

MODI

A Play

by Sergei Task

Sheremetevskaya St.27, Apt. 228
Moscow 127521, Russia
7-495-619-4462 (phone/fax)
sergei_task@mtu-net.ru
sergeitask@aim.com

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Cast of Characters

Amedeo Modigliani	a painter
Rosalie	a restaurant owner
Chouette	a waitress*
Pierre Libaude	an art dealer

*All other female parts are played by the same actress.

Scene

A restaurant on Montparnasse

Time

January 27, 1920

SETTING: A table and chairs in a restaurant "Rosalie's," stage right, extending off left with a separate table and two chairs, on a slight elevation. Above it, on a 6-foot platform, we see a nondescript couch (when removed it will discover a bathtub), an easel and a dressing screen suggesting that this space is an artist's studio, which will then transform into an apartment. From this platform hangs a white canvas, potentially a would-be picture, otherwise it is used as a projection screen; in one of his darker moments, the painter rips it down to reveal a recess area, littered with bottles and art work hanging from a wire pinned with clothespins. A narrow platform, or walkway, behind the restaurant's main area will remain in darkness until the suicide scene.

Modigliani, whom everyone calls MODI, exists at once in and out of the restaurant. Strictly speaking, he does not exist at all, as they buried him two hours ago. We are in a twilight zone where the past and the present are happily engaged: the characters hear and respond to what is seemingly out of their reach, and when they cross space they often move back and forth in time. This effect will be created by special lighting, music and choreography, the transitions being very fluid.

At the table, stage left, sits MODI. He has coughing fits-it is the last stage of TB. He is reading a newspaper. Until his line "I'm talking about anatomical theater," he should avoid direct contact and face away from his vis-a-vis to suggest the unusual, one is tempted to say unlikely, circumstances of his encounter with the living characters.

AT RISE: Jingle of a door bell. Enter a respectable gentleman in a gabardine coat and hat, MONSIEUR LIBAUDE. He comes to the fourth wall, rubbing his cold hands, to look at some paintings. As he is studying them closely, he is unable to conceal the fact that he is pleasantly surprised.

LIBAUDE: Odilon Redon . . . Gauguin . . . Renoir . . . Not bad for a dump!

Yet something is wrong. He is showing signs of impatience failing to see the pictures that he came for. When he speaks again his tone betrays concern, perhaps a trace of irritation.

LIBAUDE: (Continued) Where *are* they? They are all supposed to be *here*! His most recent Self-Portrait . . . his death being less than a year away.

Slide: Self-Portrait, 1919

Chica? . . . She was fifteen when they met.

Slide: Seated Nude, 1916

That opaque beauty . . . Madame Fanchon?

Slide: The Grand Nude, c.1919

Beatrice Hastings—poet, journalist, troublemaker . . . ?

Slide: The Amazon, 1909

LIBAUDE: (Continued) Jeanne . . . his "one and only"?

Slide: Jeanne Hebuteme, 1918

Not even Chouette, "the girl he never touched"?

Slide: The Brunette, 1918

No Modiglianis?!?

He turns around to see CHOUETTE. The waitress smiles at him amiably, then takes his coat and hat. LIBAUDE, dressed formally in a three-piece suit, sits at the table . and opens the menu. The girl hangs his coat and hat on the clothes rack and comes over to take the order. He has put on his best face.

LIBAUDE: (Continued) Cheese . . . ragout . . . aha, specialty! What will be the joy of the palate?

CHOUETTE, who is mute, uses sign language, as in charade, to show him "what they did to a ram." LIBAUDE, somewhat thrown off, is following her hands intently. Then, uncertainly.

A . . . chop?

She gives him an encouraging smile. He is very proud of himself.

A chop with . . . with what, if I may ask?

The girl sets to describe what is on the side while he is guessing.

Fried potatoes . . . onions . . . mushrooms . . .

Shaking her head she repeats her demonstration.

Broccoli?

The girl nods happily.

Peas . . . gravy . . . Yeah, bring it up. Wait! Is Madame Rosalie here today?

The girl shows "working at the stove."

LIBAUDE: (Continued) In the kitchen. Tell her to come see me when she is done. Now you can go.

As she is on her way out.

Make sure to bring a decanter of the Courvoisier and two glasses!

She is gone.

Peas?

He makes a wry face. He is curling his well-groomed beard into little ringlets in distraction without seeing MODI, at the other table, who now draws him in his big sketch book.

LIBAUDE: (Continued) This is it? Rosalie's! The den of bohemians. The haven of hopefuls. Should I be wearing tattoos and earrings? Will I offend the waitress if I offer to pay for my dinner? Let's ask the immortals.

He turns to the pictures on the wall.

What do you say?

MODI: Stick it up yours.

A shock of recognition. No eye contact.

LIBAUDE: A Modigliani legacy: rudeness and conceit. Do we know each other? I concede, our paths may have crossed--before you kicked the bucket, that is--but we were never properly introduced is what I mean. Which is another way of saying that I don't talk to strangers. Alive *or* dead. No offense meant. I've seen you to your grave, yes, but it is not

nearly the same as being on a personal. . .

MODI: I don't think we've ever parted.

LIBAUDE: Oh boy. Another harangue about the miserable condition of an artist. Rest in peace. Enjoy the rustic pleasures of the afterlife. If you will excuse me.

He stands up.

I have a business meeting which I completely forgot about. It's been a . . .

MODI: Who's talking miserable? I was everyone's *pollo*. A chicken.

