyn invite me to dinner parties. I try to avoid those.

**ALEJANDRO.** You ever go dancing?

**EMMA.** No. I mean, not in forever.

**ALEJANDRO.** You like to dance?

**EMMA.** Yeah…if I'm in the mood.

**ALEJANDRO.** When are you in the mood?

**EMMA.** It's been a long time.

**ALEJANDRO.** For me, it's when I feel like I could scream at the top of my lungs for hours and like if someone got just a little too close, I might punch them in the eye, know what I mean?

**EMMA.** I really do, actually. I am known for my sudden bursts of energy.

**ALEJANDRO.** It's funny.

**EMMA.** What?

**ALEJANDRO.** We're not so different.

*(A pause.* **EMMA** *looks through* **ALEJANDRO***'s workbook.)*

**EMMA.** Maybe we should skip antonyms for now. Let's do some analogies. They're hard, really hard for people who think creatively, you have to narrow down the way you make connections.

**ALEJANDRO.** Let's fuck it. Let's go dancing.

*(Lights begin to dim on* **ALEJANDRO** *and* **EMMA**. **EMMA** *gets up and watches* **ALEJANDRO** *leave.)*

*(Lights rise on* **TESS**. **TESS***' cell phone rings – it's the theme from "9 to 5". It is loud, very loud.)*

**EMMA.** THAT'S your ring?

**TESS.** It's ironic.

**EMMA.** Barely.

*(***TESS** *looks at her phone.)*

**TESS.** Fuck. It's Steve. He has the twins. You're so not done. *(on the phone – she speaks in a controlled monotone )* What? Yes. Yes. Yes. I'm with her. In her apartment. None of your business. I don't care, I really don't care about how anything affects you anymore. Yes I did say that and I did mean it. What do you want? *(pause)* How did that happen? Were they unsupervised? Where's Marisol? And Mrs. Pierce? I have told you countless times. I know. I know. I know. She loves grapes. I'll give you Dr. Fineman's number. He'll prescribe something an emetic or laxative…I can't remember. Of course I have told them not feed her grapes. Know what? Know what? Know what? *(the monotone goes out the window)* Ever think that maybe it's your FUCKING fault too. They have half your DNA, MOTHERFUCKER! *(beat, cool as a cucumber)* Dr. Fineman's number is 212-884-2181

*(***TESS** *hangs up.)*

The twins fed the puppy grapes.

**EMMA.** Oh.

**TESS.** They know grapes are poisonous to Puggles. It's not the first time.

**EMMA.** Yikes.

**TESS.** They're acting out.

**EMMA.** Apparently.

**TESS.** I worry.

**EMMA.** Of course.

**TESS.** The divorce has been hard on them. Seven is a difficult age, you're old enough to understand but not old enough to have empathy. I just wish someone could display a soupcon of empathy. So what the fuck happened with Alejandro?

**EMMA.** I want to know what the fuck happened with Steve.

**TESS.** Well. Steve is an asshole.

**EMMA.** Well, yes.

**TESS.** I knew he was an asshole when I married him but he was my asshole.

**EMMA.** What's the distinction?

**TESS.** Between what?

**EMMA.** Your own asshole and an asshole that is not your own? I mean, you know what I mean…

**TESS.** Steve hired a barracuda of a divorce lawyer who's trying to paint him as the most destitute hedge fund manager on Wall Street. He wants full custody, so he can spoil the twins to death his new LOFT in Tribeca which has a ping pong table and satellite everything, in addition to a nanny AND a personal chef—how can I possibly compete with that? He wants to have the children, so he doesn't have to pay me to take care of them, even though I only employ one measly au pair and I don't even have cable – on principle, mind you. The idea of giving me any money whatsoever to raise his children makes him crazy. Why? Why? Why you ask?

