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Maria/Stuart

by Jason Grote

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



**SAMUEL
FRENCH**

FOUNDED 1830

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SAMUELFRENCH.COM

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World Premiere: Woolly Mammoth Theatre, 2008

MARIA/STUART had its world premiere at the Woolly Mammoth Theater in Washington, DC in August 2008. The performance was directed by Pam McKinnon. The cast was as follows:

HANNAH.		Meghan Grady
AUNT SYLVIA		Naomi Jacobsen
STUART.		Eli James
RUTHIE.		Sarah Marshall
MARNIE.		Amy McWilliams
LIZZIE		Emily Townley

CHARACTERS

STUART

HANNAH

LIZZIE

RUTHIE

MARNIE

AUNT SYLVIA

A note about all of the characters: despite their frequently harsh words, they don't yell. Every one of them, even **STUART**, are shut down, cooking on a very slow boil. If they do explode, they do so only rarely.

SETTING

A unit set consisting of two suburban kitchens. Each side of the playing area is devoted to one of the kitchens. They are mashed together in an incongruous, vaguely Cubist or German-Expressionist way – perhaps the table or counters in Kitchen #1 are contiguous with their differently-colored, -shaped, or -sized equivalents in Kitchen #2.

Both kitchens possess an oppressive, suburban, synthetic quaintness. Kitchen #1 is in a 90s-era McMansion in Bucks County, PA. It is all egg-shell sheetrock walls and beige plasticine fake wood, and is drenched with the warm, blinding glint of an unobstructed autumn sun. Clutter lies around the place, mostly unopened mail and kitchen paraphernalia. Kitchen #2 belongs to an older house in Bergen County, NJ, 50s/60s era, smaller but probably more expensive. It is shadier and features a blue-violet color scheme that is, in its way, just as oppressive as Kitchen #1's beige. It is less cluttered than Kitchen #1, but no homier – it is over-terminated with stenciling, lace, and small cute items.

Music: contemporary, haunting, pretty, ominous, sexy.

Special thanks to:

Brooke O'Harra, Pam MacKinnon, Howard Shalwitz, Miriam Weisfeld,
and the Spiegel family. Thanks and apologies to Friedrich Schiller.

1. Infinite Secret Treasures Rise From Nowhere

(Kitchen #1. STUART draws pictures of superheroes in a large sketchpad while he talks on a cell phone. In addition to the usual clutter, there are boxes, some opened, containing crumpled newspaper and what appear to be old childhood items of his.)

STUART. So like I was saying, he fights Lukov, right, there's this whole Uh topical, like these Russian gangster capitalists, right, no, it

Yeah, that's his n – American Male, right

That's because the rights were, no one was publishing him since like 1947, except for –

Yeah I know it's a stupid name, I think it had something to do with, he was a mailman in his Uh secret identity

He's like Captain America, sort of, people think he's a knockoff but actually, in actuality, he was created first, like a year or so before, eight months to be exact, but anyway Yeah everybody's really excited Dipal's totally shopping the film rights around

Very funny, no, like a real, legitimate movie, I know it sounds like gay porn, it was a more innocent time.

We can't change it, it's this whole branding thing, if we don't capitalize on the But do you want to hear about this or not?

Hannah?

OK OK so American Male goes to like Azerbaijan, tracking this whole, like Uh terrorist network, and eventually the clues lead him to St. Petersburg, and he's in the Winter Palace, it's going to be great, I got all these reference photos off the Uh internet, right? And then this Russian super-team confronts him, now these guys

are mine, Ward Number 6, they're called, they're like these Soviet-era Cold War super-heroes, but we don't know who exactly they're working for now, right, and they're made of, the first member is Ivanov, he's like this pre-Christian Pagan God, then there's the Three Sisters, who are like these three eerie ageless Russian girls who communicate telepathically and when they all hold hands something blows up or something, I'm still working on that one, and The Seagull, who is, you know, like a guy with wings, and he has this helmet that sort of looks like a seagull's head, and then there's the Cherry Orchard, who has all the powers and abilities of, you know, a cherry orchard, I mean its like American Male looks up and he's caught in a cherry tree, or like there's this whole maze, of this like cherry orchard, and Ward Number 6 is chasing him through it, but it keeps changing shape on him, and then finally there's Uncle Vanya, who is their leader, who is this jolly fat guy who's ex-KGB and doesn't have any superpowers.

So what do you think?

I don't know yet, I think maybe they'll just fight but then team up or something.

Yeah, no, I had to invent some new villains, the only one he had when Dipal bought him was this one Nazi guy, though actually he had two enemies but one of them was like this totally offensive Japanese stereotype, like buck teeth, slanted eyes and like bright yellow skin, so anyway he's out. Though we're thinking of making him this like Yakuza guy, or maybe an Asian-American computer whiz who does like martial arts which I realize is also kind of stereotypical, but we'll make him really good-looking. Besides Dipal's Asian and he's I mean he was born in India but

So anyway what do you think?

The characters? Ward Number 6?

They're all, the character names all come from Chekhov plays.

Anton Chekhov?

STUART. (*cont.*) A writer. From Russia? Wrote short stories, plays, Ward Number 6 was a

No I'm

Well that's

I'm thinking about it but

Well yeah but

OK but

A lot of people know who he is

OK OK OK OK OK

How's uh.

That's great. Are you. Yeah.

No that's great yeah. I would love to see the Uh

I love those chrome uh whatchacallits

She's fine. The same.