LIBAUDE responds without thinking twice and instantly finds himself being dragged into an argument.

LIBAUDE: A cock of the walk, more likely.

MODI: No no no. My only "crush" is this. . . (*Strokes his sketch book lovingly*) as my Mamma will proudly tell you.

LIBAUDE: Your Mamma!

MODI: She'd make a scene at her own grave if I failed. That's how close we were.

Shows two fingers crossed.

LIBAUDE: (*Without looking*) Do I see a third finger missing?

MODI: My father? He was the best, given the time he spent in his silver mines in Sardinia. With or without him, our home worked like a clock. Punctual *and* orderly. A veritable synagogue.

LIBAUDE: Huh?

MODI: A joke.

CHOUETTE brings the decanter, glasses and a coarse-grained bread. LIBAUDE shakes off the hallucination and sits down again.

LIBAUDE: Did you tell her?

The girl nods yes.

What's your name?

She tracks down a line at the bottom of the menu for him.

LIBAUDE: (Continued) Chouette? Hmn. And I thought it was a petit four.

A grunt from MODI. LIBAUDE pours himself some cognac.

You are not very talkative for a waitress, are you? Ha ha ha.

He suddenly freezes, listening to himself.

Did you hear it?

He points at his stomach.

After funerals I could eat a horse. This hunger for life!

He breaks off a chunk of bread and chews it heartily.

Mmmmmm. The priest tells me after the confession the other day: "Libaude, you exude vitality!" Now why don't you give yourself a rest?

She sits on the edge of a chair.

MODI: Jewish luck: they botched my death mask. *Molto bene* I didn't look my best, I'm afraid. Hopefully, they didn't misspell my name in the obit. Or did they?

He opens the newspaper.

LIBAUDE: I'm amazed myself. After doing it regularly with my wife, to feel this . . . seething. (*Intimately*) I know a place just in case, not to be mentioned to the priest.

He winks at CHOUETTE and downs his drink. MODI is shaking his head as he reads the obituary.

LIBAUDE: Libaude is not a tightwad. A good cause is worth your money.

She looks away.

On the other hand, a penny saved is a penny earned, right? Who wants to be skinned alive!

With artists, one learns quickly.

Pours more drink.

LIBAUDE: (Continued) Artists are cutthroats. They lead you to believe that they are on their last legs. Can't afford to buy paints. (*About MODI*) And he is dressed like a dandy!

He cackles. MODI looks himself over. Indeed, he is dressed in style: velvet suit albeit worn-out, open shirt, casually tied bandanna and brand-new shoes, what with a three-day-old stubble and very sick, sunken eyes. Bringing his glass to the light, LIBAUDE rolls an amber drop across the bottom.

LIBAUDE: (Continued) Well here's the deal: one bottle! Give them ten, they'll drink it all.

So I keep them in check, for their own good. 750 ml, for inspiration! Ha ha ha.

Downs his drink.

VOICE OF ROSALIE: Chouette!

The girl explains to LIBAUDE that his order must be ready. She casually greets MODI on her way out, as she would a regular customer. LIBAUDE produces a gold watch on a chain from his breast pocket. When he opens it we hear a chime. A booming voice from the kitchen.

VOICE OF ROSALIE: It's well done, as far as *I* am concerned. And I don't host diplomatic soirees either!

LIBAUDE: There's a spitfire.

Hides his watch. A shrill whistle. LIBAUDE is startled. He looks out the window.

LIBAUDE: Some neighborhood.

MODI: Try La Rotonde. Decent place, good food. All the Parisian beau monde. More artists than they have chairs. You'll like it. Just watch out for your life. Its customers have been known to disappear from the face of the earth.

LIBAUDE: Excuse me?

MODI: Painters. Always looking for dead bodies. I'm talking about anatomical theater, you know. (*Looks him in the eye*) I knew you'd come.

LIBAUDE: I was passing by.

MODI: You came for Modiglianis.

LIBAUDE: Now that's an absurd--!

MODI: Good move. Surely the lady (*He motions toward the kitchen*) is a piece of work but she might be worth the trouble. I wouldn't be surprised if she had something. I mean she should.

LIBAUDE: Well, I haven't seen any.

MODI: On the walls? No. Not on the walls, *coretto*.

LIBAUDE: And what brought you here?

MODI: I couldn't miss someone making a killing out of my dying, could I?

LIBAUDE stands up in agitation.

LIBAUDE: If you are here to mess up my--!

MODI: Shhh. If I know what you're looking for, I'll see what I can do for you. But promise to go all the way.

LIBAUDE: All the way?

MODI: Hand in hand. The painter and his patron. Isn't that how it should be?

LIBAUDE: Ideally, yes . . .

MODI: Then you've got a deal.

CHOUETTE brings in a huge platter with food enough for two. LIBAUDE sits down. He decides to take care of his stomach.

MODI: Enjoy it.

LIBAUDE mumbles a "thank you" with his mouth full.

I didn't mean the chop.

LIBAUDE looks up to see what is about to transpire. The girl crosses to MODI'S table. She stops at a distance. He tears off the obituary page, rolls it into a ball and "swallows" it. She laughs quietly.

MODI: (Continued) What's dandy about death is it lifts your spirits. Ever see a suspension settle down in a transparent glass? The dregs hit the bottom and the liquid turns clear as an infant's eyes. Touch me.

He extends his arm, their fingers touch.

I'm warm. I'm working on a new piece. And guess what, I'm hungry!

