

THE DIRECTOR

Written by

Aaron Guzzo
&
Craig Hissong

Based on the play
by
Nancy Hasty

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Aaron Guzzo
1218 McClellan Dr.
APT 103
Los Angeles, CA 90025
310.736.8115
aaron.guzzo@gmail.com

Craig Hissong
15216 Magnolia Blvd.
APT 1
Sherman Oaks, CA 91403
630.405.8595
cwhissong@gmail.com

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

A terrified young woman, MEG HAMPTON (early 20s), pulls up the cushions on her couch, frantically looking for something. She checks underneath. Nothing. The whole room is lit in blue, unnatural light.

MEG

Come on... come on...

From outside comes the sound of slow, deliberate footsteps. Someone is out in the hall. The woman freezes and listens.

Underneath the door, the thin line of light is broken as whoever's outside reaches the door. The door handle jiggles. It's locked, but the door is flimsy and shakes easily as the person outside works on it with increasing force.

Meg's paralysis breaks, and she doubles her effort to find whatever she's looking for. She pulls open cabinets, drawers--

WHAM -- the door shakes on its hinges -- It's about to be obliterated.

Meg checks the drawer at the end of her coffee table--

MEG

Yes!

There's a box inside. She pops its lid off--

With a crisp **CRACK**, the lock gives out and the door flies open. A man stands in the hall. He is silhouetted from behind, from light that seems too bright in this setting.

Meg whirls around, holding what was in the box: A tiny pistol. She's shaking.

MEG

Now, Alan, let's, let's talk this out, okay? Things have gotten a little out of hand. So let's just, let's just... go home. I won't say anything to anyone. I *swear*.

But the man advances toward her. We still can't see his face. Meg gulps and COCKS the gun.

MEG

Alan, back up, BACK UP. *Please*.

She begins to cry. It seems fake, though, like this is an acceptance speech.

MEG (CONT'D)

*Don't make me do this please don't
make me do this.*

The man has almost reached her.

MEG

I'm so sorry--

She PULLS THE TRIGGER --

CLICK. *The gun is empty.*

VOICE (O.S.)

Annnnd scene!

The blue, unnatural lighting is SNAPPED to bright stage-lighting, harshly illuminating everything.

REVEAL: The living room is a set on a tiny stage. The sinister figure that was advancing on her is MAX (late 40s), who looks more community college theater teacher than serial killer. He reaches around behind him and produces a script he had tucked in his jeans.

Meg, now that we can fully see her, looks like every jaw-droppingly beautiful blonde-haired blue-eyed starlet who was made prom queen and told she'll be a big star someday. She wears a low-cut dress, showing off the goods. She and Max turn and face the empty seats of the theater.

VOICE (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Meg Hampton, yes?

Meg nods eagerly. As we slowly move down the rows of the dark theater toward the unseen owner of the VOICE, all we can see are his EYES as he speaks to them from the dark:

VOICE (CONT'D)

Have you ever had someone break
into your home? Ever been mugged?
Assaulted? ... Raped?

MEG

...Umm, no, sir...

VOICE

Well, I can definitely tell you
it's nothing like what I just saw.
Now, you *knew* that this would be
the scene we audition with, yet you
focused more on looking like a
Hunts Point hooker than a married,
young mother.

MEG

Wha--

VOICE

But that's not really the issue, now is it? No, no, the *real* problem is that you delivered those lines like the Last Girl Standing in a slasher movie, doing nothing more than pleading for your life, when really, your character *knows* the gun's unloaded. She's trying to bluff, to intimidate him, to have one *shred* of dignity, but I'm sure your acting classes don't give two shits about that, do they?

Meg is about to cry. And this time it won't be acting.

VOICE (CONT'D)

Ahhh... now *that's* the most emotion you've shown this entire time. Where was that hiding when you were just reciting lines? You have it in you; you're just scared to let it out, to let it take over.

(re: The look on her face)

Is there something you'd like to say?

MEG

Excuse me, who do you think you are?

The man in the back of the theater stands up, and we see him for the first time: PETER, a fit man with a powerful presence. It's hard to tell his age.

PETER

Oh, me? I'm the director.

INT. BACKSTAGE - DAY

Upset, Meg makes her way through the scattered props, set pieces, backdrops, and other things that have turned backstage into a maze. Ahead, she sees the exit.

ANNIE (O.S.)

You know, you weren't bad.

Startled, Meg turns to face ANNIE SANDERS(36), an eternally stressed woman. Annie smiles tiredly.

ANNIE (CONT'D)

I was watching from back here, and, given a little practice, you could bring to life exactly what the writer had in mind. You have the look; even Peter can't deny that.

MEG

... Thanks...

ANNIE

I'm Annie.

PETER (O.S.)

WHERE'S MY TEA??

ANNIE

(sighs)

And that's Peter.

Meg wipes her tears away.

MEG

He seems like a character.

ANNIE

(sighs)

That's one way of putting it. And I need to get that character his tea, pronto. It was nice to meet you. And chin up. You'll get a callback, I'm sure. You're the first person who's actually gotten through the whole scene before he starts screaming. That's about as close to a standing ovation as you'll get with him.

MEG

Well, thanks.

(turns to leave, stops)

Umm, how do you know what the writer had in mind?

ANNIE

I know her pretty well.

And in a flash, she's gone. Meg looks down at the script in her hand: **Riding Out the Storm, by Annie Sanders.**

INT. AUDITORIUM - DAY

Annie slips into the back row, next to Peter. She hands him a mug of hot tea; he takes it without looking at her.

Onstage, someone else butchers Annie's lines, waving the gun at the same dopey guy and begging for him to stop. As Peter watches, disgusted, Annie rubs Peter's back warmly.

ANNIE

So... how's it going?

PETER

It's not going at all. We're never going to find our Kate.

ANNIE

That Meg girl was pretty good.

PETER

That Meg girl was about to cry after two minutes of direction. How do you think she'll handle ten weeks of it?

ANNIE

Peter, how could anyone handle ten weeks of that? You called her a hooker.

PETER

No, I said she *looked* like a hooker.

ANNIE

Well she was the closest thing to Kate that we've had, and you went and scared her off.

PETER

Annie, I am looking for someone who doesn't just act, but who creates something *real*. When I was in Switzerland, we rehearsed a show for a year... and only six people came to see it. Frankly, I wouldn't care if anyone saw it. It's the world that they create that matters, not the reviews. I just want actors who aren't trying to "get" anything, but *give* -- *annnd scene!*

On stage, the actress with the gun faces him anxiously.

PETER (CONT'D)

That will be all, thank you.

The actress leaves.

PETER (CONT'D)
 And Max, you can go home; that was
 our last one.

MAX
 (THICK Brooklyn accent)
 You got it, boss.

Max leaves.

PETER
 (to Annie)
 Still no word from that Sally girl?

Annie shakes her head. Peter grunts. He and Annie go onto the stage and start shutting it down and packing it up for the night, switching lights off, throwing away water bottles, etc.

Annie reaches stage right, where an upright piano sits.

ANNIE
 So do you still play?

PETER
 Hmm?

ANNIE
 When you came and talked to my
 class at Barnard, you said how
 playing piano was a good way to
 relax and brainstorm. Ya still do
 it?

PETER
 Geez, Annie, that was fifteen years
 ago...

ANNIE
 Yeah, don't remind me. So ya still
 got it?

PETER
 I still play, if that's what you
 mean...

Squealing excitedly, she POPS open the lid that covers the keys.

ANNIE
 All *right!* Let's hear something!

PETER
 No.

ANNIE

Oh, come on, just one song.

PETER

I said *no*, Annie.

She advances on him mischievously, flirtatiously, her eyes locked onto his, *daring* him, chanting while pumping her fists:

ANNIE

Song... song... song... song...

PETER

No--

ANNIE

Song... song... song... song...
SONG...

PETER

I said NO, Annie! Now WHY can't you get that through your head? I don't perform for you, *YOU perform for ME.*

For a second, Annie looks as hurt and vulnerable as Meg, but then she hardens and says:

ANNIE

Look, buddy, I'm footing the bill for this theater so *you* can do *your* little acting workshops and carry out *your* vision so everyone can see what a great director that *you* are. Just thought we'd have some fun along the way. My bad.

PETER

And the fact that it's *your* play has nothing to do with it, right?

Again, the hurt look on Annie's face.

PETER (CONT'D)

That's what I thought. So if you ever get sick of me, just take your regional-third-place-winning play to some other director in town and see if they'll direct it. Oh, wait. You already did. So you do your job, and I'll do mine. Just stay out of my way and let me work.

He heads up the aisle toward the door, leaving Annie onstage.

ANNIE

Peter?

He stops.

ANNIE (CONT'D)

I heard you loud and clear: No one else wants my play. But just remember that no other writers want you directing their work, either. No one else wants you and no one else wants me.

INT. SALLY'S APARTMENT - WILLIAMSBURG - EVENING

A door shakes in its frame from someone knocking furiously, attacking it from the other side.

LANDLORD (O.S.)

Two weeks, Sally!! I've let it slip for two weeks, and YOU STILL HAVEN'T PAID YOUR RENT!!!

Sally's apartment isn't a pretty sight: it's messy, run-down, and small.

SALLY LOESER (23), a mousy woman whose appearance matches her apartment enters, frantically throwing things into her satchel. She wears leggings and a T-shirt -- definitely a starving starlet.

The door SHAKES as the person on the other side hammers away.

LANDLORD (CONT'D)

You know, I can hear you in there!! I'm COMING IN, and you're either paying me RIGHT NOW or I'm personally EVICTING YOU!!!

Sally checks herself in the bathroom mirror and opens it to reveal shelves behind it. On those shelves are pill bottles. She opens two of them, pours one out of each, DOWNS THEM, and darts OS as the sound of a key is heard in the lock and the doorknob TURNS.

A sweaty, balding man of uncertain ethnicity BARGES into the room -- and finds it empty. Confused, the landlord goes into her bedroom... it's empty. The kitchen... also empty.

He stops, confused, catching his breath. Then he sees: The window in the main room is open.

EXT. FIRE ESCAPE - EVENING

Sally quickly scurries down the fire escape as the landlord pokes his head out above her.

LANDLORD

I'm changing the locks! And I ain't
changing em back until YOU PAY YOUR
GODDAM RENT!!

Sally reaches the bottom and runs out into the cluttered, worn-down streets of Williamsburg. As she darts across the sidewalk to her car, she bumps into MAX.

MAX

Watch it!

SALLY

Sorry!

She gets in an old, noisy, VW Beetle and drives off.

INT. SALLY'S APARTMENT - EVENING

The Landlord slams the window shut angrily.

LANDLORD

Never shoulda rented to an actor...

EXT. THEATER DISTRICT - 53RD STREET - EVENING

Sally slowly crawls through the New York traffic on 53rd Street, hunched over, looking for a parking spot.

SALLY

Come on, come on, come on...

She spots a HANDICAPPED PARKING SPACE highlighted by blue paint on the curb. For a second, she hesitates, then:

SALLY (CONT'D)

...Hell with it...

She deftly parallel parks into the spot, locks the doors, and runs like hell down the sidewalk. We follow right behind her, getting just as jostled in the crowd as she is.

She rounds a corner, where, ahead, Peter is locking up the front doors to the theater. It's a dingy-looking, off-off-off-Broadway type of place. Sally bolts toward him as fast as she can, trying to get to him before he is lost in the crowd.

When she catches up to him:

SALLY (CONT'D)

Excuse me!

Peter turns.

SALLY (CONT'D)

I hate to bug you, but I need to get into the theater. I'm running late for an audition and--

PETER

You must be Sally.

Sally is caught off-guard

SALLY

How'd ... you know?

PETER

Because you're the only person who didn't show up for their audition.

SALLY

And I'm real sorry about that, but I'm here now, and I could still audition for you...

PETER

And you really think you have a shot over everyone else who showed up on time.

SALLY

This is really important--

PETER

Yes, but not important enough to show up on time for. You knew the audition was at five, yet you've decided to move it to--

(checks watch)

-- 6:33.

SALLY

But traffic--

PETER

It's *New York City*. Did you just move here? If you're this late for an audition, then God knows how late you'll be for the rehearsals.

SALLY

Please--!

PETER

If you wanted the part, you should
have been on time.