(**HANNAH** appears before **STUART**. Except she's not **HANNAH**; she is a **SHAPESHIFTER**. **STUART** does not know this. **HANNAH** is alarmingly beautiful, like an exotic sea creature. She wears a smock with large pockets in the front. The pockets are filled with talcum powder.)

What...What are you. When did you get here?

(beat)

(overlapping at the *)

You're standing right here. No, how did you, you're standing right here in front of me. But.

Where's your. Phone? No wait, this is like. You're not in Dumont, you're Uh I swear to god you're* right here –

SHAPESHIFTER/HANNAH. (overlapping at the *) Hep hep hep hep!

STUART. Uh

(The **SHAPESHIFTER** marches to a fridge [may be indicated or offstage]. She grabs a two-liter bottle of soda and chugs it, perhaps making a mess of herself.)

Uh I uh

(She offers some to **STUART**.)

STUART. (*cont.*) No I'm still here but.

No thank you I have a juice

I'm talking to her. You. Her.

(*overlapping at the **)

*Do you speak German? Because I think that's uh. Can you hear that? Listen! OK OK I'll call you back but you can hear that right?

Right?

(*hangs up, stares at her for the rest of it*)

SHAPESHIFTER/HANNAH. (*with enthusiasm; overlapping at the **)

*Freunde, nicht dieser Töne!

Sondern lasst uns angenehmere

anstimmen, und freudenvollere!

Freude, Schöner Götterfunken,

Tochter aus Elysium,

Wir betreten feuer-trunken,

Himmlische, dein Heiligtum!

Deine Zauber binden wieder,

Was die Mode streng geteilt;

Alle Menschen werden Brüder,

Wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt.

Wem der grosse Wurf gelungen,

Eines Freundes Freund zu sein,

Wer ein holdes Weib errungen,

Mische seinen Jubel ein!

Ja, wer auch nur eine Seele

Sein nennt auf dem Erdenrund!

Und wer's nie gekonnt, der stehle

Weinend sich aus diesem Bund!

Freude trinken alle Wesen

An den Brüsten der Natur;

Alle Guten, alle Bösen

Folgen ihrer Rosenspur.

Küsse gab sie uns und Reben,

Einen Freund, geprüft im Tod;

Wollust ward dem Wurm gegeben,
 Und der Cherub steht vor Gott.
 Seid umschlungen, Millionen!

SHAPESHIFTER/HANNAH. (*cont.*) Diesen Kuss der ganzen Welt!

Brüder über'm Sternenzelt
 Muss ein lieber Vater wohnen.
 Ihr stürzt nieder, Millionen?
 Ahnest du den Schöpfer, Welt?
 Such'ihn über'm Sternenzelt!
 Über Sternen muss er wohnen.

(At the conclusion of the poem, the SHAPESHIFTER abruptly starts rifling through cabinets, looking at plates and glassware quizzically, sniffing them, trying to take a bite out of some of them, casually tossing them on the floor upon discovering that they are not what she is looking for. Some stuff might break, but it doesn't necessarily have to – she is not being particularly aggressive, just careless.)

(She takes her time. She appears to be looking for something very specific.)

STUART. Hannah. What are you doing. What are you doing, stop, stop it, my mom's gonna kill me, knock it off I mean are you.

Can I help you find something?

(re: a glass she holds)

Hey not the Flintstones glass, come on, that's like a. On eBay that's like.

(He saves the glass from her.)

(She raises her heads, sniffs; she smells something.)

(She tears open one of STUART's boxes and rifles through it.)

Come on, stop.

(She takes out a bust of Friedrich Schiller, wrapped in old newspapers. It has seen better days, and may or may not

be recognizable as the German Romantic writer. Perhaps it has been broken and glued back together a few times, or attempts have been made to paint it funny colors.)

What are you doing to Schiller? No, come on, don't.

(She smashes the bust. She takes an old pink envelope, containing a thick and often-read letter, from inside the bust. She sniffs it deeply.)

SHAPESHIFTER/HANNAH. Look. It is French.

STUART. What are you doing. Will you please give that back please.

SHAPESHIFTER/HANNAH. This closet holds the secret of my lady.

STUART. What

SHAPESHIFTER/HANNAH. Es ist Zeit.

(beat)

It is time.

STUART. Time for what.

Hannah?

(The SHAPESHIFTER takes large handfuls of talcum powder from the pockets of her smock and blows it at him, creating a huge cloud.)

SHAPESHIFTER/HANNAH. Poof.

(And with that, she leaves.)

STUART. Uh

(Out on him.)

2. Everything Royal Has Been Taken From You

(Kitchen #2. LIZZIE chops vegetables. RUTHIE sits at the table. Perhaps RUTHIE's walker stands next to her. Every so often, RUTHIE picks grapes off of a fruit platter but does not eat them.)

(Silence. RUTHIE considers a grape.)

RUTHIE. Even Werther agrees about the sizes. Of the portions.

(pause)

He says they're too big, everyone says they're too big. The roast beef was good though. Except there were lumps in the gravy. And they had mashed potatoes, and stringbeans, but so much! The mashed potatoes I mean, not the stringbeans. I like the stringbeans with just a little bit of margarine on them, I mean I have to have some pleasures in life.

(pause)

Also they have a salad bar, with lettuce, and tomatoes, and cucumbers, and croutons, and on the other side seven different kinds of dressing, and potato salad, and macaroni salad, and waldorf salad, have you ever had waldorf salad?

(pause)

Have you ever had waldorf salad?

LIZZIE. *(coldly)* No.

RUTHIE. Oh it's the best! They put celery in it, and green and red apple, and little miniature marshmallows, and raisins, and walnut, and they put the whole thing in some mayonnaise, and oh! It's divine.