Beats her at it.

Bring me pasta. Anything long and curvy. Does that include absinthe? And *mia cara Livorno?*

She wants to ask him something but doesn't have the nerve.

MODI: What is it?

Her hands make a tale-telling gesture.

After death? Many things will happen after death. Are you kidding! My work will sell, for starters.

LIBAUDE: Took you awhile to figure that one out.

MODI: I wish someone would have given me a tip.

CHOUETTE turns to go.

MODI: Chouette!

She pauses.

MODI: It's good to see you.

Lithe and slender, she leaves as the two men look on.

MODI: I used to worry myself to death. Anxieties, not fears. Fears are the privilege of innocence.

LIBAUDE takes out a pad to make an entry, as MODI goes on.

My family. A big studio. Coughing fits. New coat for the winter. My outstanding debts. My messy relationships

LIBAUDE: Aha!

MODI: Myself--that golden boy who walked out on me years and years ago. And on top of that, what would happen if all these things suddenly fell into place. Was that scary!

LIBAUDE: You hated life.

MODI: I hated winter, which sent chills down my spine and rendered my numbed fingers useless. I hated being rude to people I didn't even know till I'd sobered up. I detested art dealers for not buying.

LIBAUDE laughs benevolently.

But not quite as much as I detested myself for wanting to sell. And this daubing for hours--there must be easier ways to prove your madness. I'm sure I committed more sins than I could atone for, but hating life was not on my list. I knew this world was a terrible place to live and I set out to enjoy every moment of it.

LIBAUDE: (*Writing*) The end justifies the means?

MODI: You're asking the wrong person I never had any means to speak of.

In comes ROSALIE, a faded beauty of about 35, going fat, with a red face from the stove heat and Neapolitan jet-black eyes. As she approaches LIBAUDE'S table, she wipes her hands on her apron.

ROSALIE: Palatable?

LIBAUDE: (*His mouth full*) Mmmmm!

He pulls a chair for her, she takes a seat.

How about a drink?

Always in charge, she promptly pours cognac in two glasses.

ROSALIE: Is there a good cause?

LIBAUDE: Modigliani?

She waits for more.

I am fresh from his funeral. May he rest in peace!

They empty their glasses in silence as MODI is watching. CHOUETTE brings him his pasta, a bottle of absinthe and a glass.

MODI: Strange, isn't it?

She looks at him questioningly, then sits across and watches him eat.

I come here to see you what a grave confession to make! And yet you are the only girl I never invited to my studio.

She smiles sadly.

They all wanted a piece of me. The moment I was near a woman I had to be . . . whatever I was not.

LIBAUDE: That sounds familiar.

MODI: You, you accepted me completely, as I could never accept myself. At times it felt like I didn't have to speak--you can probably read minds.

She shakes her head.

MODI: (Continued) Not this dirty mind, huh? (*Amused by her anger*) Someday--When it's worth reading. Perfect lovers.

ROSALIE: Buried on Père-Lachaise?

LIBAUDE: I wish he'd seen the crowd! All artistic Paris. By the way, Max Jacob sends his regards. Pierre Libaude, art dealer.

He produces his business card, which she studies before hiding it in her bodice.

MODI: It's a good feeling: leaving behind one thing undefined.

The girl looks away as tears begin to well up in her eyes.

I don't mean sex the, the truly dirty part. Crippling the loved one along the way. The joy of spitting on the altar before turning to a new god.

She protests angrily, he obviously has no problem reading her sign language.

I *am* cynical. I am also feisty, unpleasant, difficult, temperamental, suspicious, alcoholic, disagreeable, lecherous, unfaithful, and despotic. That's me.

More protestations.

Oh, libeling myself? I'm not even half way through the list.

LIBAUDE: Interesting artwork. (*A gesture toward the wall*) With a collection like this you could have an exhibition. Trust me.

ROSALIE is not one to be easily won over by flattery. He launches an attack from the other flank.

LIBAUDE: You have an Odilon Redon over there? "A Nude." Perfect lines. Repose of a volcano! Quite a piece.

She gives her hair a nice touch.

ROSALIE: There was something to look at.

LIBAUDE: Are you saying . . . ?

ROSALIE strikes a pose from the painting. LIBAUDE stares at her with feigned disbelief.

Really!

CHOUETTE taps on the table to get MODI'S attention. It is her little "speech" now for him to interpret.

MODI: What? I am . . . open . . . caring . . . sensitive . . . vulnerable . . . gentle . . . witty . . . and gifted. Try hard as you may, your catalog stops short of mine. Is there anything else about me that I should know?

She adds one more.

I am . . . gullible. Gullible, huh? Well, I would probably believe you if you said the Moon had been removed for restoration purposes.

He goes on without seeing her leave his table.

I may get a little suspicious if you told me that under those spots they discovered the brush strokes of van Gogh. Chouette? What?

She shows two fingers.

Two more. I am also . . . so clever . . . and so . . . simpleminded. Hey hey where you going!

CHOUETTE indicates something is burning in the kitchen and leaves.

ROSALIE: After Redon, I was everyone's favorite. Bouguereau, God bless his heart, spared no cushions for my comfort. Those bedbug retreats! Drafts. Popping springs.

She feels her sides wincing at the recollection.

Santa Madonna! I've been there. Cabanel, Courtois, Durart . . . I posed for them all!

LIBAUDE: (*Innocently*) Modigliani?

ROSALIE: For Amedeo? Never!

LIBAUDE: Why not?