**EMMA.** I didn't ask.

**TESS.** Yes you did.

**EMMA.** I asked a different question.

**TESS.** Why? Why? I'll tell you why. Because he is an asshole at large, learning new asshole tricks every day and making me pay for whatever his asshole Mom and Dad did to him to make him an asshole in the first place.

**EMMA.** I'm sorry, Tess.

**TESS.** He's not an asshole to the kids. I'm fine.

**EMMA.** How is that possible?

**TESS.** What are my options? Fall apart? Lose my kids? Lose my job? My house? End up in the nut house macrameing my life away? No thanks. No offence.

*(The tinkle of ice in empty glasses.)*

**EMMA.** I wonder what you say about me behind my back.

**TESS.** Most people don't spend that much time thinking about other people, Emma.

**EMMA.** Still.

**TESS.** We are the stars of our own stupid movies.

**EMMA.** So, I'm just a walk on in your movie?

**TESS.** If only. *(beat)* So, you and Alejandro went dancing. And…he made you an honorary Inca?

**EMMA.** The story doesn't go in order.

**TESS.** Why would it?

**EMMA.** Remember my friend Aimes Lockhart from Weslyan?

**TESS.** No.

**EMMA.** He's like gay royalty in the publishing world and I met a friend of a friend of his, named Parker, at this event/fund raiser/save the gays thing who thought I rocked. And Parker is Lydia Freemantle's right hand man.

**TESS.** THE Lydia Freemantle? Fuck.

**EMMA.** Fucking fuck.

*(Lights up on* **LYDIA FREEMANTLE** *at a desk. She stares at* **EMMA** *for a long moment.)*

**LYDIA.** Fascinating.

**EMMA.** Oh?

**LYDIA.** Parker said you were fascinating. I said to Parker, have her write a little something up. But Parker said, "This is one you have to meet, to understand the full force of WHO SHE IS."

**EMMA.** Is that a compliment?

**LYDIA.** Ha.

**EMMA.** That's very kind of Parker, since I've only met him once.

**LYDIA.** First impressions are the only thing that matter.

*(***LYDIA** *stands.)*

Sherry? Brandy? Or I have a lovely white from Cassis. It's impossible to get it in New York and I pay triple what it would cost in France but it reminds me of reckless teenage summers carrying on with silly Italian boys in their motor boats. Vroom. Vroom.

**EMMA.** Yes.

**LYDIA.** To what?

**EMMA.** The Italian wine…I mean French wine with Italian boys.

**LYDIA.** Ha.

*(***LYDIA** *opens the bottle of wine as quickly as if she were a waiter.)*

**EMMA.** Actually…

*(***LYDIA** *whips around.)*

**LYDIA.** Oh God! You're not in recovery? I haven't done something despicable – wouldn't be the first time. Do you need to call…your sponsor?

**EMMA.** No, God, no. I am not in recovery. Not. Yet. I've just been feeling off. So maybe no wine. Today.

*(***LYDIA** *pours herself a glass. She sniffs the wine and sighs.)*

**LYDIA.** August. Bain du Soliel. Tiny Bikinis, I couldn't get away with anymore. *(She takes a sip.)* Fizzy water?

**EMMA.** Yes. Please.

*(**LYDIA** pours some fizzy water in to a glass. She takes a long sip of wine.)*

*(**LYDIA** looks at her watch.)*

**EMMA.** I really appreciate you listening to my ramblings, Lydia.

**LYDIA.** As they say, thank you for sharing.

**EMMA.** I wanted to write something up for you but I've been wanting to write something for so long.

**LYDIA.** For how long?

**EMMA.** I can't say for certain it's ever gone well. I mean. I've had some things. Short stories? Published.

**LYDIA.** Where?

**EMMA.** On line mostly. Small Magazines. Minute, really. I forget their names…

**LYDIA.** Bloody awful, writing.

**EMMA.** But I was riffing the night I met Parker at Aimes' event and he said I seemed to have something a story, a thing, a something that he thought you would get… respond to but…but…sitting here I feel…foolish.