(pause)

I can eat that all day.

(pause)

RUTHIE. (*cont.*) Werther likes it too but not as much as me.

I always complain to the black ladies at the dining room that the portions are too large but then I go up to the salad bar and take two or three scoops of waldorf salad! Werther always says:

(*bad German accent*)

"You are always eating so much waldorf salad that you are going to turn into a waldorf salad!"

(*pause*)

He's so funny, Werther. When we went to Atlantic City, that's when I could take the bus, he would say, "The first thing I am going to do is take in the dancing girls!" And I would say, "What about your wife?" And he would say, "My wife, she can't even remember who I am, why would she care if I was looking at some dancing girls! She can't remember anything!"

(*laughs*)

She has Alzheimer's!

(*RUTHIE laughs at this story, a bit too gleefully. Beat.*)

LIZZIE. Why do you keep picking grapes off and not eating them?

RUTHIE. What?

LIZZIE. You keep picking the grapes off the fucking thing and just rolling them around in your hands and not eating them.

RUTHIE. That's my bad ear I can't hear you

LIZZIE. I don't care if you eat them all, they're only fucking grapes, we can afford plenty of grapes but if you don't want to eat them why do you keep picking them off?

RUTHIE. That's my bad ear you know that

(*Overdramatically, like a petulant teenager, LIZZIE stops chopping vegetables and marches to RUTHIE's good ear.*)

LIZZIE. WHY ARE YOU PICKING THE GRAPES OFF IF YOU DON'T PLAN ON EATING ANY OF THEM?

RUTHIE. You don't have to yell.

LIZZIE. (*overlapping at the **) Why do you keep *picking the grapes –

RUTHIE. (*overlapping at the **) *My dentures

The skins get stuck in there and it irritates me

LIZZIE. OK fine then why do you keep picking them off the thing?

RUTHIE. It feels cool, the grapes are cool. It feels nice in my hands.

LIZZIE. You're the one who keeps making me turn the heat up.

RUTHIE. I'm sorry I don't mean to be so much trouble, you can just take me back to Riverdale if I'm too much trouble.

(*Overdramatically, LIZZIE marches across the room and goes back to chopping vegetables.*)

LIZZIE. (*calling off*) HANNAH!

Where is she it's like she's a fucking teenager

RUTHIE. What?

(*Silence. LIZZIE chops vegetables.*)

LIZZIE. Oh Jesus Fuck.

RUTHIE. What? Did you cut yourself?

LIZZIE. (*says "Hamburg" like "Ham"*) That son of a bitch is off to Hamburg for a week and a half, no help at all with this dinner that bastard and what kind of olives does he get me? I very explicitly gave hom a shopping list, the one fucking thing I asked him to do and now what am I supposed to do with these? My instructions were very explicit, Kalamata olives, and what is this shit?

(*She throws the container of olives, hard, sending them flying everywhere, and sobs over the counter.*)

(*pause*)

RUTHIE. Your father always made me get olives, that was the one thing he always made me spend money on, I wanted to buy the Shop-Rite ones because why spend the extra money? But your father always insisted on his special kind of olives. And the worst of it was he wouldn't even eat the actual olives! He would just pick out all of the little red pimentos one by one until he had a whole little pile of pimentos, and that was back when he smoked so just forget it, and he would eat the pimentos with a fork, and I would have to throw those fancy expensive olives out because I wasn't about to eat them.

(Still crying, LIZZIE marches over to where the bottom of a staircase might be.)

LIZZIE. HANNAH WILL YOU GET THE FUCK DOWN HERE

RUTHIE. You don't have to yell so loud! Is she deaf too? If she's not she will be soon.

(Silence. LIZZIE cries, chops.)

(HANNAH enters. She is the same person we saw earlier, but no longer strange. There is no trace of the SHAPESHIFTER in her appearance or behavior.)

HANNAH. What?

(noticing the olives)

Jesus.

LIZZIE. Where have you been?

HANNAH. Why is there olives all over the place? Hi grandma.

LIZZIE. Where were you?

HANNAH. On the phone with Stuart.

LIZZIE. How is he. Is he coming?

HANNAH. He sounds slightly crazier than usual. And yeah he said he's coming.

RUTHIE. Did you say you were talking to Stuart?

LIZZIE. I need you to do me a favor.

RUTHIE. How is he?

HANNAH. He's fine.

LIZZIE. Your fucking father neglected to do the one thing I asked him to do which was buy the items on the list I gave him and I need you to go to the store and pick up some Kalamata olives.

HANNAH. How I don't have a license anymore

RUTHIE. I always used to say to Stuart that he was my favorite grandchild but not to tell you so you wouldn't get jealous.

HANNAH. ...

That's great grandma.

LIZZIE. (*overlapping at the **) What do you mean you don't have a license? I paid all that *money for driving school –

HANNAH. (*overlapping at the **) *Dad paid for driving school, that was ten years ago and you're still talking about it, anyway I just don't have one, it expired, I was drunk one night and I forgot my billfold in a bar or a cab or something, it was a Jersey license, you know what a nightmare the DMV is, I'm sorry.

(LIZZIE cries again.)

Oh for god's sake.

Listen I think I'm going to stay in a hotel from now on when I visit.

(*pause*)

RUTHIE. I think she's just upset about the olives.

HANNAH. I'm sorry, but how am I supposed to sleep on that thing? It's like a storage room in there anyway! The room has become like a graveyard for gifts you don't want but can't bring yourself to throw away.

LIZZIE. (*indicating RUTHIE*) Sh!

RUTHIE. What?

HANNAH. Oh she doesn't care and you don't either.