ROSALIE: You'd be the first to run for your life, if you saw his daubs.

She bites her tongue remembering the man's profession. Probing the ground further.

ROSALIE: No?

LIBAUDE: You have his portraits, don't you?

ROSALIE: I wish someone would tell me what I have!

LIBAUDE puts his jaws to work pondering his strategy.

MODI: Simple-minded? Must be a polite form for dim-witted. Am I missing something?

Alright, maybe I *am* stupid. My first *faux pas*, one of many, upon my arrival here was buying women's woollies for this girl that wore nothing under her coat. As it turned out, it was the Parisian high fashion.

LIBAUDE: He did some sketches of Chica . . . perhaps a portrait . . . years ago. Well?

ROSALIE shrugs her shoulders.

Nothing?

MODI: You know about Chica?

LIBAUDE: I do my homework.

MODI: I'm impressed. So you're after Chica.

LIBAUDE: Don't tell me you can show me one.

MODI: Will you give me a hand?

ROSALIE: Uh oh.

MODI: Can't find my matches.

LIBAUDE crosses to the studio to light the candles for him.

MODI: Chica, mmmm. A kindred spirit.

He is at the easel, fixing a new canvas, preparing his paints and brushes, etc. Here, as with other flashbacks, special lighting and music indicate the transition.

MODI: Better yet, a good sitter--provided one could coax her into it. Which eventually you would, by hook or by crook. Boy, was I a good Samaritan if only for one night.

CHICA enters the studio. It is the same actress that plays CHOUETTE, but she is transformed: we see an awkward, inhibited provincial girl, a teenager, who is doing her best to look older than she is. She makes a few baby steps and stops. MODI glances at her casually.

MODI: I will start with your tender little fingers, if you don't mind. We cannibals each have our own quirks. Wouldn't hurt if they'd fattened you up. Come closer, I'm not hungry now. No, to the light.

She does.

Why do blondes smile when they see lightning? They think that they are getting their pictures taken.

The girl smiles.

You have a beautiful smile. Where you from?

CHICA: From the southern country.

MODI: You can undress behind the screen.

As she does.

MODI: In the country you have a mother. You write to her every other day. "Mamma, I live in a spacious, sunny room with a view on the Seine." Why disappoint her? "At the bistro where I work as a waitress they pay me well, not to mention the tips" You can't say you pose for a song naked as God made you. "Wait till I save some money and boom, I'll walk in before you know" And even if you don't, she will understand.

CHICA: (*From behind the screen*) I will too, I promise!

MODI: Right. I've promised it in *my* letters. For seven years now.

CHICA: Where *you* from?

MODI: (*Proudly*) Livorno, the only town in Italy where slurring a Jew could get you in more trouble than offending a Duke.

CHICA: You profess Judaism?

MODI: I profess Art. Doing nudes is a profoundly religious experience.

LIBAUDE: Hear hear.

He jots something down in his pad while MODI goes on.

MODI: I know enough Hebrew to read Kaddish. It moves me, but can I move God? What if I am saying these words only to invoke the spirits of bygoners? To feel that sweet murmur in my blood which is so out of place here?

The girl shows her face from behind the screen.

CHICA: Will you turn off the light?

MODI: What?

CHICA emerges naked. LIBAUDE is staring with his mouth open.

ROSALIE: I'm sure you've seen naked girls before.

LIBAUDE: I, uh, got distracted. I was thinking about, uh, . . .

CHICA: You've had a good view of me.

She is behind the screen again.

MODI: Not good enough to paint you in the dark from memory.

CHICA: Just today. Please?

MODI pauses, then blows out the candles.

LIBAUDE: . . . about, uh, horse-radish!

He returns to their table.

ROSALIE: Horse-radish, of course. Give me a second. I may have just what you are looking for.

ROSALIE, suddenly very mysterious, goes to the cupboard where she expects to find her Modiglianis. She opens it and, bending over, carefully inspects its lower depths while giving LIBAUDE ample opportunity to review her behind. She straightens up, a thoughtful expression on her face, only to find the jar of horse-radish right under her nose.

ROSALIE: (Continued) Oh here it is!

Triumphantly, she takes it back to the table. Fake innocence

Who is Chica?

LIBAUDE: You said you didn't have her portraits.

ROSALIE: An old flame?

We hear a gramophone record-it is an old romantic tune. Light change. MODI and CHICA are dancing wrapped in a bed sheet. It is another occasion and a different CHICA. MODI turns to LIBAUDE.

MODI: Aren't you going to join us?

LIBAUDE: I . . . no.

MODI and CHICA laugh quietly.

ROSALIE: Older pieces, higher prices?

LIBAUDE: You think he's being serious?

MODI: So you like it.

CHICA nods, blushing perhaps, not because she is still bashful but because she is excited.

CHICA: Ah well. And what do you like about posing nude?

MODI: The body . . .

CHICA: Yes? . . . I learned not to be ashamed of it.

MODI: You must learn to love it.

CHICA: As much as you do?

MODI: Mmmm.

CHICA: How could you draw it so well after one quick look? That first sitting, remember?

MODI: I didn't get one thing right. *(She is intrigued)* This.

He bends to kiss the scar on her shoulder. ROSALIE offers LIBAUDE horse-radish from the tip of the knife. He rolls up his eyes in ecstasy.

LIBAUDE: Mmmmmm.

A loud screeching of the gramophone needle. LIBAUDE responds to the funny sound.

LIBAUDE: Your pipelines OK?