And he spins on his heel and leaves her. Dejected, she tucks her tail and heads back toward her car at the other end of the block ... where it is being TOWED.

SALLY

No!

She starts to run for the truck ... then stops, her eyes suddenly twinkling with an idea.

EXT. HANDICAPPED PARKING SPOT - EVENING

A beefy tow-truck DRIVER has almost finished hooking her car up to his truck.

SALLY

Plllleaa dow taaayk myy caahh!

Sally limps toward him with her fingers stiffened as if she has Cerebral Palsy. It's actually a pretty good imitation.

The driver stops, unsure of himself. Awkward.

DRIVER

Ummm... you know you're... supposed
to... have a handicapped plate...
or a sticker...

SALLY

Buh ah lehh mah thicker ah *home*...
wone do ih again. Prommithh!

As the driver stares at her, not sure what to do, she twitches to the side. A line of saliva runs from her mouth.

DRIVER

(to himself)
Goddammit.

EXT. HANDICAPPED PARKING SPOT - LATER

The driver has finished unhooking the towing mechanism from her car. As he climbs back into the truck:

SALLY

Thang oo!

DRIVER

Yeah, yeah, do it again and I'm
takin the car.

As he drives off, Sally starts to slip out of character. He abruptly STOPS and leans out his window. She recovers quickly.

DRIVER (CONT'D)
Say... how'djoo get a license anyway?

SALLY
Thook a diving tetht.

DRIVER
(awkward)
Oh. Right.

He drives off. Sally watches him go, amazed that it worked. She turns around to her car, where PETER leans against the hood. He applauds her with a smirk.

PETER
You know you're going to hell, right?

Sally is wide-eyed and caught off-guard, but she quickly hides it and smiles wickedly:

SALLY
Yeah, but we both know I'll be late. What do you want?

PETER
Any of those girls who auditioned today would've just shown some cleavage and flirted, but not you--

SALLY
I... don't... have any--

PETER
You, darling, went above and beyond. Which is what I'll be expecting from you in callbacks tomorrow.

SALLY
You mean--

PETER
Five o'clock. Be there. Not a minute late. Actually, let's make it 4:45 for you. And there's nowhere to park around here. I suggest you take the bus. Five o'clock.

Once again he spins on his heel and walks away.

SALLY

Hey!

He stops.

SALLY (CONT'D)

Thank you.

PETER

We'll see if you're saying that tomorrow.

Peter resumes his walk.

INT. THEATER - EVENING - THE NEXT DAY

A handsome young man with a full head of hair a tight shirt that accentuates his muscles sits onstage in a folding chair. This is Joel HIGHTOWER (25), a guy who's used to getting what he wants. He checks his expensive watch -- **4:55**.

Three other chairs, still empty, have been set up, making a half-circle. The stage is still set up as the living room from the first scene. On stage right, there is a door down on the audience level. It opens, letting in sunlight, which puts an angelic halo around Meg as she enters.

Joel perks up, interested -- a new target...

She's wearing another sun dress, not quite as revealing as yesterday's, but still something to look at. She stops as she takes in Joel. As they take in each other.

MEG

... I'm here for the callbacks...

JOEL

Wow. That's what *I'm* here for too.
Crazy coincidence.

She giggles even though he's not funny -- she knows when someone's flirting.

MEG

Well I hope we're not going for the same part.

She PLOPS her bag next to him and sits in the nearest chair, pulls out a magazine, and pretends to be deeply interested in not flirting with him.

JOEL
And may I know the name of who's
about to beat me out of my part?

MEG
I'm sure you'll see it on the cast
list.

Joel eyes her with a smirk.

JOEL
Okay, Meg.

He taps the magazine cover, which has her name stamped onto
the mailing address.

MEG (CONT'D)
Oh. Right.

Joel laughs as she stews. The door opens again and in rushes
Sally, looking just as frazzled as yesterday. She stops when
she sees them.

SALLY
What time is it?

Joel checks his watch.

JOEL
4:59.

SALLY
YESS!!!

She does a happy-dance. It's off-beat and adorable. Joel and
Meg look at each other, amused.

Behind Sally, the door opens again and in comes a man with a
sweet 70s 'stache -- BARNEY McCALL (late 40s / mid 50s). He
has thick hair and equally thick glasses that give him a
slightly bug-eyed look.

BARNEY
Wait. There's a dance portion? I
should just leave now...

They all laugh politely. Sally scoops her bag up and heads up
onto the stage, where she sits next to Meg. Barney follows.
As he takes the last seat:

BARNEY (CONT'D)
So, where's--

BAM -- They all jump as a fifth folding chair is SLAMMED down, center stage, with great precision by PETER.

PETER

Kate's chair will be *here*. And the hallway to Nathan's room will be back *there*. This is important for the scene where Kate thinks that Aunt Rose is asleep, but of course she's *not* asleep. Why? Because she's creeping down the hall in the shadows like a ghost. And there'll be dirt backstage so Vincent can farm. The audience won't see it, but it'll make it real for *you*--

ANNIE (O.S.)

Hey, Peter, don't you think, uhhh, maybe everyone should introduce themselves, get to know each other...

Annie sits out in the audience, watching.

PETER

In your play, do the characters know each other?

ANNIE

No. They--

PETER

Then neither should the actors.
(to the actors)
And you won't be given scripts until the last week before your performance.

JOEL

What?

BARNEY

Uhh... Isn't this a two-hour show?

PETER

Yes. And who are you?

BARNEY

I'm Barney McCall.

Peter seems amused by this.

BARNEY (CONT'D)

Uh, I know this is just the callback, but... I think I speak for all of us when I say that... there's no way we'll be able to memorize a whole play in a week.

PETER

Well, it's a good thing that's not your job.

SALLY

Wait. Whoa.

PETER

Your job is to be your characters, not recite lines. If you forget your lines in the play, you can still bluff without the audience ever knowing. But if you step out of character, even for a *second*, the show is over. As in I'll cancel it. Right there in the middle of the scene. I'll send the whole audience home.

JOEL

Don't you think that's a little... *extreme*?

Peter approaches him coldly.

PETER

Extreme? Let me tell you something about extreme. Before I came here I had an acting troupe in Australia. The reason I moved here is because every single actor in my troupe *quit*. Except for one. And that person is the only actor in the world who will still work with me.

SALLY

Then why aren't they here now?

Peter ignores her, continuing to focus on Joel.

PETER

Joel. You will be playing the character "Vincent." He's the only character in Ms. Sanders' play who anyone knows anything about. So, I'll make an exception and let you tell us all about yourself.

PETER (CONT'D)
I asked everyone to bring their
resumes. So let's see yours.

Joel digs his out of his bag, happy to show off. As he hands
his résumé to Peter:

JOEL
If there's anything on there you
want to know more about--

But after only glancing at it for a second, Peter sneers and
RIPS IT IN HALF.

JOEL (CONT'D)
Hey!

PETER
I hate bullshit.

JOEL
Why'd you--

PETER
What is this "table tennis" shit?
What is this "drive a jeep?" Do you
think that anybody gives a FUCK
about your Theater Arts Degree from
NYU?

JOEL
Hey, you asked to see it.

PETER
But you're the one who filled it
out. That's what you really think,
isn't it? If you can drive a four
in the floor, then you can act. Or
maybe get a commercial, which to
you is the same thing. Seems to me,
Joel, that you're just a resume
sort of guy. So why don't you
leave? I'm looking for actors.

ANNIE
Peter!

He slices his hand through the air toward her -- *shut up.*

JOEL
I'm an actor.

PETER

No, you're not. You've memorized some monologues and according to that *paper* you're the king of all dialects. There are more dialects on here than there are countries in the world!

JOEL

Listen, I don't know what your game is--

PETER

This is no game!

JOEL

Then why did you ask me to come back?

PETER

I said I was looking for gifted actors to form an unconventional acting company. So the real question, my good man, is *why are you still here?*

A moment of silence as Joel takes this in. Then, he looks up at Peter with a million-dollar smile:

JOEL

Ya know what, Peter? You're a fucking asshole. Anyone ever told you that?

PETER

Yeah, I've been on the subway a time or two.

Joel stands up and picks up his bag.

JOEL

Fuck you, Peter.
(heads for the door)
And I'm going to Equity.

ANNIE

Wait! Joel! Joel!

From the audience, Annie chases Joel outside. On stage, Sally gets up, too.

PETER

And where are you going?

SALLY

Home.

PETER

Really? Because yesterday you *begged* me to let you come here. You said this was important to you.

SALLY

It is, but I don't think I'd be able to afford the therapy bill.
(to Meg and Barney)
Are you guys gonna stay for this?

Both Meg and Barney look at the ground.

SALLY (CONT'D)

Fine. Have fun.

She turns to leave, but Peter has somehow come between her and the door.

PETER

Sally. You want to make it as an actor, right?

SALLY

Yes.

PETER

Then you have to challenge the rules. If you can't do that, then you're not an actor. You're just a model. And you are no model.

SALLY

Please get out of my way.

But Peter gets closer. Meg and Barney watch, transfixed.

PETER

Things have to be safe with you all the time, don't they? Safe and secure and never exciting. Oh, acting's fine as long as we never have to be afraid, and reality's fine, too, as long as it never gets too real. Am I right?

SALLY

I've seen your type before. And I think you're dangerous.

PETER

I am.

SALLY

And I'm going to report you to Equity, too.

PETER

Tell me, Sally: What's your dream role?

SALLY

(caught off-guard)

Uhh... I've always wanted to be Ophelia in Hamlet, I guess.

PETER

Well let me tell you something about Ophelia, darling: You will *never* play Ophelia. Ever. You know why? Because *Ophelia* goes mad at the end and *you* are deathly afraid of madness, aren't you? You're so afraid of your own madness that you won't go *near* it. Did your therapist prescribe those pills you take, or is that just something you do on your own?

Sally tries not to cry.

SALLY

I want to leave.

She tries to dart to the side, but Peter BLOCKS her. She moves the other way-- he moves with her, enjoying himself.

SALLY (CONT'D)

Please... let me go...

As their struggle turns into a fight, MEG rises with a can of MACE. She POPS the cap off and is about to let it fly, when:

PETER

Joel!!! ANNIE!!!

All heads turn as, behind them, Joel and Annie enter, both calm and collected. Smiling.

MEG

What?

PETER

Good work, Joel.

JOEL
(as he sits back down)
Thanks.

SALLY
What's... going on...?

PETER
This was an improvisation. We'll be doing a lot of these. This is Joel Hightower. After his audition yesterday I asked him to come a little early today so we could do an improvisation and see if any of you caught on that it wasn't real. Obviously it worked, because it was real. We got an emotional response from you. And *that* is the one and only goal of theater.

SALLY
One and only goal my ass. What you did was *sick*.

PETER
No, what we did was *real*. There's a difference, Sally. You're just upset because you were in the dark, that's all. But that was the only way to make you believe the scene. And you did believe, didn't you?

BARNEY
Whooo-eee, I did! I was too scared to move! I thought you were about to get maced in the *face*.

He and Peter chuckle.

MEG
That *was* about to happen. You boys can have your laugh about your little scene, but things were about to get out of control.

PETER
No, Meg. I was always at the helm. Always. Now imagine if an audience felt what you just felt. That somebody was actually in danger, that something was at stake. That something mattered besides applause.

Everyone thinks about that one. *He's right.*

SALLY

Well. I've never been to a callback like *this*.

Everyone chuckles uncomfortably.

PETER

True. But when we're done, this will be the *only* way you'll want to work. That is, if you want to work this way. Do you?

BARNEY

Hell, yeah! Man, that was great!

PETER

Thank you.

BARNEY

Let's do another one--

PETER

Eeeasssy, Barney.

He makes the same "silencing" gesture he made to Annie.

BARNEY

Right. Sorry.

PETER

Now. This is a two-way callback. I want you all to step out back for a few minutes and decide among yourselves whether or not you want to go through with this. And while you're deciding about me, I'll be deciding about you.

EXT. BACK ALLEY - EVENING

The four actors step out the back door and onto a side-street. On the other side of the street is a parking lot filled with dozens upon dozens of police cars. As soon as the door is shut:

MEG

Anyone else think this is weird? Or is it just me?