LIZZIE. Fine, OK, if I go to the store to get the olives can you please chop these vegetables for me? And not fuck it up?

RUTHIE. (*maybe leafing through a news magazine*) Bill Clinton, he seemed nice, but then he did all that stuff. Now there's George Bush, who is apparently not the other one but his son, and I never liked him so much, but Werther likes him. But you know who they have now? Hillary! I knew it!

HANNAH. (*to LIZZIE*) Yeah fine.

LIZZIE. Thank you.

(*LIZZIE storms out. HANNAH chops.*)

RUTHIE. Hannah you're so pretty.

Do you have a job yet?

HANNAH. I have the same job I had last year and the year before that.

RUTHIE. A real job I mean.

(*pause*)

RUTHIE. Is Rocky coming by?

HANNAH. Rocco. I don't know I have to call him.

(*pause*)

RUTHIE. Did you hear about the Weissman's girl, Paulette Weissman?

HANNAH. I don't know them, Grandma.

RUTHIE. She went to high school with your mother I think.

She lost her hands, she doesn't have any hands anymore. They said she tried to kill herself by lying down on the railroad tracks but she must have changed her mind at the last minute because it just ran over her hands. The conductor said he saw her but it was too late to stop.

She said it dragged her for almost a mile. The wheels on the train, they were hot, it what do you call it, it cauterized the, um, the stumps. It saved her life but the train dragged her for a mile and her mother told me that all she wanted to do was sleep but every time she closed her eyes that was all she could see, was getting dragged by the train.

Tsk.

(pause)

HANNAH. *(sad)* ...That happened a long time ago grandma.

RUTHIE. Oh yeah?

HANNAH. Yeah. That was Aunt Sylvia.

In like the 70s.

Do you really not remember?

RUTHIE. I never forgave him for it.

That's why I burned them, you know. The what do you call them.

HANNAH. Burned what? What are you talking about, Grandma?

RUTHIE. Oh I don't know.

(silence)

SHAPESHIFTER. *(O.S.)* Hep hep hep hep!

RUTHIE. What?

HANNAH. I didn't say anything.

(Silence. HANNAH chops. Out on them.)

3. His Rudeness Is His Usefulness

(Kitchen #1, an hour or so after we last saw it. Things are still a shambles from the Shapeshifter's rampage.)

(STUART sits at the kitchen table, trying to repair the Schiller bust with Gorilla Glue, making an even worse mess of things.)

(MARNIE enters. She halts, stares at the mess, and STUART, in disbelief and the beginnings of rage.)

(She blinks, takes a deep breath, exits.)

(STUART either does not notice or he has been avoiding her. He works on Schiller.)

(MARNIE enters again. She stares at STUART, and the mess. She's pissed off to the point of shock.)

STUART. *(startled)* Oh hey Mom

MARNIE. What happened to the kitchen

STUART. Uh.

It was uh kind of uh weird.

Actually.

I'm going to clean it up, I just had to

Schiller broke.

There was a, uh. Forget it. I'm sorry, I'll clean it up, I.

(MARNIE looks as if she might cry.)

Aw Mom don't

I'll clean it up, I.

MARNIE. I have to pick up your Aunt Sylvia from the home.

Lizzie deals with Grandma and I deal with Sylvia.

I have to pick her up from the halfway house in Long Branch before we can go to Lizzie's.

STUART. I know, I'm coming with you.

MARNIE. I need you to be on my side today. OK? I really really need that. I really need you to be on my side.

STUART. I am on your. Side.

MARNIE. ...

You got gorilla glue all over the table.

STUART. Yeah I uh. What time are we going?

(She storms off.)

STUART. Mom?

When are we leaving?

I mean I can get all this cleaned up.

Before we.

Uh.

(But she is long gone. He looks around at the mess. He starts to clean.)

(blackout)

4. Your Speech Of Comfort Is My Death Sentence

(Kitchen #2, later. The olives from LIZZIE's outburst have been cleaned up.)

(HANNAH has finished chopping the crudite and sits, munching carrot sticks, as RUTHIE continues to fondle individual grapes.)

(An awkward silence, one that has probably been going on for a while.)

RUTHIE. You probably shouldn't eat all of those.

HANNAH. All of what. The carrots?

RUTHIE. You'll turn orange. From the vitamin A.

HANNAH. I'll be OK.

RUTHIE. Well your mother will get angry if she gets home and there are no carrot sticks left.

HANNAH. She'll get over it.

RUTHIE. *(conspiratorially)* I think she's very anxious about this party.

HANNAH. I can just cut some more carrots grandma.

RUTHIE. What?

(no answer)

What? That's my bad ear.

HANNAH. Nothing.

(pause)

RUTHIE. I talked to Helen.

(no answer)

I talked to Helen.

HANNAH. Who's Helen?

RUTHIE. Helen who used to live next door to me when I lived at Sylvan Glade. Remember? She used to always give you unsalted peanuts.

HANNAH. Oh yeah.

How is she?

RUTHIE. Oh, I never liked her. She was always so dour.

She got a little dog. I don't know where she finds the energy to take care of it.

And she got a computer, her son set it up for her, he brought it home from the store and set it all up. She told me I should get a computer too and we could chat on it, and I said, "We're chatting right now!"

(pause)

I suppose if we did that we could save money on the phone bill and also I wouldn't have to listen to that dog yapping.

But I can't type because of my arthritis and anyhow it's all too complicated for me.

HANNAH. Well tell her I said hi.

RUTHIE. Oh, we don't talk. She'll probably be dead the next time I see her.

(pause)

HANNAH. You want a carrot?