ROSALIE: Pipelines?

LIBAUDE: Plumbing.

ROSALIE: You mean?

LIBAUDE: Your bathroom.

ROSALIE: Well--My toilet tank.

LIBAUDE: Won't fill up? The float lies dead and water trickles out?

He winks at her.

ROSALIE: There you are.

LIBAUDE: Aren't you lucky!

ROSALIE: Am I?

LIBAUDE: My profession.

ROSALIE: Aren't you a--

She turns his business card in her hands.

LIBAUDE: Art dealing, yes. It's the garnish, as it were. As for the meat, it is pipes, washers . . . toilets. Fifteen years on the job. You may as well forget about your leaks.

ROSALIE: You probably charge more than I can.

LIBAUDE: Shhh. There is no room for profiteering among patrons of art.

The dancers pass the bottle back and forth. Their wobbly feet tell the story of their binge.

ROSALIE

CHICA

So when did you become a patron
of art, Monsieur?

So when did you fall for
painting?

LIBAUDE

MODI

Libaude.

Modi.

ROSALIE

CHICA

Libaude.

Modi.

MODI: Ahhh. It's good to be closer to you by two syllables.

They dance.

LIBAUDE: Here's how. I finished off this bathroom. A beauty. Imitation marble. He takes

a peek and he says, "What about that hole?"

LIBAUDE: Scared the shit out of me. "Where?" He points at the bare wall: "What are you gonna cover it with?" So I get him this painting. Poussin. "Bathing Aphrodite."

He strikes a pose.

LIBAUDE: (Continued) A copy, naturally. Matched perfectly, like it had been designed for the man's bathroom. I didn't make a penny on it, mind you.

MODI: Guess what you are.

CHICA: What?

MODI: A soccer ball.

CHICA: You can't touch a soccer ball with your hands!

It's a cancan now. They hop clumsily, giggling, tripping over the bed sheet. For a moment they pause at LIBAUDE'S table.

MODI: Did you say you wanted Chica?

She gives him an elbow and they hop away, two naughty children.

ROSALIE: And what does Poussin have to do with it?

LIBAUDE: Old masters are a sure thing; as for this stuff

He dismisses the paintings on the wall.

Junk. You can barely break even.

ROSALIE: There is a market for modern art! Renoir.

MODI: O, Renoir!

LIBAUDE: Ah, there's a man who really fleshes them out. Everyone wants Renoir. They say he caresses his models' buttocks for hours to get the feel.

ROSALIE: There are others who get the feel the old way.

MODI blows her a kiss. Cancan is over. The merry couple has stopped at the open window. They shout to someone in the back yard, their backs to the viewers.

CHICA: Hey! Hey!

MODI: *(He declaims, punctuating it with the bottle)* Midway along the journey of our life I strayed, abandoning the rightful path, And found myself within a gloomy wood.*

With a mischievous grin, ROSALIE pulls LIBAUDE up suggesting that they give the couple a dressing down. They change their voices acting as two angry neighbors across from MODI'S studio.

MALE VOICE/LIBAUDE: You have any idea how late it is?

FEMALE VOICE/ROSALIE: Shame on you!

MODI and CHICA exchange glances, then fling open the bed sheet giving their neighbors a good view of frontal nudity. Dead silence. They wrap themselves up, locked in an endless kiss. Lights out. LIBAUDE realizes his arm is around ROSALIE'S waist. She moves away with a provocative smile.

ROSALIE: Where were we?

LIBAUDE: I'm not sure.

ROSALIE: The pictures?

LIBAUDE: The pictures.

ROSALIE: This stuff," you said. Do you know what they cost me?

LIBAUDE: Pocket change, at best.

ROSALIE: That's what you think. Take Modi for one, did he ever pay for his drinks? And he drank like a fish. No food, God bless him.

Light on the other table where MODI is drinking.

ROSALIE: They're all tarred with the same brush.

 *Dante. *Divine Comedy*. Translated by Thomas G. Bergin.

She crosses to MODI.

ROSALIE: (Continued) "Add it to my bill, Rosalie! I'll pay for it next time, Rosalie!"

With what? His threadbare pants?

She brushes his knee flirtatiously and he promptly responds by bringing her down on his lap. She giggles like a school girl, still talking to LIBAUDE.

ROSALIE: (Continued) Okay, so Utrillo may bring the real thing once in a while. Steals from his mother, I guess. Who, an artist in her own right, probably steals from her lover, Toulouse-Lautrec. It's what they do best, steal.

She shares a laugh with MODI, who is getting bold with her.

And shall I mention the glassware this scalawag has smashed to pieces? Modi, right.

She breaks away from him, almost reluctantly, and returns to her table.

You add it up, and you are in the red. Two or three years' worth of IOU's. I tell you: these paintings are priceless!

MODI: Touché.

LIBAUDE: To cut the long story short

ROSALIE: Huh?

LIBAUDE: Do you have Modiglianis?!

ROSALIE: A man of passion I recognize the itch.

Enter an older CHICA. She wears a risqué dress and looks weather-beaten. She also smokes.

CHICA: How much is the sucker willing to spend on the treatment?

ROSALIE: Ask around.

CHICA: Monsieur?

LIBAUDE has buried his face in a handkerchief. To ROSALIE.

CHICA: (Continued) He says he has a cold. He says he can take care of one thing at a time. He says he's not sure how much fun it is anyway. (To LIBAUDE) When it's good it's good but when it's bad . . .

MODI: Come on, Chica!