BARNEY

Well I think it's great! I just read *The Fervent Years* and Harold Clurman was right--

SALLY

I think he's insane. And I don't mean that like "wild and crazy" insane. I mean like in the medical, psychiatric sense. When I was close to him, when he was blocking me, I just... there was something... The man scares me.

JOEL

You know, yesterday, when he was telling me about what he wanted to do to you guys, I got a bad vibe, too. But I gotta admit, the look on all of your faces was worth it. I've been in every musical and play you've ever heard of, and I've never seen people as hooked as you were just then. And I didn't feel like I was acting. Even though I knew he was going to tear my resume up, I got mad when he did it. Especially when he ragged on my accents.

He sighs deeply, lost in thought for a second. He looks out over the parking lot.

JOEL

You guys know what all these police cars are here for?

Everyone just looks back at him, not following him.

JOEL

Okay. Roland Emmerich is here in New York for the next few weeks shooting a movie. These are all old cars that've been painted up -- they're props. They're gonna blow em all up and I could *be there* for that. I could be an extra in this and pay my rent in a week. It would be awesome. But I want to be *here*. For *this*. I wanna feel what I just felt again.

(sighs)

So yeah, I want to be a part of this.

They all nod their heads, getting it.

MEG

Back in high school, I had this chemistry teacher -- the guy was brilliant -- everybody took his class. I mean, I wasn't big on science, but I took it, too. And one day, I'm late for class, and someone tells me the school's being evacuated. Turns out, he'd almost killed the whole class from carbon monoxide. A week later, they fired him. I still think he was a genius, but it doesn't matter: He almost got us killed. So who knows, maybe Peter is a genius, but it's the same thing. I can't trust him.

PETER (O.S.)

That's too bad. Because without trust, nothing is possible.

Both Meg and Sally GASP -- Peter has joined them. The actors are all rigid, awkward, but Peter doesn't seem to be upset.

PETER

Let's all come back inside and wrap this up.

He turns to go back in--

MEG

Peter, I'm sorry I said--

PETER

There *is* a method to what I do. I promise.

INT. THEATER - EVENING - CONTINUOUS

MEG

Look, I'm sorry, but this just isn't the gig for me. Now I'm going to leave-

SALLY

Me, too.

MEG

-- We're going to leave. And I hope you're going to let us by.

PETER

Of course. But would you wait just one minute? I need to talk to Barney first. Would you do that? Just *one minute*?

MEG

(sighs)

Okay.

The actors reluctantly sit down. Barney walks up to Peter and mock-salutes him -- this is all fun and games to him.

BARNEY

Yes, Herr Directeur?

PETER

Barney, I hate it when directors give out false hope to actors, so I'll just tell you now: I don't think this is the best place for you. I want to wish you luck, though. Thanks for coming by.

BARNEY

But I want to do this! I would do *anything*! I would *pay* to do this!

PETER

That would be unnecessary.

BARNEY

I want to know *why*. Why did you pick *him*--
(points to Joel)
--over me? Is it because he's got the looks? All Joel can do is smile. But I can act! I can act up a storm!

PETER

I'm not looking for storms.

BARNEY

I want in.

PETER

Barney, please go.

BARNEY

No. I want to know why. I deserve to be told why. And I'm not leaving until you do.

PETER

(sighs)

All right. You have no backbone. No depth. No mind of your own. You are an echo, a sponge, the ultimate follower. You go where the wind blows, you get excited about something, and then you look for the next order, the next leader, the next trend. And, yes, it partly is the looks -- you look like you never made it out of the 70s. And you're overweight, you're sweaty, you've got pedophile glasses. Actually, you really *do* look like a rapist. Like a walking stereotype-- ooh, did I just hit a little too close to home?

Barney is deflated, looking pathetic and sad.

PETER (CONT'D)

Barney, do yourself a favor and please: Get the fuck out.

Barney leaves, devastated. This was probably the only thing he had in his life.

PETER (CONT'D)

(to the others)

I'm sorry about that. But I have a terrible habit of telling the truth when people push me to do so.

SALLY

Why did you do that?

PETER

Because Barney thought that being enthusiastic and complimentary would mean something. But I don't want ass-kissers. I want actors who believe in something and are willing to fight for it. Who have a mind of their own and don't just follow blindly. Which is why I wanted you to see that. Meg, you were right when you said there was no trust. There wasn't. A company is created and cemented with trust. And even a certain kind of love. For a while, I had a troupe in Toronto who had it.

(to Meg)

PETER (CONT'D)
 And I want you to have it. To learn
 to trust me.
 (back to the others)
 And each other.

MEG
 I just don't know--

PETER
 I don't want you to know. I want
 you all to go home. Think about it.
 I'll be here tomorrow at five PM. I
 hope to see you all there. But it
 has to be *your* decision. It has to
 be--

BARNEY (O.S.)
 I was all the way to Broadway
 before I caught on.

Barney has come back in, grinning foolishly.

PETER
 Caught on to what?

BARNEY
 I know what this is about. You
 fooled me. But not for long -- no,
 sir! I'm in like Flynn. I'm
 sticking like a licking.

PETER
 Oh, no. You thought I was joking
 with you, didn't you?

BARNEY
 Yeah, it took me a while, but I
 caught on. Did he do that to you
 yesterday, Joel? Tell you to leave
 just to see if you'd come back? To
 see if you cared?

A moment of awkward, sad, silence.

PETER
 Barney, that wasn't an
 improvisation.

Barney's face registers pure fury.

BARNEY
FUCK YOU!!!

Everyone sits in silence, feeling sad. However, Barney's face changes back into a grin.

BARNEY (CONT'D)
Pretty good, huh? Just like Joel!

PETER
No. Joel did it better.

BARNEY
Yeah? Well *KISS MY ASS!!!*

Again, his anger is quickly replaced by a look of hope and expectancy.

BARNEY (CONT'D)
Now don't everybody talk at the same time.
(no response)
But I wish you would say something.
(no response)
Anything.
(no response)
Oh, shit... you weren't kidding, were you? You really don't want me.

He stays a second longer, waiting for someone to tell him he's wrong. When no one does, he leaves. Peter turns back to his actors.

PETER
Tomorrow night. Five o'clock. You won't regret it.

INT. ANNIE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Peter reads over a script, making notes. He notices Annie watching him.

PETER
What?

ANNIE
We can't do any more auditions, Peter. We need to start rehearsing.

PETER
You heard me. We'll start 5:00 tomorrow.

ANNIE
They're not going to *come*, Peter--

PETER

They'll come. Right now they think they won't, and they probably don't like me very much, but tomorrow morning they'll all go in to their shitty jobs that they swore they'd never settle for, and they'll realize that this hell here is better than that one. They'll come.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Joel enthusiastically shaves, nodding approvingly to himself as he does. He's shirtless, showing off his carefully-constructed, waxed gym body. Ridiculous music.

He breaks that fourth wall and looks right at us:

JOEL

Finally, a shave that's as smooth as me!

DIRECTOR (O.S.)

Annnnd, cut!

We move back, revealing that this isn't a bathroom, it's a--

INT. SOUNDSTAGE - NIGHT

The bathroom set is surrounded by a small film crew. A wiry director shouts from a bullhorn that really isn't necessary.

DIRECTOR

Thanks, that was good.

JOEL

Was it? Really?

DIRECTOR

Yeah. You looked great. Good work.

JOEL

OK, 'cause I can--

The director puts down the bullhorn, an aside to Joel:

DIRECTOR

Joel. We're sellin razors here. Now come on. We got three more of these to do with you. Let's go.

JOEL

But--

DIRECTOR

(back into the bullhorn)
All right, people, moving on, let's
go, hopefully we'll get out of here
by sunrise...

The crew moves on, leaving Joel on his little set. The million-dollar smile is gone from his face.

INT. STAIRWAY - NIGHT

Sally makes her way up a dingy, fluorescent-lit stairwell. Her landlord rounds the corner ahead, making his way down. Sally freezes.

SALLY

Hey. Hi. Umm, I know I said I'd
have my rent by today but there's
been a small holdup, nothing major--

LANDLORD

Whadaya talkin about? Your rent's
paid.

Sally only looks at him dubiously. He slaps her on the back as he passes her, all buddy-buddy like. He pauses at the bottom and looks back up at her.

LANDLORD

If you woulda just said somethin
about your friend in the first
place I wouldn't've been such a
hardass on you.

(an afterthought)

Nice guy.

He turns to leave again--

SALLY

Umm, wait. *Who*, exactly is such a
nice guy?

LANDLORD

Your friend. Peter.

INT. ANNIE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Annie sits at an upright piano she has, poking around. She's not that great.

Peter SLAMS a manuscript on the piano.

PETER (CONT'D)

I need you to make a copy of this.

Annie looks at it: **Miss Julie, by August Strindberg. 1888.**

ANNIE

Cool. Are we reading through a scene tomorrow?

PETER

No. This is the show we'll be performing.

ANNIE

What? No. We're not doing *Miss Julie*. We're doing my play!

PETER

Okay. Annie. Do you really think the fine people we saw today are ready to bring your play to life? To give it the one and only chance it will have at being noticed? Consider *Miss Julie* a trial run. If they mess it up, it's okay. They'll learn from it, and no one is worse off. Then when we do your play, we'll have one under our belts. They're almost beat for beat the same plot anyway.

ANNIE

Peter, I can't afford to rent this place out for two shows. Now, we're going to do one play, and it's called *Riding out the Storm*, by Annie Sanders.

PETER

And here I was, thinking that you actually cared about what I'm doing here, when really, it would be all the same to you if we had it performed by a bunch of kindergartners. Just so you'll have your name out on that marquee, and when you're old and wishing you'd actually worked a day instead of living off of daddy's money, you can tell all your friends at the country club about the time you had a play running in New York City.

ANNIE

Dammit, Peter, I do care about what you're doing, but how the hell would you feel if I brought some other director in and told you "Oh, by the way, this guy's gonna direct now, and you can direct later?" You'd be pissed off, too, so spare me the sermon. You could've just told me this is what you wanted to do all along.

Peter is oddly not angered -- he calmly gets up.

PETER

I should go.

He goes to the door.

ANNIE

Peter, wait. Come on, you don't have to go. I've got plenty of room here.

PETER

Uhh... I'm staying with a friend. Thanks, though.

He leaves.

EXT. THEATER - DAY

Annie struggles to carry several copies of *Miss Julie*. She passes the alley on the right side of the theater... and catches a glimpse of PETER, who drags a HUGE BAG into the back door of the theater.

Annie goes down the alley toward the back door, now uncomfortable. She goes in--

INT. BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

-- And finds herself in a cluttered maze of props and set pieces.

Ahead, PETER comes down a flight of stairs that leads up to the attic. Annie ducks out of sight. He goes out the back door, then reappears, dragging another huge bag. He glances back out into the alley and checks both ways that no one is watching.

From the darkness, Annie watches as he drags the bag over to the attic stairs. He goes back up, oblivious of her presence.

Once he's passed her and gone on up the stairs, Annie leaves, troubled.

INT. NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY - DAY

A private study room with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the main floor of the New York Public Library.

In this room is a giant, industrial printer. Inside this printer is Joel, who is trying to fix a paper jam. Indistinguishable curses and shouts come from within the printer.

On the desk, his laptop has an internet browser window open with a picture of Peter on it. To the side, Meg enters, unnoticed by Joel.

MEG
Fixing a paper jam?

JOEL (O.S.)
No, I'm going spelunking-- what's
it look li--

He sees who it is and immediately tries to sit up, which only causes him to -- *WHAM* -- smack his head on the printer. Defeated, he just lays there.

MEG
I bet you were really dorky when
you were a kid.

JOEL
Don't worry about me, I'm okay.
Thanks for asking.

Meg giggles and heads for his computer. This gets him up -- he immediately jumps up and slams it shut.

MEG
I don't think you're allowed to
look at porn at the library, Joel.

JOEL
You're so funny, Meg. So what are
you doing here?

MEG
Stalking you...

JOEL
Yeah?

MEG

Uh-huh. Took advantage of the free internet here and Googled everybody. Couldn't find much on Annie or Sally, and *nothing* on Barney, but, you, sir, well... someone has quite the IMDb résumé...

JOEL

Meh. It's only three movies...

They sit there for a moment silently, but not uncomfortably.

JOEL (CONT'D)

So... ya gonna be there tonight?