RUTHIE. Oh I can't eat those.

You should put some dip on it, that French Onion Soup Dip with the sour cream is so good, I don't see how you could just eat the carrots and celery sticks plain without any of the dip on it.

HANNAH. I'm good like this, Grandma.

(pause)

RUTHIE. So pretty.

HANNAH. Thanks.

(pause)

(a pall)

(HANNAH's phone rings. She looks at the caller ID, answers.)

HANNAH. (*cont.*) What's up.

No I'm in Jersey.

OK.

Well could you come get me?

That's not what you.

Yeah but that's not what you.

OK you don't understand, I'm stuck here.

(*stage whisper*)

I'm stuck here with my grandmother

No my mom's at the store...

RUTHIE. Is that your mother?

HANNAH. No it's Rocco

No I was talking to my.

Jesus Christ Rocco, you told me you were.

OK, no, fuck that

(*to RUTHIE*)

Excuse me, Grandma.

(*HANNAH goes out onto the deck to argue with Rocco. If we can see outside through a window, we can see that she is having a very impassioned phone argument.*)

RUTHIE. ...

(*She stares, fondles grapes. She is frightened of the silence.*)

(*She hums. This can be tuneless and mumbly and continue for as long as seems right.*)

(*ad lib as needed*) Hmm hm

(*She cranes around to look for HANNAH. If we can see HANNAH, she is still arguing.*)

(*Sound of wind rises, maybe some distant thunder.*)

(*calling off*) You shouldn't be out there in this!

Hannah?

You shouldn't be out there in weather like this talking on the telephone!

Hannah!

(The wind kicks up, perhaps agitating shutters or a screen door. If we can see HANNAH, she huddles for protection.)

(Sound of a door opening, off.)

(LIZZIE enters. She looks weird. This is because she is not LIZZIE, but the SHAPESHIFTER.)

(She stares at RUTHIE.)

RUTHIE. *(cont.)* Did you get your special olives?

Where's your bags?

Hannah's out on the deck talking on the phone. I told her not to eat so many carrots but she didn't listen.

Where's your bags?

Lizzie?

SHAPESHIFTER/LIZZIE. Hep hep hep hep hep!

RUTHIE. ...

SHAPESHIFTER/LIZZIE. Arroganz fand von Unschuld statt,
 Sie ehrten und zeigten Ihre Schande mit Stolz an.
 Ach, ließ ewige Ruhe
 Schlucken Sie diese Tat.

RUTHIE. Lizzie?

...Honey?

(The SHAPESHIFTER takes a warm bottle of soda from the counter. She opens it, ignoring any foam that issues from the bottle, and chugs it, making something of a mess.)

(as she does this) What are you doing, that's not even cold, you're making a mess of yourself, STOP IT!

SHAPESHIFTER/LIZZIE. But you, I know you, and you are not fallen.

I love you as I love myself.

There are spirits who dwell in unguarded minds,
 commit all kinds of vileness, and return to hell, at
 which the stained heart wakes,

Aghast.

(The SHAPESHIFTER slowly and deliberately moves to RUTHIE and kisses her slowly on the mouth, her face sweet and sticky with soda.)

(RUTHIE acquiesces for a split second and pushes her away.)

RUTHIE. What are you STOP THAT

(The SHAPESHIFTER backs away, then presents RUTHIE with the pink letter that she took from the Schiller bust.)

(beat)

(RUTHIE takes it, reluctant.)

(Something happens.)

SHAPESHIFTER/LIZZIE. Poof.

(The SHAPESHIFTER exits, weirdly.)

(beat)

(RUTHIE looks around, scared. Terrified, in fact.)

(HANNAH does not enter. If we can see her, she is oblivious to all of this.)

(RUTHIE worries the pink envelope. She smells it. Something familiar.)

(Wind kicks up outside.)

(She takes the letter out of the envelope and reads it. She might have some trouble with this.)

(She makes out what the letter says.)

Oh.

Oh, no.

(She looks around her. She spots a wastebasket across the room.)

(With great effort, she pulls herself to her walker and begins an arduous journey across the room to the wastebasket.)

(...)

(After a while,)

(...)

(She gets to the wastebasket, but she can't figure out how to get it open. She tries anyway. She has to toss this thing.)

(In attempting this, she slips.)

(But is caught by HANNAH.)

HANNAH. Jesus, Grandma!

What are you doing?

RUTHIE. Nothing.

I had to throw something away.

HANNAH. You should have just left it. I can throw it away for you.

RUTHIE. *(hiding the letter in a sort of obvious way)* No.

HANNAH. What is that? Why are you hiding it?

RUTHIE. It's nothing, I'll take care of it later.

HANNAH. OK whatever.

(notices the soda mess)

What the hell happened here?

RUTHIE. It was. Your mother. I don't know what she was. Doing.

HANNAH. She came home?

(calling after "LIZZIE")

Mom?

RUTHIE. She left again, it was very strange

HANNAH. *(calling off)* Mom?

(to RUTHIE)

Come on, let's get you. Sit down.

(calling off)

Mom?

Mom?

RUTHIE. Don't leave me alone again.

HANNAH. I'll be right Um. Hold on.

(She goes off, looking for LIZZIE.)

(RUTHIE frantically looks for a place to hide the letter. She puts it in her purse, reconsiders, then puts it under a placemat, or somewhere equally obvious.)

(HANNAH returns.)

HANNAH. *(cont.)* Did she forget something or something?

RUTHIE. I don't know.

HANNAH. Something smells like...something. It's like.

When I was a...

Do you smell that?