She makes a hopeless gesture and joins MODI at the table. He has a bad cough. It's been awhile since they saw each other.

CHICA: What are you drinking? (She picks up the bottle) The "green," what else.

MODI: (A warning) I have TB, remember?

CHICA: Ai ai ai.

She takes a swig.

MODI: Jesus. I can't believe I picked you up. If you hadn't said, It's me, Chica . . . I could have been your next client. How disgusting: me paying you for getting laid.

CHICA: I would've taken the money.

MODI: Yeah. You look like shit, love.

CHICA: Likewise.

They pass the glass back and forth.

MODI: What do you expect! My day: tracking down Utrillo who has borrowed my coat. As he already hocked it to buy some liquor, you might say I'm looking for a 40-proof equivalent of my coat yet another way of getting warm, if you ask me--perhaps a better one

given that my coat was probably not even 30-proof. Come to think of it, I should toast Maurice on a good deal. After I cut his balls off. Hope that letter is still there I haven't even read it.

CHICA: Someone I know?

MODI: My pal from the old days. Did I tell you this? When I was twelve or something he took me to the junk yard to show me a picture of this sex-kitten. It was one of those nebulous, fuzzy-schmuzzy affairs that give your imagination a real stretch. We both wanted her so bad we decided to bum the picture. No cache was safe enough to keep us out of trouble anyway. In my household, where the word "shikseh" sounded like an air-raid siren, that bombshell could have done more damage than the German "Big Bertha."

CHICA: I could never get it. What's this thing about your Jewishness that you keep bringing it up like a sore thumb?

MODI: Maybe they made it sore. You think I was this way back home? Here when I say that Modigliani actually is *not* an Italian name everyone gives me that look, you know? (*An eye contact with LIBAUDE*) Like I'm a public nuisance? So I tell them right away: I really hate to upset you but I'm Jewish.

CHICA: There's a brave boy.

He gives her a strange look.

What?

MODI: I don't know if it qualifies as "brave," (*Raises his voice to get ROSALIE'S attention*) but I always put up a fight when they kick me out of a bar!

(*He shoots a meaningful look at the other table. Vindictively.*) Wait till I see one of them at my exhibition some day.

LIBAUDE: 0-la! Now he is throwing stones at you.

ROSALIE: He wouldn't mind killing *two* birds with one stone.

LIBAUDE: You may be right there. They'd bite the hand that feeds them, which you can certainly say about mine. No moral code, nothing sacred.

MODI: Speaking of moral codes: Never pay for drink, if you can get around it. And don't fuck your model, if she is going to fuck with your work. Isn't that more or less along the lines of what Moses said?

CHICA: You've got a mean streak.

MODI: I just learned something about good and evil: It's the same wine turned sour.

ROSALIE: What are you scribbling there?

LIBAUDE: Just . . . thoughts.

MODI: Do you still have that scar on your shoulder?

CHICA: Don't tell me you want to kiss it.

MODI: I want to kiss it.

CHICA: Liar. "If there's anything I try hardest to avoid, it's a familiar face." See, I can remember your dirty little secrets. Tell me a new one.

MODI: I was not a painter in my past life.

ROSALIE & CHICA: Oh brother!

MODI: What do you mean "Oh brother!" I'm starting from a clean slate! A novice. A tenderfoot. Cézanne has been there. And Henri Rousseau. They have an edge, don't you see? Artistic memory. Ah what the hell. I'll beat them all fair and square.

LIBAUDE: He could explain artistic.

CHICA: Could you?

MODI: You want *me* to define artistic? You just did when you uncrossed your legs.

She smiles faintly.

ROSALIE: (*To LIBAUDE*) It's too early in the day for him to discuss art in earnest. (*To MODI*) You need a break, Amedeo even better, a vacation.

MODI: Now they want to take away my paints and brushes! Can I have a stick and a beach to myself?

CHICA: Easy, easy. I bet you haven't had sex for a day or two.

MODI: Sex. Is it something that you do because it would be stupid if you didn't?

CHICA is looking at him more closely.

CHICA: All right now--What is it?

MODI: I don't know what you're talking about.

CHICA: It helps to get it out.

MODI: Says who? Well. I don't know. The Hassidic quarter. I'm standing on the corner and three Jews, in black fedoras, are coming down the alley. The older one beckons me over and asks if I will help them out. Sure. I follow them down the steps, into the basement, and there are all these people there at the table, waiting, as we proceed to the kitchen. The man shows me a big oven plugged into the wall, which he wants me to unplug, and when I do he shows me the door.

CHICA: I knew you'd make a good shabbes goy.

He grabs her by the shoulders and shakes her viciously. She screams. He comes to his senses and lets go of her.

MODI: I didn't say a word, do you understand? Wouldn't admit I was one. of them!

LIBAUDE: One of "them"

ROSALIE: He was probably amused by the whole thing.

MODI: I was . . . amused by the whole thing.

CHICA: Congratulations: three years, and you are as crazy as a bedbug.

LIBAUDE: I once was a witness, at the Lapin Agile, of his crazy talk. He said, "My philosophy of life"--

MODI: (*Overlapping*) My philosophy of life sits proudly on the rock of my financial imbecility. I am a Rothschild who forgot his way to the bank. What would *I* do with a million dollars? Well, I'd stack the bills up, one big heap in the center of the Place Pigalle, and when the night comes I would strike a match. Can you see it? A ball of fire with the prostitutes doing a cancan and the cabbies honking and the firemen cursing and the police after my ass. They are going to put me behind bars, right? And for the rest of my life I will have all the models I want, for free.