MEG

You know, this thing with Peter... this will be the first time I've ever been asked to *do anything*... to not just smile. To *act*.

JOEL

So, I'll see you tonight?

She sighs, resigned.

MEG

Yeah. I'll see you tonight.

As she leaves, they briefly make eye contact. Once she's gone, Joel sighs to himself and starts to pack up his things--

The printer clicks back to life and begins to print. The first is an article from an Australian newspaper with the headline **ACTOR TRAGICALLY KILLED ONSTAGE DURING LIVE PERFORMANCE.**

As Joel skims it, certain phrases jump out: "*...when a prop gun was loaded with live bullets...*" "*...'She didn't just act her scenes; she lived them,' the director of the play said...*"

Another page features an article from the same newspaper saying "BELOVED ACTOR DISAPPEARS." Below it is a picture of the missing actor.

Joel takes these papers and puts them into his bag, troubled.

INT. THEATER - EVENING

Joel and Sally sit in the same spots as yesterday with Meg's empty chair between them.

Peter sits in the chair he placed center stage yesterday. They're tense. Joel checks his watch - 5:02.

JOEL
I hope she comes...

PETER
She'll come. Don't worry.

Sure enough, the door opens and there stands Meg, once again haloed in light.

MEG
Sorry - the subway's on some weird schedule today--

SALLY
HA! See, Peter? It wasn't me. *It wasn't me.*

PETER
(chuckles)
Of course it wasn't. Now everyone UP, on your feet, move these chairs. *Let's get started.*

INT. THEATER - EVENING

The five of them stand in a circle, playing ZIP-ZAP-ZOP:

JOEL
ZIP-

ANNIE
ZAP-

SALLY
ZIP-

MEG
ZOP-

INT. THEATER - EVENING

Meg paces about theater, reciting a tongue-twister. Everyone has on different clothes; it's a different day.

MEG
Picky people pick Peter Pan Peanut Butter it's the peanut butter picky people pick. Picky people pick Peter Pan--

INT. THEATER - EVENING

Another day. They're in the middle of a game of Freeze:

JOEL
 (in a ridiculous German
 accent)
 --Oond zat is vy my Glockenspiel
 vahs duhrty!

No one on stage can keep from cracking up.

INT. THEATER - MORNING

Another day.

Peter sits in the empty theater, happily watching what's happening onstage, where we hear two sounds: someone doing a Chewbacca impression and fart noises. Annie sits down next to him, holding a stack of scripts.

PETER
 What the hell is this?

ANNIE
 They're scripts, Peter. The ones
 you asked me to copy. This is all
 fun, and I'm glad everybody's
 learning to share and care, but
 this isn't acting camp. This is
 rehearsal--

She PLOPS the scripts into his lap.

ANNIE (CONT'D)
 So *rehearse*.

PETER
 But they're not quite--

ANNIE
 I was fine with paying for the
 theater when it was my play. Then
 you got me to pay for someone
 else's play. But I'll be damned if
 I'm paying for *this*.

On stage, Sally is riding around on Joel, who is on all fours, making vague animal noises. They seem to be chasing Meg.

BACK TO: Peter and Annie, staring at them.

PETER

Okay, this time I see what you're getting at.

(to the actors)

OKAY! Annnd scene! That was very good!

He gets up, drops the scripts back into Annie's lap, and marches toward the stage, where he joins them.

PETER (CONT'D)

Okay, we're going to do an improvisation based on the play *Miss Julie*. Annie, I'm going to need you for this one.

ANNIE

What?

PETER

Come on.

Confused, she joins them. Sally still sits on Joel's back, who doesn't seem to mind. Meg does, though.

PETER (CONT'D)

Joel, you're going to play Jean. Now what do we know about Jean?

JOEL

He's... confident. Cocky.

MEG

Oooh. *That* will take a lot of acting.

Peter gestures for Joel to go on.

JOEL

He's ... got a silver-tongue.

PETER

That's what I was going for. Jean could talk the devil into giving up drinking. Play that up. Joel, you're only allowed to say one line. Your line is: "I'm a busy man. I did several important things today." Girls, you will *both* be Miss Julie.

MEG

And what's our line?

PETER

None. You have to be silent. Now what do we know about her?

SALLY

She's pretty.

PETER

I don't give two fucks what she looks like; that's wardrobe and makeup's job. Now what do you know about the *character* Miss Julie?

SALLY

She's defiant. She won't take orders.

PETER

Yes, but what else...?

A moment of silence as they think, then Meg notices Sally's hands on Joel's back, subtly feeling him.

MEG

She wants Jean. She really, *really* wants him.

PETER

Ding, ding, ding, tell her what she won, Vanna! That's *exactly* right, and that's exactly what you're going to be doing. You're going to fight for his affection. You're both going to try to seduce him. In the end, he'll wind up with one of you. Whoever that is will portray Miss Julie in the play.

ANNIE

Well I'm glad we're finally doing a halfway *normal* exercise. Now why am I here?

Peter dashes backstage and returns with a tray that has cookies and tea on it. He thrusts it into Annie's hands.

PETER

You, Annie, will be the maid. Feed them. Serve them. Do what they say.

ANNIE

But--

PETER
 Annd ACTION!

JOEL
 (popping his collar)
 I'm a busy man. I did several
 important things today.

Peter seats himself in the front row of the theater, scribbling furiously on a notepad as the scene begins. Meg and Sally both dash to the sides of the set, where they happily put on various pieces of costume -- a frock coat for Meg, a long fancy robe for Sally.

Joel picks out a pair of black boots and begins to shine them, paying no attention to the girls. Annie, however, looks bewildered. She ties a red scarf, peasant-style, on her head, and puts on an apron. She then goes to the counter and pours the tea into glasses.

PETER
Miss Julie is not a play about
 food.

ANNIE
 (freezing)
 Oh.

Unsure of what to do next, she lifts the lid to the electric skillet and pours water into it from her Evian bottle. A great cloud of steam fills the air, which she tries to disperse with the skillet lid.

PETER
 This is *not* a play about food.

JOEL
 I'm a busy man. I did several
 important things today.

Meanwhile, Meg pounces onto the bed behind Joel, where she seductively runs her hands through his hair. He definitely enjoys it. Frustrated, Sally grabs some scarves and starts dancing around him, trying to be sexy but mostly just making him uncomfortable.

ANNIE
 Jean, supper's ready! I've made
 your favorite meal--

PETER
THIS IS NOT A PLAY ABOUT FOOD!!

ANNIE

Sorry!

PETER

Do not acknowledge me. I am not here. Stay in character.

ANNIE

I am in character. I'm the damn maid.

PETER

Do not acknowledge me.

ANNIE

Damned if I do and damned if I don't.

PETER

God DAMN it.

(to the actors)

You three, continue the improv out in the hall.

Giggling, Sally takes off running.

Joel starts to follow her.

JOEL

Wait!

MEG

Oh, no ya don't...

PETER

Silently!

Meg grabs Joel's hand and leads him out in the hallway, keeping his hand only a few inches from her butt. When they reach the door she shuts it behind them, leaving Peter and Annie alone.

PETER (CONT'D)

What is this about, Annie? What are you trying to do?

ANNIE

Oh, I'm sorry, it's almost like I'm *not an actor*. So why am I up here, Peter? What is this accomplishing?

PETER

You're up here to learn from your character.

ANNIE

Right. Has the tea not been up to par lately?

PETER

No. It's not a play about food.

ANNIE

You mentioned that.

PETER

I had you play the maid because the maid *accepts*. She accepts the circumstances she's in. And she serves. Something that you need practice at.

Annie stares at him, not believing what she's heard. Peter stares back, and though it's tense, they're standing awfully close together...

-- The door bursts open and Sally and Meg come screaming onto stage, dragging Joel behind them, each of them latched to one of his arms.

MEG

Do you want both of us, Jean? Is that what you want??

PETER

Okay, girls, we're done. Meg, have a seat.

Meg runs over to the tray of cookies, grabs one--

MEG

No!

PETER

Yes.

MEG

I said--

(pushing the cookie into
Peter's face)

NO!!

Peter sighs, then suddenly scoops Meg up, throws her over his shoulder, and starts to carry her to the chair. Meg shrieks in excitement.

MEG (CONT'D)

I'm not scared of you!! I am MISSS
JULIEEEEEEEEE!!!!

Peter plops her down on the center-stage chair.

SALLY
No you're not. I am. Right, Jean?

JOEL
Umm... are we still going?

PETER
No. We're done. This is something new.

From the side he produces a rope, which he hands to Joel.

PETER (CONT'D)
Tie her up.

MEG
If you dare!

PETER
Sally, grab that piece of cloth by the tray and gag her with it.

SALLY
Is this... part of the improv...?

PETER
Just get the fucking cloth.

MEG
(a la "Nana nana boo bo")
I am Miss Jule, I am Miss Julie, I am Miss Julie, I am Miss Juuu----

She's cut off by Sally, who SHOVES the cloth into Meg's mouth.

PETER
There. Now. How do you feel?

She squeals and kicks one of her legs in the air, still laughing.

PETER (CONT'D)
Look at her. This is wonderful. She's becoming her character. Sally, take note.

No one else sees, but Sally is stung. She quickly recovers.

PETER (CONT'D)

Meg, you've got Miss Julie's craziness, her defiance, but the character who you're ultimately going for, the one in Annie's play, experiences much more than that. So we're going to try to break your spirit. When you want us to stop, just drop your head to your chest, and we'll stop immediately. You will lose, but we will stop. Okay?

Meg bops her head up and down, over and over.

PETER (CONT'D)

Good. Now, Joel, I told you to tie her up. Make it tight.

Suddenly uncomfortable, Joel slowly walks over to her. As he wraps the rope around her, he whispers in her ear:

JOEL

Let me know if it hurts.

His arms are around her as he ties it, their faces close together. They hold that position a little longer than necessary... Once she's secure, he backs up.

JOEL (CONT'D)

Is that too tight?

She nods vigorously. Joel moves to loosen it.

PETER

I said make it tight!

JOEL

But she said--

PETER

You don't ask the hostage if it's too tight! You don't ask the soldier if his pack is too heavy. You live it.

JOEL

I'll live anything you want. But I'm not going to hurt Meg.

PETER

(sighs)

Annie, Sally can you untie Meg? I need to talk to Joel.

He grabs Joel by the arm and leads him out into the hallway.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

PETER

You are breaking one of the cardinal rules of rehearsal and I won't tolerate it.

JOEL

What are you talking about?

PETER

You've got a thing for Meg.

JOEL

What?

PETER

You've got a thing for Meg and that's going to kill everything.

JOEL

Peter, chill. I do not have a "thing" for Meg--

PETER

Then why have you been walking her home after rehearsal all week?

JOEL

So what? I walk Sally home, too. There's nothing going on with me and Meg.

PETER

But you wish there were, don't you?
(pause)

Of course you do. And that creates a wedge between the three of you. And it causes damage. Especially since she seems to have a thing for you, too. Did you really think her bumping into you at the library was an accident?

JOEL

How did you--

But Peter turns and leaves, going back on stage. Disturbed, Joel follows...

INT. THEATER - DAY

Peter strides on stage, where, now untied, Meg bounces about.

PETER
Girls, we have a problem.

JOEL
Peter!

PETER
No, I believe in being honest. I'm afraid Joel cares for one of you more than the other. He finds one of you more attractive. He doesn't think that's a problem. How does that make you feel?

MEG
Well, of course, he loves me!

SALLY
Are we still improv-ing?

PETER
No.

SALLY
Eek. Then I'd rather not know.

PETER
No, we need to address it and move past it. We can't work together if there are secrets. And the only way to move past it is to face it. So, another exercise.

Groans from everyone, including Annie.

PETER (CONT'D)
We are going to the bowels of the theater.

INT. REHEARSAL ROOM - DAY

PITCH BLACK -- then the room is lit up by Peter, who has pulled a cord attached to a bare light bulb that hangs from the ceiling. Behind him, the gang enters, looking warily at the dingy room they're in. There are no windows or furniture, other than a chair directly beneath the light bulb

PETER
Annie, did you bring the rope?

She produces it and hands it to Peter.

PETER (CONT'D)
Joel, have a seat.

Joel slowly, warily sits down. Peter immediately ties his hands behind his back.