RUTHIE. *(lying)* No I don't smell anything.

HANNAH. ...

You OK?

RUTHIE. Fine.

HANNAH. Whatever.

(Sound of the door, off. They freeze.)

(LIZZIE enters, with a shopping bag.)

LIZZIE. Three places to get the goddamn Kalamata olives.

It's not like they're rare. It's like there was a run on Kalamata olives or something What the fuck happened here?

(HANNAH looks to RUTHIE, who looks on the verge of tears.)

(beat)

HANNAH. It was me. I went to get a soda, it spilled. I was about to clean it up.

LIZZIE. Well see that you do? Because the last thing I need is everyone's shoes sticking to the floor, like

(demonstrates)

HANNAH. I'm cleaning it.

(HANNAH cleans. LIZZIE resumes preparing food, perhaps munching on olives.)

(RUTHIE looks terrified.)

(LIZZIE notices the letter. It is familiar.)

LIZZIE. What's that?

RUTHIE. What's what?

(LIZZIE sighs, in a dramatic display of resignation, and takes the letter from wherever RUTHIE hid it.)

LIZZIE. I'll take that.

RUTHIE. Don't

(LIZZIE reads the letter. RUTHIE looks very upset by this. HANNAH stops cleaning and stares at both of them.)

(LIZZIE takes her time. She does not display any reaction.)

(She puts the letter in her pocket, continues chopping vegetables.)

(RUTHIE looks near tears.)

(HANNAH shakes her head and continues cleaning.)

(blackout)

5. Allow Me First To Tell You Of Myself

(Kitchen #1, later. Everything is now more or less clean. The repaired Schiller bust sits on the kitchen table.)

(MARNIE uncorks and pours wine, while STUART sits at the kitchen table, showing his sketches to AUNT SYLVIA.)

(AUNT SYLVIA has prosthetic hooks in place of her hands. With one hook, she eats cheez balls from a large cardboard cylinder with a sort of mathematical rigor.)

(Outside, there are vestiges of the rainstorm in New Jersey.)

STUART. ...So the thing is, the rights elapsed to this superhero who was last published in, uh, most people consider to the official run to have ended in 1947, except for this one-shot in 1963, from Dell Publishing, it was a very, uh, it's rare, it was printed so cheaply that most of them fell apart, the color separations were, they were terrible, American Male was either hot pink or bright yellow in most of the, uh, and it was only made available as part of a special promotion with Two Guys Stores.

AUNT SYLVIA. I remember Two Guys.

STUART. *(overlapping at the *)* Right. So we *heard that the rights elapsed.

AUNT SYLVIA. *(overlapping at the *)* *Marnie do you remember Two Guys?

MARNIE. I worked there when Stuart was a baby.

AUNT SYLVIA. Remember there was that one time when you urinated on the floor and on all of the new clothes Ma was getting us?

MARNIE. No.

AUNT SYLVIA. You were very upset. It was upsetting. Or maybe that was Lizzie. No it was you. You were standing in the cart and Ma had gotten all of this stuff and she got me a school dress and you peed on it. And they made her buy all the clothes because you peed on them.

MARNIE. They did not make us buy the clothes.

AUNT SYLVIA. Yes they did. They made us buy the clothes.

MARNIE. No they didn't. You and ma said they were going to do that but they didn't.

AUNT SYLVIA. (*to STUART*) She's remembering it wrong.

MARNIE. No I'm not Sylvia.

AUNT SYLVIA. Whatever.

(*brief awkward silence*)

STUART. So we bought the rights – are you familiar with this, do you know what that means? To buy the rights to something, like a character?

AUNT SYLVIA. I'm not stupid.

STUART. Sorry.

AUNT SYLVIA. I've been swimming lately.

STUART. (*overlapping at the **) Uh, right, I've been talking to, my friend Dipal is, he's a venture capitalist, and I really, I have this deeply held belief that graphic fiction is the art form of the future, so we decided *to revive the –

MARNIE. (*overlapping at the **) *OK, Stuart, we don't really want to hear any more about the superheroes.

STUART. I was just.

MARNIE. Enough.

(*Silence. AUNT SYLVIA crunches cheez balls. MARNIE drinks.*)

Why don't you clean up?

STUART. I did clean up.

MARNIE. I need your help today. Will you please just help me with this one thing?

STUART. But I did. I cleaned up, look around.

(*MARNIE holds back tears.*)

MARNIE. Stuart can you please come here for a second so I can talk to you?

STUART. OK.

(He deflates, goes to her.)

MARNIE. *(through her teeth)* What do you think you're doing?

STUART. *(overlapping at the *)* Nothing. I was just showing Aunt Sylvia my *character sketches –

MARNIE. *(overlapping at the *)* *Are you going to be on my side today?

STUART. Yes.

*(overlapping at the *)*

I'm on your side. OK? I cleaned up *already –

MARNIE. *(overlapping at the *)* *Do you swear?

STUART. Sure.

MARNIE. I want you to swear.

STUART. Really?

MARNIE. ...

STUART. I swear.

(STUART pretends to clean the kitchen.)

MARNIE. Thank you, Stuart.

(AUNT SYLVIA munches.)

AUNT SYLVIA. Hey where is Ronald?

(no answer)

Where is Ronald? Is he coming?

MARNIE. I told you in the car.

AUNT SYLVIA. I don't think I was listening.

MARNIE. Stuart, will you please tell your Aunt where your father is?

AUNT SYLVIA. Why can't you tell me?

STUART. They're separated.

He's living in Philadelphia with a bunch of art students I introduced him to.

(more to MARNIE)

He's having a good time. They really like him.