CHICA: Your dreams.

MODI: My dreams are too disjointed to describe. I often scream in my sleep. I'm not fun to be around, honey pie.

CHICA is silent.

ROSALIE: I wonder what keeps him going after he's run out of gas.

CHICA: What keeps you going?

MODI: My landlord's face when he is told to forget about rent. A binge at the Lapin Agile.

A line from Lautréamont. (*Pointedly*) Fixing the lady's plumbing.

ROSALIE and LIBAUDE exchange glances.

CHICA: Sounds like there's not much you would change in your life.

MODI: *Di che si tratta?* I can choose between vermilion and magenta, as you can choose

between two clients. Should we both give up our profession because we cannot change a damn thing? Now don't sulk, Chica. At least we can amuse. Oh, and the money part! The patron's money hat rubs so gently against your thigh having just defected to a new pocket.

LIBAUDE & MODI: There's a change!

CHICA looks at them in disgust.

CHICA: You don't really mean it--all your wisecracking--because if you do--Aren't you sometimes ashamed of yourself?

MODI: Let me see.

LIBAUDE is happily punctuating each point by clanking his fork against the decanter.

I'm *not* ashamed of baring my soul in front of you--only seems fair after you stripped buck-naked, so many times, in front of me. I'm *not* ashamed of lying to my mother in every letter about coming to see her, not really. I *didn't* feel remorse when I dumped Simone, who claimed she was pregnant with my child. I can't think of anything that I am truly ashamed of.

Both men are pleased to no end.

And guess what: It feels good to confess my sins. Like you said, it helps to get it out.

CHICA: Fuck you, Dedo. (*To LIBAUDE*) Fuck you. And you call me your friend.

MODI: My only friend is silence: it leaves me be. Give me silence in exchange for my life.

CHICA: Your life. Your life, huh? You sonofabitch. You don't know shit about life--and you don't care. It's something you play with on canvas. And if you don't like it, you scrape it off. As simple as that. But what's the use! With a real job, you'd be.

MODI: What did you say . . . ? A real job? A real job? And what am I doing? Come on, speak up. What do you think I'm doing? You slut, you sneaky little snatch! I'm sitting

around with my thumb in my ass? Huh? . . . Huh . . . ?

He is on his feet, visibly shaking and cursing in his native tongue. She also stands up, getting hold of the bottle.

CHICA: Go on, kill me.

She offers him the bottle. For a moment, as they face off, it seems entirely possible. She then finishes off the bottle and leaves.

MODI: There's your chance.

He sits again.

LIBAUDE: Knock it off, will you?

MODI: Suit yourself. It's your show.

LIBAUDE: You're damn right. *(To ROSALIE)* So?

ROSALIE: Huh?

LIBAUDE: You haven't answered my question.

ROSALIE: And what was the question?

LIBAUDE: Do you have Modiglianis?

ROSALIE: I guess so.

LIBAUDE: You guess?

ROSALIE: I mean I didn't throw them away.

MODI: *(To LIBAUDE)* What did I tell you!

LIBAUDE: You didn't throw them away. Good. That's very good.

ROSALIE: Listen . . .

LIBAUDE: Libaude.

ROSALIE: Monsieur Libaude. Are you married?

LIBAUDE: Alas, Madame.

ROSALIE: Would you bring home your wife's portrait? Cataracts for eyes, a "swan-neck" inspired by an absinthe bottle.

MODI: Ha!

ROSALIE: You know what I'm talking about.

LIBAUDE: Well, if I tell her in advance

ROSALIE: If you tell her in advance she may do damage to your own portrait. (*She lightly smacks his face*) I didn't throw his paintings away only because he is a fine man.

LIBAUDE: Was.

ROSALIE: God save his soul. (*Crosses herself*) Had one or two screws loose, but a real gentleman-when sober, that is-very handsome, very chivalrous . . . an Italian! No woman could resist his.

LIBAUDE: (*Changing course*) Yes. He liked to draw female models, so it seems.

ROSALIE: You bet he did. And when it's a married woman you can draw yourself into a lot of trouble.

LIBAUDE: The husband dragged his head down every step?

ROSALIE: Worse. He--

MODI: He dragged the *husband*.

ROSALIE: That's one way to get stuck with a lady. I'm talking about Madame *Fanchon*.

LIBAUDE: Fanchon!

The mad glitter in his eye makes ROSALIE slide back in her chair. She is mildly scared.

You know what she is? A milky cloud. Monet's fog on the Thames. You sink into this billowing haze alongside the English Parliament, oblivious to your political commitments,

and you are a myth. The sunken Atlantis. But you don't care. Your pride and joy, that solid, grey matter in charge of caring one way or the other, has dissolved, annihilated, gone. The sweet pain of void!

ROSALIE: When did you last see her?

LIBAUDE: Seven years ago. A Modigliani portrait.

Light change. LIBAUDE gets his pad ready--he is becoming an avid writer. We see MADAME FANCHON'S apartment. On the couch, the same actress is posing nude. She exudes languor and passion. MODI crosses to his easel and picks up the brush. But something is missing. He is looking around. He cannot get started without a drink. LIBAUDE picks up the decanter of Courvoisier and takes it to MODI. He then grabs a chair, all pumped up, shining like a nickel, and sits in the corner prepared to watch the seance. MODI begins to work, helping himself to cognac. He can't. He drops his brush in disgust.