PETER (CONT'D)
Is that too tight?

JOEL
I thought we weren't supposed to ask that.

PETER
We're not doing a terror exercise anymore. Actually, quite the opposite. So close your eyes.
(Joel does so)
Take a deep breath. All right, you're no longer Joel. You're Jean, and all you can think about is Miss Julie. You're dreaming of her. Can you see her?
(Joel nods)
She's beautiful, isn't she? Beautiful eyes, beautiful hair. You want to touch her, don't you? Relax and breathe. Go deep into your imagination. I'm going to ask Miss Julie to caress your face. Is that all right with you?

Joel nods again, his mouth ajar, limbs sprawled. Peter motions Meg to Joel and gestures for her to touch his face, which she does gingerly. Joel can't help but sigh and tremble.

Sally doesn't enjoy this at all. In fact, she looks jealous.

PETER (CONT'D)
You're fascinated by her, aren't you, Jean? Say something to him, Miss Julie.

MEG
Hello, Jean.

JOEL
Hello.

PETER

Now, *flirt* with him, Miss Julie.
But not with words. With your body.

Meg wastes no time -- she slowly rubs herself across his back, causing him to helplessly moan again. She goes around to the front, giving him a borderline lap-dance.

PETER (CONT'D)

I'm going to have Miss Julie kiss you. Is that all right, Jean?

JOEL

Yes! Er- yes.

PETER

In fact, we're going to leave you alone with Miss Julie. I expect you to be your character. You are to respond to her as Jean -- is that understood?

JOEL

Yeah. Yes. *Totally.*

PETER

Miss Julie, he's all yours.

Everyone stares as Meg slowly STRADDLES Joel, runs her hands over his shoulders and onto his neck, then deliberately, methodically, kisses him. Joel eagerly responds, kissing her back.

Peter silently motions for Sally and Annie to leave. As he follows them out the door, he pulls the string, shutting off the light, leaving them in total darkness. Joel moans as it gets more heated.

JOEL

Hey, come back!

His moans resume and escalate as their bodies rub together. His voice rises in pleasure as--

The light turns back on and THERE SITS PETER, straddling Joel like Meg, with his tongue down Joel's throat. Meg stands off to the side.

Joel's eyes widen as he screams into Peter's mouth, desperately trying to get away, but Peter holds firmly. Finally, Peter pulls away and GRABS Joel's face angrily.

JOEL (CONT'D)

What the *fuck*, man- *HELP!!*--

PETER

LISTEN!! You were reacting to *Meg* kissing you, not Miss Julie. If you were really in character, like I asked you to be, it wouldn't matter what actor is kissing you, you'd react like you're supposed to.

JOEL

Untie me.

PETER

Are you going to leave?

JOEL

What do you think?

Peter starts to untie him.

PETER

Then make sure that's what you really want, because once you leave, you don't come back. Ever.

JOEL

Good. Because that's the last thing I'll ever want to do.

PETER

Oh, I think you're wrong about that, Joel. You'll go back to your Gillette commercials and always wonder how your life could've turned out if you'd stayed and taken part in something that would have gotten you *noticed*. Now sit down. We're not done.

JOEL

No, I think we are.

He opens the door to leave, when:

MEG

Joel, no! Don't leave.

He stops, torn. Out in the hall, Annie and Sally watch him anxiously. Behind him, Peter and Meg also watch.

MEG (CONT'D)

Please, Joel. You're the one who convinced me to stay.

He continues to look indecisive, but finally:

JOEL

Shit.

He goes back in and sits down.

PETER

Perfect! Sally, Annie, can you come back in here?

(they do so)

Now that we're all one big happy family again, I want to make this clear: We're all here to learn. And to be here for each other. So, Joel, if I ask you to tie up -- or kiss -- Meg or Sally, or Annie, I want you to know that it will be all right. That I won't let any harm come to them. Can you trust me?

Joel looks at the floor, emasculated.

JOEL

Yes.

PETER

I asked if you can trust me, Joel.

JOEL

(louder)

Yes.

PETER

Good. Then that covers it for today. Everyone get some rest. I'll see you all tomorrow, 9 AM.

INT. BACKSTAGE - EVENING - MOMENTS LATER

Peter and Annie come up from the basement.

PETER

I'll be back in a bit to help you close up, but right now, Peter needs a sandwich.

Peter goes out the back door. As soon as he's gone, Annie DASHES up the stairs he was dragging the bags up.

She reaches the top of the stairs, where a door is slightly ajar. She looks around carefully, then GOES IN--

INT. LOFT - DAY

-- And her jaw drops.

The loft has been converted into a makeshift apartment. A futon is set up on the floor, a portable Butane gas stove sits in the corner, and every other inch of space is stacked with thousands of scripts, books, and plays. Annie goes deeper into the room, both mesmerized and scared.

ANNIE

Oh my God...

Taped to the back wall are candid pictures of the actors, taken through bushes and from behind.

She scans the room, taking in what she's seeing--

THUMP THUMP THUMP -- *Peter is coming up the stairs.*

Annie makes a mad dash for the back of the loft, hiding amongst the endless stacks of manuscripts. Not a second after she's hidden, Peter enters, holding a hoagie. He starts to take a bite of it-- then freezes.

He suddenly becomes aware he's not alone. He puts down the sandwich and does a 360, slowly scanning the room. Annie holds her breath as his eyes pass over where she's hiding.

He reaches his starting point; he's scanned the entire room. He then freezes completely, becoming silent, listening. Again Annie holds her breath.

The moment passes. Peter shrugs and picks up his sandwich, his mind already on to something else.

Annie relaxes -- and accidentally knocks over a stack of scripts. Peter WHIPS his head toward the source, his eyes narrowing like a predator. He marches toward her; there's nowhere for her to hide--

He freezes when he sees it's her. His sinister demeanor melts away. He even chuckles to himself.

PETER

Annie? God, you scared me...

Annie stands up.

ANNIE

Peter, is this where you... live?

He looks around, ashamed.

PETER

Welcome to my lair. My humble
abode. My den of iniquity.

He covers half of his face with a page from a script.

PETER (CONT'D)

I'm the Phantom of the Rehearsal
Hall.

He chuckles cynically.

ANNIE

Peter, I wasn't making fun.

PETER

I was. As soon as you rented out
this theater, I started moving my
stuff from the building I'd been
living in. There was no water. Or
electricity.

ANNIE

How long have you been... homeless -
- er... Without a home?

PETER

Without a home? Uhh... about two
years. But homeless? Never. The
theater is my home. The *theater* was
there when my parents weren't, when
people failed me. The *theater* is my
constant. It gives me stability and
love. It is my mentor, my friend,
and my lover. I'm asking our actors
to live their roles, I'm living
mine. Here I can *always* be the
director.

He's a little nostalgic... a side of Peter we've not seen.

ANNIE

Have you ever tried... just being
Peter?

PETER

I don't think you'd like that.

ANNIE

I bet I would. I bought something
for you.

She pulls sheet music out of her purse and hands it to Peter.

PETER
 (chuckles)
 "Moonlight Sonata." Wow.

ANNIE
 I still want to hear you play. I know, "we perform for you," bla bla bla, but just once, Peter, I want you to perform for me.

They're very close now.

PETER
 When this is over, I promise I'll play for you. What I *don't* promise is that it will be any good but--

He's cut off by Annie, who gently kisses him. She's a little misty-eyed. She pulls away.

ANNIE
 That would be great.

She leans in to kiss him again, but he firmly holds her back.

PETER
 I want you to do something else.

She looks at him, perplexed but excited. Seeing her willingness, he pushes her head down, bringing her to her knees. She looks up at him, unsure, then sighs to herself, disappointed.

Resigned, she starts to undo his belt buckle, but then he pushes her down further, past his crotch, to her feet.

PETER
 Lick my boots.

ANNIE
 Are you -- *what*?

PETER
 I said *lick my boots*.

ANNIE
 No! Peter, I'm not--

PETER
 Lick. My. Boots.

ANNIE
 No.

PETER
If you love me, Annie, then do it.
Please.

Humiliated and degraded, she closes her eyes, hesitates, then bends down and slowly, sadly, licks his boot. She starts to gag, but then resumes, her eyes squinched shut.

PETER (CONT'D)
Good. Now say "yes."

In between licks:

ANNIE
About what?

PETER
About anything. Just say the word.

ANNIE
Why?

PETER
Just say it.

ANNIE
Yes.

PETER
Say it again.

ANNIE
Yes.

PETER
Again.

ANNIE
Yes... Yes... Yes...

As she repeats the word, she stops licking and comes up to his face.

ANNIE (CONT'D)
Yes... Yes... Yes...

She kisses him again. He is awkward, unsure of how to respond, but as she kisses him more intensely, he gets the hang of it. Now breathing heavily, desperately, they begin to undress each other. Finally, they collapse onto his futon.

INT. JOEL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Joel is hunched over his computer. The papers he printed out at the library are scattered around his desk. Words that pop out in his search are *Australia, onstage shooting* --

He finds a video. Clicks on it.

ON HIS SCREEN: pixeley, handheld footage shot by someone in the audience of a play. An actress is onstage, holding a gun at a man. The man slowly approaches her.

ACTRESS

I'm so sorry--

The gun GOES OFF in her hand -- and Joel JUMPS as, onscreen, the man's brains are blown out the back of his head.

Horrified SCREAMS as people jump to their feet -- complete pandemonium in the house--

-- a quick glimpse of the actress collapsing to her knees in horror--

The video ends. Joel doesn't move. He just stares at the screen.

INT. THEATER - MORNING

Peter, Meg, and Sally all wait in their respective folding chairs on stage. Annie sits in the empty audience. The door on the right side opens and Joel enters. Peter gets up.

PETER

All right, everyone's here, let's go.

He puts on round sunglasses and heads for the door.

JOEL

Where are we going?

He turns back to them in his sunglasses.

PETER

The question is not *where* we're going but *how* we're going. You are going to spend the afternoon out on the town... in character. Can you do that?

SALLY

That's it?

PETER

Scout's honor. So, two things:
First of all, the three of you need
to stay together. And secondly,
meet me on the north side of Times
Square in two hours. Now, shoo
flies, shoo.

For a moment where they just look at each other... then they
all snap back into character:

MEG

Come on, Jean, let's see what
trouble we can get into.

She takes his hand and leads him out of the room. Sally
watches a little sadly.

PETER

Well? *Fight* for him!

SALLY

Right. Yeah.

Eternally awkward, eternally sad, she leaves, shuffling her
heels, her head down.

ANNIE

Oh my God... she's become the third
wheel... like...

PETER

Like her character in your play.
It's coming to life, Annie. They're
not *acting* out your play; they're
living it. And they're going to
live the whole thing.

ANNIE

Uhh... most of the people die in my
play.

PETER

Yes, that part'll be interesting.

He leaves with a chuckle.

EXT. MANHATTAN - DAY

New York is as busy as ever. Meg and Sally laugh, having fun
as Miss Julie, but Joel looks troubled.

He is further bothered when he sees BARNEY watching them from across the street. He turns to the girls to say something, but--

MEG

Sooo, *Jean*. You kissed a man yesterday. How was that for ya?

Joel looks back over -- Barney is gone.

SALLY

Yeah, that's actually one of the requirements to be a leading man on Broadway, so there you go.

JOEL

Yeah, you're not gonna convince me you haven't warmed up the casting couch a few times, am I right Meg? ...Meg?

But Meg isn't there. He and Sally suddenly stop and look around, getting in the way of the dozens of pedestrians.

JOEL (CONT'D)

Meg?
(to Sally)
Did you see her take off?

Sally shakes her head.

SALLY

She probably just went into a gift shop, you know, doing *Miss Julie* stuff. Try her cell.

Joel gets his phone out, dials the number, and waits anxiously. Finally he claps it shut and puts it away.

JOEL

Voicemail. Hey, did you see Barney just a minute ago?

SALLY

Wait-- you saw Barney?

JOEL

Yeah. I did. And... he definitely saw us...

SALLY

You don't think...

But the look on Joel's face says this is *exactly* what he thinks.

SALLY

Okay, okay, let's not jump to conclusions. She probably just went ahead of us. Let's just go meet up with Peter -- this might be one of his little games.

JOEL (CONT'D)

That's what I'm worried about.