AUNT SYLVIA. Oh.

STUART. Yeah.

AUNT SYLVIA. Doesn't he love you anymore?

MARNIE. I asked him to leave.

Don't spoil your appetite.

AUNT SYLVIA. I'm not.

MARNIE. We're leaving soon, Lizzie will freak out if you fill up on junk.

AUNT SYLVIA. Hey Stuart do you know what? We used to have Uncle Scrooge.

STUART. Uncle Scrooge is great.

MARNIE. Stuart, don't encourage her.

STUART. Carl Barks was an underrated genius.

MARNIE. Stuart.

(Silence. AUNT SYLVIA munches.)

AUNT SYLVIA. God is unbounded in His miracles.

Do you know God?

STUART. Me?

AUNT SYLVIA. Either of you.

STUART. I know of him.

AUNT SYLVIA. The lady with the Bibles came and put us all in a minivan and took us to the little beige church. I didn't want to go because there were too many coloreds but they made me and I went up and did the thing with the people. I gave my soul to Jesus.

STUART. It's really not polite to say coloreds anymore Aunt Sylvia.

(Silence; AUNT SYLVIA munches, MARNIE drinks, STUART fake-cleans.)

AUNT SYLVIA. Except I used to think we were Jewish. Am I Jewish?

MARNIE. You're not really anything Sylvia.

(to STUART, re: her husband)

He's having a good time? Did you talk to him?

STUART. You know. The kids seem to like him. All his stories.

AUNT SYLVIA. Ever since I let Jesus into my heart the changeling doesn't visit me anymore.

MARNIE. Well that's great for him.

AUNT SYLVIA. It used to always show up at very inconvenient times and it would tell me stuff in German mostly and drink all my soda and make a terrible mess.

STUART. Wait, what?

AUNT SYLVIA. Marnie, remember the changeling? Spanish Mary, we called it. Or sometimes just Maria. I don't know why we called it Spanish when it was German.

MARNIE. There wasn't any changeling. You were just ill.

AUNT SYLVIA. They gave me all kinds of medication, the shock treatments, everything, and it wouldn't leave me alone but then I accepted Jesus into my heart and it left me alone.

STUART. It spoke German?

AUNT SYLVIA. I think it was German. I didn't understand it, I don't know German.

STUART. Grandpa spoke German.

AUNT SYLVIA. That's right

MARNIE. Sylvia stop eating junk food.

AUNT SYLVIA. It would make a mess with my soda. Oh, and it also said, hep hep hep hep hep, just like that.

MARNIE. Sylvia, please, you're going to spoil your appetite and Lizzie is going to freak out.

(AUNT SYLVIA eats, recalcitrant.)

AUNT SYLVIA. Oh and it always wore a smock.

MARNIE. Sylvia give me those SYLVIA!

AUNT SYLVIA. NO! MINE!

(They struggle over the cheez balls. AUNT SYLVIA makes whining noises.)

STUART. Mom, come on, what are you. Mom.

(He noncommittally tries to pull his mother off of his aunt. Cheez balls fly everywhere.)

(beat)

AUNT SYLVIA. *(sad)* I'm hungry.

(brief unbearable pause)

MARNIE. I don't want Grandma's birthday to be depressing this year. Every year it's depressing and this year I want everyone to team up and make it not depressing.

(No answer. MARNIE looks as if she might cry.)

(brief unbearable pause)

Who's driving?

STUART. I think I should drive.

MARNIE. Not my Beemer.

STUART. We can take my car.

MARNIE. Did you clean it out like I asked?

STUART. When did you ask?

MARNIE. I'll drive.

STUART. You've had a lot of wine.

(MARNIE stares daggers at STUART. Then, with an abrupt vicious glee:)

MARNIE. *(a mocking, drunken falsetto)* "I love you, Mom!"

Remember that story.

STUART. Yes.

MARNIE. *(to STUART)* Not you. Sylvia.

AUNT SYLVIA. I'm hungry.

MARNIE. We had just gotten home and this car pulls into the driveway, and this middle-aged man reaches into the passenger side and pulls Stuart out by the scruff of his neck, and Stuart is just covered in puke, and then tosses him onto the lawn and drives off.

STUART. I don't think Sylvia needs to hear this story.

MARNIE. And we dragged him upstairs and tossed him in the shower, clothes on and everything, and through the closed door we hear this drunken caterwaul, and I open the door a crack and he's crying, "I love you, Mom! I love you, Mom!"

(She laughs.)

STUART. I think we should get going.

MARNIE. Who's driving?

STUART. *(overlapping at the *)* I don't care. Do you want me to clean out my car so we can *take it?

MARNIE. *(overlapping at the *)* *I'm driving but if Sylvia's taking those cheez doodles, we're taking your car. I am not getting that orange gunk all over the upholstery I just had cleaned.

STUART. Fine we'll take my car.

MARNIE. Ugh, your car's a sty.

(Beat. STUART aggressively takes a huge handful of cheez balls and stuffs his mouth with them. He gets a little too close to MARNIE and chews with his mouth open, getting orange stuff all over himself and the immediate area.)

(He takes a deep breath, exits.)

(MARNIE breaks down, crying.)

(AUNT SYLVIA deftly takes a stubbed-out cigarette from a pocket or purse and places it in one of her prosthetic hooks.)

What are you doing?

Uch, that's what smells like an ashtray, I thought it was just you.

That's disgusting, Sylvia, what do you think you're doing? You can't smoke in here.

AUNT SYLVIA. I'm just holding it.

MARNIE. It stinks. Throw it away. Please.