**LYDIA.** Parker has an eye. He has his finger on things, that frankly, I am too old to keep my finger on. And Parker is almost without opinion.

**EMMA.** Umm…is that possible?

**LYDIA.** Parker brought me the mother daughter meth addiction memoirs. I said, lets just publish one book. The diary of a meth mom and in the same book, part deux, the daughter who had to cope with the meth mom. And Parker said. It's two books, Lydia. And BAM, we have TWO best sellers on our hands.

**EMMA.** So, Parker did have an opinion about the meth mom and daughter.

**LYDIA.** He had a sense of the market, different from the discernment of an opinion. He was spot on. And he senses you would sell well. I think he's right. And

THAT'S what it is all about, Emma. Supply and demand. I can make people demand what you supply. And thank god I am in America and I can say that sort of thing out loud.

*(***EMMA** *raises her glass of water.)*

**EMMA.** To mass market marketing! Of books and people!

*(***EMMA** *sits.)*

**LYDIA.** The book is the person, the person is the book. This is you: attractive, straight-forward and intelligently self deprecating. Chock 'o block full of style.

**EMMA.** Sometimes, I think that's all I have.

**LYDIA.** Ha. BUT…

**EMMA.** You don't like my shoes?

**LYDIA.** Ha. I am interested in YOU, not your novel. I want to know YOUR story. YOUR dreams. YOUR inner demons. I want to know the gory details of your crack up…

**EMMA.** Ups. That would be plural. But hasn't the educated, crazy girl been done to death? I mean, I feel like the Bell Jar was a genre definer…

**LYDIA.** YOU are Bell Jar in the city.

**EMMA.** Nuts in Jimmy Choos?

**LYDIA.** Ha. Exactly.

**EMMA.** But the novel, or rather the idea for the novel was about race, race in New York in the 21st century. And an unlikely romance, not a romance really but a moment of collision, of confusion and connection, a moment of connection and consequence. And I was wearing, I mean my character, my protagonist would wear Payless shoes…

**LYDIA.** But they would look like Jimmy Choos.

**EMMA.** My idea is fiction.

**LYDIA.** Emma darling, fiction is for writers.

**EMMA.** Believe it or not, I'm aware of what fiction means.

**LYDIA.** I publish some literary giants, Pulitzer Prize winners, literary war horses, and a marvelous aboriginal writer who is a shoo in for the Nobel this year. And do you know what they all have in common? They write. All the time. They have been writing since they could hold a pen. They live and breathe to construct a perfect sentence and they know how to use the semi colon correctly. Words are their life. Are words your life?

**EMMA.** I mean…yeah…sure. Yes. Stuff has happened and I have not written as much as I had hoped. I do write. Most days.

**LYDIA.** Good. If you want to be a novelist then keep doing that and come back to me in two years, five years, ten years…when you have cobbled together a book and I can take a look at it and maybe buy it for fifty grand. Write your Proustian moment about race and identity in New York that all comes together in an East Harlem Starbucks. Write your ode to James Joyce, a modern day Ulysses set amidst the racial divide that is contemporary Manhattan. Take a stab at a post millenial version of *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Please by all means do it, someone has to. I love a good literary read as much as the next head of a publishing house. At the weekend, I read a book all bout Guernesy, told in the first person by a cranky cow farmer. Not light fare but I felt sated after. I had been somewhere. Now, I don't ever need to go to Guernsey because I already know it inside out. That's what a good novel does. And I long to go on those imaginary journeys but I'm afraid I'm a minority.

**EMMA.** Really?

**LYDIA.** 185 novels were published by the major houses last year versus 250 memoirs. Do the maths.

**EMMA.** That's a lot of memory.

**LYDIA.** People feel the need to know that what they are reading is linked to some kind of absolute truth, whatever that might be.

**EMMA.** Since when did truth become so important?

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