EXT. TIMES SQUARE - DAY

Times Square is in the height of mid-day pedestrian madness. They look around for Peter.

JOEL

Any idea where exactly he said to meet him?

SALLY

Uhh, he just said meet on the North side--

PETER

Did you stay in character?

JOEL

Hey. Have you seen Meg?

PETER

Hmmm, no. I haven't seen *Meg* since we left the theater.

SALLY

Great. Something could have happened to her.

PETER

Something *did* happen to her.

Joel and Sally's eyes go wide.

PETER(CONT'D)

She's become Miss Julie.

SALLY

Oh, please.

JOEL

That's great and all, but it doesn't matter what she's become if she's gotten herself hurt. She could be--

MEG joins them. She's got a bunch of flowers in her hair, looking like a leftover hippie, totally unconcerned with their worry.

MEG

-- Anywhere?

JOEL

Jesus Christ, Meg, you scared us to death.

Peter does the slow-clap.

PETER

Welcome back, Meg. You're the only one who followed my instructions. I said to stay together, yet you chose to ignore me... just as Miss Julie would. I think we can all agree that you'll be playing the lead.

Peter turns to Sally.

PETER (CONT'D)

I guess you'll be the maid.

Sally looks like she's shrunk down to half her size.

SALLY

(under her breath)
Big surprise...

Peter puts his round shades back on.

PETER

Walk with me.

He heads down the sidewalk. The others struggle to stay with him. As they are jostled in the crowd:

PETER

Look around you. Look at these people. What do you see? People who aren't paying attention to anything around them. People who wouldn't know opportunity if it spit on their shoes.

PETER (CONT'D)

I bet none of them have had a genuine moment today, probably not even this year. Now if you can make any one of these people *feel* something, *anything*, for just a second, then you'll have done your job as an actor--

GUY

Peter?

A good-looking guy, BRAD (30s) stands before them, dumbfounded. He comes up to Peter.

BRAD

Oh my God! Peter! It's been too long. How are you?
(to the actors)
Are you guys working with him? You doing a play?

PETER

Just a small one--

BRAD

Oh come on, Peter we all know *nothing's* ever small with you.
(to the others)
You guys are lucky. This guy -- hands down *the* best director I've ever worked with. He *changed me*. Opened my eyes.

PETER

Tell me, Brad, what are you up to now?

BRAD

I just finished up a tour of *My Fair Lady*, and I'm actually gearing up to go to London for a production of *Les Miz*.

PETER

I'm glad you're happy.

BRAD

OK, I'm so sorry, I have to run, but hey, here's my card, PLEASE, let's stay in touch, all right?

Peter takes the card. Brad turns to leave- turns back around.

BRAD

Oh, before I go: You ever talk to Rachel anymore? I haven't heard from her in a while.

PETER

No, I'm afraid I've lost touch with her. Sad, isn't it?

BRAD

Yeah. Oh well. Well see ya, Peter. And thank you. Really.

Brad leaves. Peter turns to the actors, holding Brad's card.

PETER

Anyone need a bookmark? No? Okay.

He crumples the card up, throws it away. He watches Brad disappear into the crowd.

PETER

So much potential. Such a shame.

JOEL

What?

PETER

He never would go the extra mile. He never really *let go*. What a little more effort would have done for him. Now that girl he mentioned, Rachel, now that's someone I was proud of.

Again, he is lost in thought for a second. Then:

PETER

Okay. This is as good a time as any for lunch; let's meet at the theater in an hour.

They all start to scatter -- Joel grabs Meg.

JOEL

Hey. You got a second.

MEG

I've always got a second for *you*, Jean.

JOEL

Jesus Christ, would you quit that for a second?

MEG
 (stung)
 Okay, fine, what's up?

JOEL
 Before we go back, I want to check
 on something. It'll just take a
 minute. You mind coming with me?

MEG
 Sure. Where?

INT. ACTORS' EQUITY RECEPTION - DAY

A peppy, feminine INTERN is hunched over his computer at a desk in a lobby. Definitely a theater boy. He makes no effort to be subtle about checking Joel out. Behind him is a sign reading **Actors Equity**.

Joel and Meg stand at the other side of the desk.

INTERN
Miss Julie?

JOEL
 Yes.

INTERN
 Yeaah... There must be some
 mistake. We don't have any record
 of *Miss Julie* being performed
 anywhere around town. Oh -- wait! --
 here it is!

Joel and Meg breathe a sigh of relief--

INTERN (CONT'D)
 La Guardia High School is doing it
 in three weeks.

JOEL
 No, no! We're the actors in the
 show, we're at--
 (shoves paper in his face)
 --*this* theater!

INTERN
 Oooh, I've been there, I saw *Cats*.
 It was bad. Kinda hot, though.

MEG
 Yeah. We've got a show coming up
 there in two months.

The intern types something into his computer.

INTERN

Hmm. That's strange. Because this theater's only been rented out for another week.

Joel and Meg stare at the intern.

JOEL

Thank you... that's... all we needed to know.

They leave.

EXT. TIMES SQUARE - EVENING

Joel and Meg burst back out into the crowd, power-walking to the theater.

JOEL

So you know that Australian wonder-troupe he keeps talking about?

MEG

Yeah...

JOEL

Well I did some research, and guess what? One of the people in their troupe died *onstage*, and another one disappeared, and there was some other weird stuff--

MEG

But you keep coming back to rehearsals.

They reach the theater. Joel starts to open the door.

JOEL

About that. Don't say anything to anyone, but I'm leaving after today, and you might want to as well. And I think it's time for some answers.

INT. THEATER - EVENING

Joel and Meg BURST into the theater, coming up the aisle through the house. Sally and Annie sit on the edge of the stage, chatting.

JOEL
Where's Peter?

Peter's voice comes booming down from the catwalks above:

PETER (O.S.)
Up here, Joel. Adjusting some
lights. How can I help you?

Joel tries to find Peter, but it's too dark up there. We just hear him moving about.

JOEL
What's this about us not doing *Miss Julie*?

PETER (O.S.)
Now where did you hear a thing like
that?

JOEL
Equity.

PETER (O.S.)
Well of *course* Equity wouldn't have
anything scheduled. That's because
we're not *performing* Miss Julie.

JOEL
Then what the hell are we doing?

PETER (O.S.)
We are *using* Miss Julie to prepare
for the play that we are
performing, *Riding Out the Storm*,
by our very own-- drumroll! --
Annie Sanders.

ANNIE
And when were you going to tell me
this?

PETER
When I felt that our dear actors
were ready.

JOEL
And tell me, Peter. When exactly
are we performing this play?

PETER (O.S.)
Well, I think with a little bit of
intense rehearsal and preparation,
we could be ready in--

Peter emerges, center stage--

PETER
-- Three to four weeks.

Joel and Meg share a look.

JOEL
...Okay.

PETER
Well. Now that we're all back
together, I think we can start.

He SLAMS a chair down, center-stage, just as he did at the beginning of callbacks.

PETER
We're going to do the exercise that
we didn't get to do yesterday. So
Meg, would you have a seat? Joel,
would you restrain her?

Joel and Meg share one last look, then climb up onto the stage. Joel goes for the rope, which has been tossed off to the side--

PETER (CONT'D)
No, Joel, I need you to *restrain*
her.

Peter now holds a pair of handcuffs. Joel takes them, not liking this at all.

JOEL
Jesus, these are heavy...

PETER
Yeah. These aren't from the sex
shop.

Meg has a seat and puts her hands behind her back, looking apprehensive. She offers a weak smile:

MEG
You've done this before, haven't
you?

But Joel isn't laughing. As he closes them around her wrists, he notices bloodstains on the inside of the cuffs--

JOEL
Wait. No--

He tries to open them, but they don't budge.

PETER

Sally, gag her, please?

Now Peter holds a leather BALL GAG. But Sally isn't as uncomfortable as Joel about this -- she gladly SNATCHES it from his hands, SHOVES it into Meg's mouth, and roughly ties the leather behind Meg's head. Meg's starting to really look worried now.

JOEL

Peter, wait--

PETER

Trust, Joel. Trust.

Peter steps backstage and emerges holding a large wooden box.

PETER (CONT'D)

Meg, I prepared this box just for you. What's in the box? A famous author once said, "Come, drag your chair to a precipice and I'll tell you a tale." So let's do that.

He DRAGS the chair she's in to the VERY EDGE OF THE STAGE, with her back to the edge.

PETER (CONT'D)

Now, you know the rules. If you get too scared, all you have to do is drop your head down and we'll stop. But if you twitch and squirm too much, you'll fall and crack your little head down there. Are you okay with that?

Meg nods her head, but not with the same "Miss Julie" zeal as before. Peter hands the box to Annie, whose eyes go wide as soon as it's in her hands.

ANNIE

Holy shit-- *there's something in here...*

Peter crouches down next to Meg, who watches him nervously.

PETER

But there are such things as sadists, aren't there? Maybe I'm a sadist. Remember that first day when I said I was in control? What if I lied, Meg?

PETER (CONT'D)
 What if we get started and I like
 it so much I don't want to stop?

Before Meg can answer, he blindfolds her. She's scared, now.

ANNIE
 What's in here, Peter? Something's
 in here.

PETER
 Yes, there is. I want you to bring
 it here, next to Meg's head. I want
 Meg to try to guess what's inside.

ANNIE
 Okay, sure, it's okay, Meg--

PETER
Without talking!

Annie holds the box to Meg's head. Something THUMPS inside, causing Meg to jump. There is a quiet *hisssss*... a slithering sound...

PETER (CONT'D)
 Hold it closer.

Annie unwillingly does so. Meg tries to pull away from it. Peter takes the box from her.

PETER (CONT'D)
 Now let's see what's inside...

Meg trembles now, causing the chair to lurch. The back two legs now protrude a little bit over the edge...

PETER (CONT'D)
 I'm opening the box, Meg.

He opens it, reaches in, and produces a 5-FOOT BROWN SNAKE, which lazily wraps around his hands. As soon as we see it, though, he quickly tosses it back into the box and closes it.

SALLY
 Oh my God...

He swiftly TURNS THE BOX UPSIDE-DOWN over Meg's head, causing DOZENS OF SNAKES to come pouring over her. Everyone screams, but none as loud as Meg, who twitches in her chair -- she's about to fall off the stage.

Joel quickly pulls her away from the edge, grabs one of the snakes, and pulls it off of her. Annie and Sally join him...

while Peter laughs behind them. Then Joel realizes: The snake in his hand... is rubber.

The stage is covered in snakes they've pulled off of Meg. They're all rubber.

JOEL

Wait...

Peter calmly opens the box again, where a second door inside holds the real snake he showed them.

PETER

(re: the snake)

This is Ingrid. She never came close to touching Meg.

JOEL

DUDE.

Annie takes the gag off of Meg, who is actually crying, maybe even hyperventilating. Peter produces a key and undoes the handcuffs.

PETER

Now. Who here knew that the snakes weren't real?

SALLY

I did.

PETER

Right. Because I told you beforehand that they were rubber. So were you in any suspense during this little episode?

SALLY

No, not really.

PETER

Yes. Because you knew it wasn't real, whereas Joel and Meg here thought that it was real. Wasn't that intense, Meg? Your heart's still pounding, your adrenaline's going through the roof... and yet you were in no danger. I said no one would come to harm. I said you could trust me, and you can.

PETER (CONT'D)
 Joel, you were many things today,
 all of which are required for your
 character: Strong and concerned,
 and that's what this is about. It's
 about love and concern--

BARNEY (O.S.)
 Really? Is that what this is all
 about? Love and concern?

Barney stands at the back of the theater. He's CHAINING THE
 DOOR SHUT. He looks unkempt and disheveled.

PETER
 How did you get in here?
 (no response)
 What's his name, Annie?

ANNIE
 Barney.

PETER
 Oh yes, good old Barney. Barney,
 come on down. Everyone, would you
 excuse us for a second?

Everyone quickly heads for the exit on the left side of the
 stage to the hallway ... but the door won't budge.

ANNIE
It won't open!

BARNEY
 That's right. I've got you locked
 in tighter than a drum. And don't
 try the doors backstage; they're
 locked, too.

As he gets closer, he produces a PISTOL -- it's the one Meg
 held in the opening scene.

MEG
 Oh my God...