AUNT SYLVIA. I'll put it away if I can have my cheez balls.

MARNIE. I don't have them Stuart took them.

AUNT SYLVIA. I just want to hold it.

(A tableau. MARNIE sobs, AUNT SYLVIA pretends to smoke.)

(blackout)

6. Shameless Gossips, Swapping Stories

(Kitchen #2. The storm rages outside, more wind than rain.)

(The kitchen is empty. Off, we hear the inchoate noises of a too-loud TV set. It's just loud enough to be really annoying, but not loud enough for us to make out what's being said. There is, however, a laugh track. It makes the kitchen seem lonely.)

(Off, LIZZIE shouts something we can't understand.)

(beat)

LIZZIE. (O.S.) I SAID WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

RUTHIE. (O.S.) I CAN'T HEAR YOU OVER THE TELEVISION

(The TV goes off.)

LIZZIE. (O.S.) WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

RUTHIE. (O.S.) You don't have to yell. That television is too loud. No wonder we're all deaf.

LIZZIE. (O.S.) Well it's off now. Where are you going?

(beat)

Where are you going, sit down.

RUTHIE. (O.S.) I want some more Diet Sprite.

LIZZIE. (O.S.) Sit down.

RUTHIE. (O.S.) I'm thirsty

LIZZIE. (O.S.) Sit. Hannah'll get it HANNAH!

RUTHIE. (O.S.) Don't yell, I can get it

LIZZIE. (O.S.) HANNAH

HANNAH

HANNAH. (O.S.) What I'm right here what

LIZZIE. (O.S.) Grandma wants a Diet Sprite. Please.

RUTHIE. (O.S.) I can get it.

LIZZIE. (O.S.) Ma, sit down, what the fuck.

(The TV comes on again.)

(**RUTHIE** says something we can't hear.)

LIZZIE. (O.S.) WHAT?

(The TV goes off.)

What?

RUTHIE. (O.S.) You don't always have to use that language.

(No answer. The TV comes on again. Laugh track.)

(**HANNAH** enters the kitchen. She starts to pour some soda.)

(The **SHAPESHIFTER** silently appears behind her. It is in the shape of **STUART**.)

(He grabs the bottom of the soda bottle and abruptly jerks it upward, causing the soda to spill.)

HANNAH. (startled) What?

Stuart, what the fuck?

SHAPESHIFTER/STUART. Hep hep hep hep!

HANNAH. When did you get here?

Jesus Christ, you are such a jerk, I just washed this floor.

SHAPESHIFTER/STUART. Your eloquence has always brought me trouble.

HANNAH. You're not funny.

(He touches her face, invasive but not rough.)

Knock it off, Stuart.

SHAPESHIFTER/STUART. There is wisdom in the old traditions.

HANNAH. Get OFF I said

SHAPESHIFTER/STUART. (barking) Do not avoid the subject!

(This scares her – she is not used to **STUART** disobeying her.)

HANNAH. What are you. Doing.

(He traces one finger around one of her breasts. She sharply draws in breath.)

Stuart, stop.

SHAPESHIFTER/STUART. I only shrink from secret bloody murder

(She slaps his hand away but it doesn't work.)

HANNAH. Stuart knock it off we're not fucking kids anymore OK

STUART. STOP IT

(He gets even closer. She pushes him away but he looms over her.)

HANNAH. Please

(He pulls talcum powder from his smock and blows it at her. She coughs.)

(Something happens.)

(The SHAPESHIFTER has now taken the form of RUTHIE.)

...Grandma?

(Unlike the real Ruthie, the SHAPESHIFTER is nimble and energetic.)

SHAPESHIFTER/RUTHIE. Oh

What is so like it is what is this

To dance in the skin of one so far along

The heart sags it is

Feel

The world will not be fooled

HANNAH. Grandma what's happening

(The SHAPESHIFTER drinks soda and does a little dance.)

SHAPESHIFTER/RUTHIE. Oh it is what

This dance of skin and always many holes

She is so afraid this one is not lovely like you Oh Her veins are so nice and hard

Hep hep hep hep! She says don't oscillate, you might get a venereal disease on the upholstery

Oh but Something is something to say in the nightmare language to the pretty one

It says to say Oh watch me win the praise of angels
Come hold my hand girl come

HANNAH. What's going on

(The SHAPESHIFTER takes her hand.)

SHAPESHIFTER/RUTHIE. Feel

This one is so afraid Because she will end soon and all
she knows is be alone

Somewhere is a forgotten sensation an echo of love
leavened by vicissitude

You will have to excuse me the language of the sticky
ones is not my language

Hep hep hep hep!

But what was I going to say, oh listen to me I am more
facile by the second in a moment I will become her,
she will vanish, I will lose all memory of what I am.
Perhaps I will think I am dead, even though I can not
die, and I will be buried, and I will use my transmutational
legerdemain to pretend to decompose, and forget, I will forget,
I will lie in the dirt in the cast of this old woman's skeleton
and then in the cast of the dirt itself.

HANNAH. I don't understand.

SHAPESHIFTER/RUTHIE. When the secrets accumulate in
the corners of the houses of the wretched sticky ones,
and are moved from house to house in boxes and are
buried under porches and hidden in cabinets and
toilet tanks, those secrets amass into a sort of varmint,
oh Hannah, I do not want to become this old woman,
how I would like to take the shape of your desires and
imbibe the sweet and sticky liquid don't mind if I do

(She takes the soda from HANNAH and downs it.)

Thank you.

But I do not want to become indelible, so I must tell
you what it is I came to tell you and then it's back to
the German and the lightning and the enigmatic flum-
madiddle.

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