BARNEY
 I'm glad to know it's about love,
 because it sure isn't about talent.
 (mock falsetto)
*Ooh, look at me, I'm Miss Julie, I
 don't listen to the rules!*
 (back to normal)
 All they do is cry and complain and
 get scared.

BARNEY (CONT'D)
So why did you pick them? I'm not leaving until you explain it to me.

PETER
I have to hand it to you, Barney. This is the most interesting thing that's happened all night. This is... brilliant.

BARNEY
You kicked me out because you said I was an ass-kisser. So don't be a hypocrite, okay?

PETER
Fine. So what do you want?

BARNEY
I want to do one of your famous exercises, Peter. I want you to see that there's nothing they can do that I can't.

PETER
Alright. Come up here and show us what you got. Without the gun.

BARNEY
I'm not showing them anything. This is between you and me.

SALLY
Then let us go.

PETER
Sally, let me handle this.
(to Barney)
I think I know one that you and I can do. But if I win, you have to unchain the door and let us out.

BARNEY
Fine. But if I win, then I kill you, Peter. No use being a director if the people you reject are better than you, eh? So tell me, what's this exercise?

Peter swallows and collects himself -- for the first time, he looks nervous.

PETER
It's called Master and Slave. I'm sure you've heard of it.

BARNEY

No.

PETER

Really? Well it's pretty self-explanatory: One of us is the master, the other, the slave. Whoever is the slave has to do everything the master orders. Whoever's the master wins by ordering the slave to do something that he refuses to do. And you can't cheat. You can't say "fly," or "turn into a sofa" or something like that -- it has to be something that a person can do.

BARNEY

And how does the slave win?

PETER

By obeying too well. By going too far. By outdoing the master.

BARNEY

But says *who*?

PETER

Oh, we'll know. So. Come on up onstage. Let's begin.

As Barney climbs onto the stage, Joel seizes his moment of vulnerability and starts to CHARGE him, but Peter stops him.

PETER (CONT'D)

No, Joel. I know this game. I will win it in five minutes. Trust me. Can you trust me? All of you-- I want you to trust me.

Barney is now onstage. He puts the gun away.

BARNEY

Five minutes, eh? Who's gonna keep time?

JOEL

I will.

PETER

We don't need a timer. It won't take that long. Barney, you can even go first. Be the master. I'm yours to command.

BARNEY

I know.

The game begins.

Barney grabs a trash can from directly offstage right. He dumps it out in front of Peter. In the midst of assorted wads of paper, old coffee cups, etc., a few crusts of bread and several orange peels tumble out.

BARNEY (CONT'D)

Mmmm... someone didn't finish their lunch. So help them out.

Barney nudges a crust of bread with his shoe.

BARNEY (CONT'D)

Eat that.

Peter smiles, picks up the first crust of bread and takes a bite with relish. He then grabs an orange peel and shoves it in his mouth.

He grabs another crust, another peel, growing more and more like an animal. Still on his knees, he advances on Barney, cramming handfuls of food into his mouth.

PETER

I'm eating! I'm eating! Just as you said!

BARNEY

GET BACK OVER THERE!

Peter backs away, satisfied.

PETER

Five minutes. Five minutes.

BARNEY

Shut up.

JOEL

Barney, you may be barking up the wrong tree on this one...

Barney props his boot on the chair.

BARNEY

Lick my boot.

Barney smiles at Annie -- *he was watching them*. Peter doesn't hesitate;

he drops to his knees, forcefully grabs Barney's foot, causing him to almost fall over, and begins to lick it fervently, ravenously... sexually.

Barney moves his foot from the chair but cannot dislodge Peter, who holds on tight. Still licking, Peter is dragged prostrate across the room as Barney attempts to flee.

BARNEY (CONT'D)

Let go of me.

PETER

I'm licking, master! I'm licking!
Have you had enough?

BARNEY

Shut up! Let go of me. *Go over there!*

Peter crawls to the side, pausing to smile at the others.

Getting frustrated, Barney moves over to the box from the terror exercise and opens it. The snake lazily twists around inside.

BARNEY

Is this snake poisonous?

PETER

No.

Satisfied, Barney reaches in and pulls the snake out and begins to advance on Peter. It writhes around, agitated, twisting itself around his arm.

PETER (CONT'D)

Unless, of course, I lied.

Barney cries out and throws the snake on the ground. Now totally PISSED OFF, it turns on Barney and angrily slithers toward him. Panicking, he draws his gun --

Smiling, Peter casually scoops the snake up from behind. It writhes around in all directions.

PETER (CONT'D)

Oh, come on, Barney, if you join our happy gang, you need to know: I never lie. Totally harmless. The snake, that is.

BARNEY

Put its head in your mouth.

PETER

What?

BARNEY

Put. Its head. In. Your. Mouth.

Peter looks unsure of himself again. He looks down at the snake, which is angrily trying to bite him, then back to Barney, then abruptly grabs the snake with his other hand and SNAPS ITS SPINE OVER HIS KNEE.

It goes limp immediately. Peter lifts its head up and *shoves it into his mouth*. Everyone recoils, disgusted.

BARNEY (CONT'D)

You cheated.

Peter pulls the snake's head out and throws the snake at Barney, who jumps back.

PETER

I did what you asked. What now, master?

Fuming, Barney looks around the room, then smiles as he spots the piano, where Annie's sheet music sits. He walks over to it and spreads the music out.

BARNEY

Moonlight Sonata.

(reading)

"To Peter, a modern-day Strasberg. Love, Annie." *Ooooh...* love, eh? Well, Peter, the least you could do is play for the lady.

PETER

But---

BARNEY

We're done performing for you. Time for you to perform for us.

JOEL

Five minutes is up.

Peter solemnly walks to the piano and sits down, but just looks at the keys. He positions his hands over the keys, takes a breath, and begins to play--

But only three or four notes in, he plays the wrong note and stops. Helplessly, he looks to his actors. They all look back at him expectantly.

BARNEY
Play, Peter. Or I win.

PETER
 I... I can't.

ANNIE
What?

PETER
 I've never played a note in my
 life.

ANNIE
 But, Peter, you said--

BARNEY
 What he's saying, Annie, is that he
 does lie, after all, isn't that
 right, Peter?
 (no response from Peter)
 So I win.
 (laughs to himself)
 Barney beat Peter... Barney... beat
 Peter!

He pulls out his gun again and rounds on the actors.

BARNEY (CONT'D)
 (to Sally)
 Can you say "Barney beat Peter,"
 Sally? Say "Barney beat Peter."

He runs the barrel of the gun along the back of her neck.

SALLY
 (sobbing)
 Barney... beat... Peter...

BARNEY
 Very good. You get to live. Meg,
 your turn--

PETER
 That's enough, Max.

BARNEY
 But --

PETER
It's over. Go ahead and show them.

BARNEY

(sighs)

Fine.

Barney reaches to his hair and PULLS IT OFF -- it's a wig. He then removes his glasses and rips off the 70s 'stache to reveal he's *the man from the opening scene* -- MAX.

PETER

On our first day, I said everyone quit from my troupe in Australia except for one man. When you asked where he was today, I bet you never thought he'd be *sitting right next to you!*

SALLY

Oh, fuck this. Seriously. Fuck. This.

PETER

On that first day, he bound you all together out of sympathy for him. And now he's found your soft spots and torn you all asunder. He did it through his perception and his commitment and his gift. Of course, he's still a student. He still has much to learn--

MAX

(THICK Australian accent)

Oh, I don't know, I think I may have just graduated.

PETER

He's inclined to hit a little too heavy--

MAX

... *summa cum laude*...

PETER

There's a tendency to overdo.

MAX

Just don't forget, I won.

He draws the pistol and pretends to shoot Peter.

MAX (CONT'D)

Boom. You're dead.

PETER

Of course you won. Good work. Now
let's discuss-

He turns to the others, but Joel stands right behind him with his arm outstretched.

JOEL

Give me the key. Now.

PETER

Of course.

Peter moves to the door at the bottom right of the stage and opens it -- this one isn't chained.

PETER (CONT'D)

You can go if you want, but I
promise you: This was the last
test. If you stay, no more mind
games, I promise. You all now know
what you're made of, and you all
passed; you're qualified to
continue. The *real* rehearsals can
begin.

The others look at him, disgusted, then Joel and Sally both grab their bags and walk out without looking back. Meg gathers her things, too, but she stops when she reaches Peter. She's in tears.

MEG

You know, I have an audition
tonight for a really big show. And
I was going to skip it. You know
why? Because I believed in what you
were doing. *I wanted to be a part
of it.* But after *this*--
(re: Max, still holding
the wig & glasses)
-- I've got no choice but to leave.

PETER

It's not for everyone.

MEG

It's not for anyone. Goodbye,
Peter.

She leaves. Hurt, Peter turns to Annie.

PETER

Annie?

ANNIE

Why do you do this, Peter? Is there ever a *second* of your life that isn't some "exercise," some "Moment in method acting?" I don't even think you're capable of ordering a cup of coffee without trying to "push the boundaries." Just remember this, buddy: Everything you touch crumbles to dust... and always will. Not because you're so high and mighty but because there's something *deficient* in you. Something is *wrong* with you, and you don't know what it is, do you? And that bothers you. It just kills you.

PETER

That's good, Annie. What you're saying is so *fierce*.

ANNIE

No, shut up. This isn't an exercise. This is *real*. Do you know what that is? Real? Maybe the reason you're not world-famous, why you're homeless, why no one wants to work with you isn't because the world doesn't understand you; it's because you're FUCKING INSANE. All you do is find the wounds and pour on the gas. And that's not art. That's just ... abuse. So goodbye.

She passes him and leaves.

EXT. ALLEY NEXT TO THEATER - NIGHT

Peter follows Annie out into the alley.

PETER

Annie, I love you.

This halts her, but only for a second. She closes her eyes, wipes away her tears, and continues to walk away.

With a sigh, Peter holds up Barney's prop gun.

PETER

(to himself)

Dramatically speaking, this would be the scene where I kill myself.

He puts the gun to his head and pulls the trigger. CLICK -- with his other hand he mimes brains flying out of his head.

PETER

Or her.

He points the gun at her. She's almost made it to the street.

He pulls the trigger. CLICK -- he makes a gunshot noise with his mouth. He pulls the trigger again--

BAM -- The gun actually GOES OFF in his hand. At the end of the alley, Annie collapses and doesn't move.

Peter registers shock, looking at the gun in disbelief, but he quickly recovers and goes to her, playing out his scene.

He rolls her over. She's still barely alive. She looks up at him helplessly, hurt, confused.

PETER (CONT'D)

I didn't mean to.

Annie dies. Trembling, Peter squeezes his eyes shut in shock and denial. When he opens them:

PETER (CONT'D)

Annnnd *scene*.

He lets Annie fall to the ground like a ragdoll, a prop. A shadow falls over him. It's Max. Behind them, lights are being turned on in the windows.

MAX

So. What now?

Peter looks up. All connection to reality completely gone.

PETER

You have your clothes? And the car?

MAX

Drove it right off the lot.

PETER

Good. We can still make this work.
I need you to do exactly what I
say. We're gonna have to move fast.

MAX

Whatever you say.

PETER
 Okay. First,
 (re: Annie's body)
 help me with this.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE SALLY'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Sally's a wreck. Mascara stains her face from where she's been crying. She reaches her apartment and starts to get out her keys... and then notices her door is cracked open.

Now paranoid, she fishes out her pepper spray and pushes the door open--

SALLY
 Oh shit.

INT. SALLY'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Sally looks into her apartment with her jaw dropped. It is completely EMPTY.

She steps inside. Not a single thing remains. No furniture, no clothes, nothing. Just bare walls.

SALLY
 No, no, no, NO...

She goes to the bathroom and opens her mirror, where the pill bottles still sit... only now they're empty.

SALLY (CONT'D)
 No, no, no, no...

As she goes back into the main room, panicking, she notices a piece of paper taped to the inside of her door. Printed clearly across the top are the words **EVICTIION NOTICE**.

INT. JOEL'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Joel pulls into his small parking spot in front of his home, gets out and comes in. As he turns the lights on, we see how nice his place is -- he's definitely NOT a starving artist.

His good-natured charm is totally gone though -- he looks depressed. He hits the button on his answering machine.

AGENT (V.O.)
 Hey it's your ever-faithful agent.
 Look, some bad news, buddy: Just
 got off the phone with Gillette.
 They've decided to go with a
 different actor from now on.

AGENT (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 Sorry bout that, buddy, knew you
 were counting on that. I'll try to
 get you on something else, but it
 may take a bit. Look, call me next
 week, we'll do lunch-

Joel hits the button, deleting it--

He hears the sound of something BANGING into his trashcans
 out back.

JOEL
 Goddam raccoons.

He offhandedly pulls the full trash bag out of the bin next
 to him.

EXT. BEHIND JOEL'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Joel comes out the back door to his small yard, trash in tow.
 He goes to trash can and opens it, and *Annie stares up at
 him*. Her clammy body has been hastily stuffed into the trash
 can, folded unnaturally on itself. Her eyes are rolled up
 into their sockets. Her mouth is open in a silent scream.

Joel reels back, dropping the lid and the trash bag.

INT. HALLWAY - APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT

Sally bangs on her landlord's door. A second later he opens
 it. He's wearing a wife-beater.

SALLY
 (re: the eviction notice)
What the hell is this? I thought my
 rent was taken care of.

LANDLORD
 Your friend's check bounced.

SALLY
 What? But I thought--
 (an idea)
 Give me the check.
 (the landlord stares)
 GIVE ME THE GODDAM CHECK.

He disappears for a second then comes back, check in hand.

LANDLORD
 Here. It's worthless anyway.

After giving it to her he SLAMS the door. Sally scans the check, seeing the name on it is **RKO RICHMOND THEATER**. Below that is the address.

EXT. BEHIND JOEL'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Joel paces back and forth.

JOEL
Oh, shit, shit, shit, shit...

His cell phone rings. The display reads ANNIE'S CELL. Trembling, Joel flips open the phone and puts it to his ear without saying anything.

PETER (OVER THE PHONE)
Convince them.

JOEL
Is this what happened in Australia, Peter? Did Max choose to go with you, or he is the only one who survived any of your bullshit?

PETER (OVER THE PHONE)
Only good actors survive, Joel. You're probably hearing sirens by now. They're coming to you. Now Jean would be able to talk his way out of this, to explain that he had absolutely nothing to do with the mysterious body now in his trashcan. You need to convince them that you didn't do it, and fast... or they'll want to take you downtown, which won't leave you much time to save Meg.

JOEL
What are you talking about?

PETER (V.O.)
It's sad that I've had to threaten somebody that you care about in order to get a performance out of you.

The sirens are getting closer...

JOEL
Where is she?

PETER (V.O.)

She's at that theater down the street from you, you know the one; I believe you had an audition there two years ago. But no one will find her there if you don't make it. So good luck, Jean.

JOEL

Wait! *You can't do this!!*

PETER (V.O.)

Annnd *action!!*

The line goes dead as Peter hangs up. Panicking, Joel tries calling Meg's cell as police cars swarm the front of his house...

EXT. RKO KEITH'S RICHMOND HILL - NIGHT

Meg jogs up to the front door of an ancient theater. She silences her phone as it begins to ring. The door is locked. A paper has been taped to the door saying

Auditions 3 - 7 PM, please use side stage entrance.

Meg checks her watch - 7:10 PM.

MEG

Dammit.

She walks away, dejected. Then stops. Takes a deep breath.

MEG (CONT'D)

Screw it.

She runs down to the side entrance.

INT. RKO KEITH'S RICHMOND HILL - CONTINUOUS

She rushes onto the brightly lit stage.

MEG

Hey! Excuse me! I'm sorry I'm late, my name is Meg Hampton, I'm here for an audition.

MEG'S POV: She barely makes out a figure at the back of the house. With a voice that sounds like James Mason's long-lost brother:

BRITISH DIRECTOR

My dear girl, auditions ended ten minutes ago. Everyone's gone home!

BRITISH DIRECTOR (CONT'D)
 We're all done.
 (sighs)
 But, I suppose if you're here and
 rearing to go, I could give it a
 listen. Whenever you're ready.

MEG
 Thank you.

She composes herself.

EXT. JOEL'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Joel's back yard is lit up in red and blue as a dozen
 policemen run around the side of his house with their guns
 drawn, led by SERGEANT WADLOW (30s, serious).

SERGEANT WADLOW
 NYPD!!! ON YOUR KNEES, ON YOUR
 KNEES!!

Joel does so. He is quickly surrounded by the dozen other
 policemen, all of whom have their guns on him.

SERGEANT WADLOW (CONT'D)
Are you Jean Hightower?

JOEL
 No, I'm-- Yes. Yes I am.

Wadlow nods to one of the officers, who nervously makes her
 way over to the trashcan to open it.

JOEL (CONT'D)
 Don't--

But she opens it and almost gags. Seeing what's inside,
 Wadlow forcefully grabs Joel and begins to handcuff him.

SERGEANT WADLOW
 You're under arrest.

JOEL
 I didn't do it! Look at the trash
 here! I was taking my trash out and
 I found this not five minutes ago--

SERGEANT WADLOW
Where were you today?

JOEL
 I--

He pauses. Then faces Wadlow.

JOEL
I'm a busy man. I did several
important things today.

INT. RKO RICHMOND THEATER - NIGHT

Meg stands center stage at her audition, reciting a monologue on a set that looks eerily like the one at their original theater.

As she recites her monologue, it's clear she's improved. When she finishes, she drops her head, then looks back up, waiting for a response. The theater is silent. Then, slow deliberate clapping.

BRITISH DIRECTOR (O.S.)
Bravo, bravo. You've really seemed
to inhabit your character FULLY!
You sold every adjective, every
line! You seemed to have greatly
improved, and on a personal note,
it was a hell of a lot better than--

The British accent abruptly drops, changing to:

PETER
-- your first miserable audition.

He steps out of the shadows, slowly making his way up the aisle toward the stage.

Meg walks directly to the door she came in-- It's locked.

PETER
Don't bother. I've got you locked
in here tighter than a drum.

She turns around and faces him, truly scared. He steps up onto the far end of the stage.

There is a small box on a table by her.

PETER (CONT'D)
See that box there? Open it. I
promise there are no snakes inside.

Never taking her eyes off of him, Meg opens the box, reaches in and pulls out THE PISTOL -- the scene is now complete: This is the exact same image the movie opened on, only now it's real.

As Peter begins to slowly advance on her, Meg trembles.

MEG

Now, Peter, let's, let's talk this out, okay? Things have gotten a little out of hand. So let's just, let's just... go home. I won't say anything to anyone. I *swear*.

She begins to cry. This time it's not fake, though.

Peter continues to walk toward her.

MEG (CONT'D)

Don't make me do this please don't make me do this.

PETER

I'm not making you do anything. It's your choice. The question is: Do you want to shoot me? Is that what you're feeling? It's simple: Take the safety off, pull the hammer back, squeeze the trigger. Now how do you want this scene to end? With me dead? Or you dead? What? There's no script, no cues. Just you. So end the scene, Meg.

BAM -- The doors at the back of the theater are BUSTED OPEN, and in comes Sergeant Wadlow and the rest of the police, guns drawn. Joel is with them, closely guarded by one of the officers.

SERGEANT WADLOW

NYPD!! PUT THE GUN DOWN, MA'AM!!
PUT IT *DOWN!!*

PETER

Jean! You brought our audience. Excellent. Be sure to face them, Meg. I want them to see you.

SERGEANT WADLOW

PUT. THE GUN. DOWN.

MEG

(quietly, to Peter)
I can't.

JOEL

Meg, put it down! The scene's over!

As Peter closes in the final feet, his eyes willing her to do it, Meg squinches her eyes shut.

MEG
I'm so sorry--

JOEL
NOO!

BOOM -- One of the officers SHOOTs HER in her right shoulder, causing her own gun to go off - **BAM** --

A lamp next to Peter SHATTERS. He doesn't flinch.

As Meg goes down, her fall causes the gun to go off again, sending another bullet whistling past Peter's head, blowing a hole in the wall behind him.

Meg looks at her gun in disbelief, realizing it was loaded.

Joel screams, trying to rush the stage, but the officers hold him back.

SERGEANT WADLOW
Why the hell did you do that?

OTHER OFFICER
*She was about to shoot that guy!
 You saw her!*

On stage, Meg has collapsed, dying. Peter hunches over her.

PETER
 See? Did you hear that? They
believed you. You really are an
 actor now...

The cops rush down the aisle to apprehend Peter, who slips backstage. Wadlow chases after him--

INT. BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

-- Only to find it's an even bigger mess than the other theater's backstage. He faces several fake doors. He opens one -- it only leads to another.

Now completely turned around in the maze of set pieces, props, backdrops, pulleys, fake walls, and other junk, he hears a door open. He rushes after the sound.

EXT. ALLEY BEHIND THEATER - NIGHT

The door BURSTS open and Peter runs out in a blur. He's about to get away--

WHAM -- a crowbar CRACKS into the back of his head. As he collapses, REVEAL: Sally.

She looks even worse than when we last saw her. Her eyes are bloodshot; her hair is a mess. She kicks Peter down as he tries to get back up. He starts to laugh hysterically, his smile red with blood.

PETER

Sally! So good to see you! Great entrance. How'd you find us?

Sally throws his check down at him.

SALLY

You said I would never play Ophelia because I was "too afraid of madness." Well I'm not afraid anymore, thanks to you. You--

(STRIKES him)

-taught me that madness is really okay. I can play Ophelia. I can play anyone I damn well please thanks to YOU --

She lifts the crowbar over her head for a final blow--

Behind her, Sergeant Wadlow and the police BURST into the alley just in time--

As Sally swings down, Wadlow snatches the crowbar from her hand from behind. Before she can whirl around, he grabs her wrists, slams her against the wall, and struggles to handcuff her.

However, she squirms from side to side, making it difficult. The rest of the officers step in and help pin her down.

SALLY

I am OPHELIA!! I am MISS JULIE!!!

SERGEANT WADLOW

What the hell is wrong with these people? Gary! Check on that man she was just about to--

Wadlow gestures to where Peter lays on the ground--

But Peter is GONE.

They all look around, perplexed. Sally cackles to herself.

SALLY

Of course he got away!

EXT. FRONT OF RKO KEITH'S RICHMOND HILL - NIGHT

Joel is escorted out the front by two policemen. They walk alongside Meg, who is pushed on a stretcher by paramedics. It's a madhouse now. Police cars and ambulances have swamped the block.

MEG

Am I ... going to live...?

JOEL

Yeah, Meg, you'll be fine...

MEG

I... don't believe you...

As the paramedics load the stretcher into an ambulance, she slips away. Joel watches in horror from outside as they slam the doors of the ambulance shut, and he's stuck outside listening to them shout as they try to revive her.

Sergeant Wadlow and another officer walk Sally out and put her in the back of a police cruiser. Wadlow goes back to Joel, who's being put in another cruiser. The other officer gets in Sally's cruiser.

INT. POLICE CRUISER - NIGHT

Sally hums to herself in the back seat. The officer in the front seat sighs deeply.

FRONT SEAT OFFICER

(Australian accent)

I really didn't think it'd be you.

The officer turns around and it's MAX, wearing yet another disguise. He's dressed as a cop, but more importantly, he *looks* like a cop. He has a different mustache on.

SALLY

But... the car...

MAX

There's 50 of these sitting down the street, remember? But that's not important. What *is* important is where I drive this car. You got a decision to make. Now I can drive you to the police station, and you'll serve some time, and not pay rent, probably ruin your career. Or... you can come with us.

We linger on Sally. She shifts in her seat, looks Max in the eye, opens her mouth to answer--

EXT. ROOF OF THEATER - NIGHT

High above the street, Peter squats on the edge of the roof, and though he holds a cloth to the back of his bleeding head, he looks content.

PETER

In the alley below, the police pointlessly search for the mysterious victim. Stage right, Joel is escorted into a police cruiser and driven away. Sally is driven in a separate cruiser to who knows where. And finally, our leading lady, the lovely Meg, is taken away in an ambulance, her fate unknown.

Peter looks down on the scene he's created, at the reactions of his audience. He rises.

PETER

Bravo... *Bravo...* Encore. *Encore.*
Annd, scene.

He walks away from the edge, away from us, out of sight.

FADE OUT.