MODI: What's the use!

MADAME FANCHON: What did Dr. Alexander say?

MODI: *(She pushed the button)* What did Dr. Alexander say? What did Dr. Alexander say?!

He furiously empties the decanter in one long gulp and puts it down with a thump. Short of breath, he holds onto a chair for support.

LIBAUDE: Dr. Alexander? What kind of an oracle is he anyway? He should be busy treating his patients rather than sticking his nose into other people's affairs.

ROSALIE: What if he is a better art dealer?

LIBAUDE: Pooh!

ROSALIE: (*An aside*) No one in his right mind is gonna buy this stuff anyway.

MODI has regained his composure.

MODI: Dr. Alexander said, "Dedo, success is round the corner."

MADAME FANCHON: You see.

MODI: I see, yes! Braque is peddling his "little cubes" for a hundred a piece. Matisse gets an exhibition in New York. Picasso has the money-bags come to him like a bunch of doctors attending a sick man. And Utrillo, poor thing, can barely keep up spending on booze what his paintings have earned him. You know what "success" really means? What happens to someone else.

MADAME FANCHON: I thought you said, "I am above"--

MODI: Sitting in a pile of shit. Above, right. Just my nose showing.

MADAME FANCHON: Some nose!

LIBAUDE: Do you mind?

He is humbly pointing at the canvas. MODI shrugs indifferently.

MODI: Suit yourself.

LIBAUDE crosses to the easel. It is a huge leap of faith. For a moment it seems as though he'll never make it, then he gets bold enough to give it a touch. No one is looking.

MADAME FANCHON: All this suffering and you wouldn't let go of your pain, wouldn't share one bit.

MODI: My pain is me, Fanchon. Are you sure you want any of it? Which part? You won't last one day with this poison in your veins. And I want it all to myself, yes. Greedy greedy. I like to see just how many more blows I can take. I like to bleed inside. I like to hear my heart miss a beat before it leaps into my throat. I like to hurt so much from a droning wire no

one can touch. You know what "suffering" is? Being alive.

MODI crosses to the kitchen, past ROSALIE, where he starts to look for something.

MADAME FANCHON adopts a more striking pose. LIBAUDE takes it as an encouragement to paint in earnest.

MADAME FANCHON: Dedo, you must work.

MODI: *(Slamming doors)* I do three pictures a day--in my head. What's the use of spoiling canvas when nobody will buy?

MADAME FANCHON: What are you looking for?

MODI: Is there any liquor in this house?

MADAME FANCHON: Try the cupboard. In the sitting room.

MODI drifts into the sitting room, which is also the restaurant's main area. As he draws blank in the cupboard's many compartments, he visibly gets more irked.

ROSALIE: I told him. *(She gets up and goes to the cupboard)* I said, "Why don't you do a portrait your customer can look at without wondering whether he should have corrective surgery?" *(Facing MODI)* If you did it right--

MODI: Jesus! *(No luck with the booze)* Shit.

MADAME FANCHON: At the top!

ROSALIE gets an open bottle from the top shelf but MODI is already gone. He stops before the white canvas hanging from the 6-foot platform, then hatefully yanks it down revealing a recess area littered with discarded drawings and emptied bottles. He finds one with some booze left and downs it. He stretches out on the floor. He is in no hurry to rejoin his valentine.

MADAME FANCHON: *(Continued)* I saw him the other day.

MODI: (*He couldn't care less*) Who?

MADAME FANCHON: Monsieur Fanchon.

Pause.

MADAME FANCHON: (Continued) He hardly looked like an abandoned husband. Guess what he said to me? Three tries.

Another pause. ROSALIE is grinning in anticipation.

He booked a room at the hotel called Echo. Under an assumed name. Isn't that romantic? He says you can hear everyone and they can hear you. Like you're in the woods. You think he is lying? He is convinced that I will come.

Pause.

Dedo?

MODI: Mmmm.

MADAME FANCHON: Did you really dump your sculptures into a canal? Before coming to Paris?

MODI: My first personal exhibition. The only one so far.

MADAME FANCHON: Why? (*He is silent*) You thought you were not going back to Livorno?

Heavy pause. LIBAUDE interrupts his work. ROSALIE wisely retreats to her table.

MADAME FANCHON: (Continued) Describe them to me.

MODI: Armless monsters with egg-shaped heads.

MADAME FANCHON: Hmm. Still

MODI: They lay scattered in the backyard. Dusty stone stumps. They are better off buried in the silt. No sore in the eye.

He is studying, quietly, almost serenely, a painting hanging from the wire strung across the room.

MADAME FANCHON: In your studio, there are these drawings, in the bathroom. Stringed on a cord, like toilet paper.

MODI carefully removes the painting. He spreads it out against the wall.

MADAME FANCHON: (Continued) You drink too much, Dedo. Alcohol, hashish. What with your tuberculosis and-I mean you need a real studio. Good food.

He picks up a knife and drives it into the painting. LIBAUDE, the only witness to it, freezes in dismay. ROSALIE, who remembers the incident all too vividly, closes her eyes. MODI leaves, unseen by MADAME FANCHON, while she elaborates.

MADAME FANCHON: (Continued) You know what I'm saying? In fact, you could work here. Feed Foufou when I'm away. You aren't allergic to cats, are you? We could turn the guest room into your studio. You'll work and then we'll have a snug lunch and maybe take a stroll in the park or ransack the department store-I may even allow you to pick out some lingerie for me. See? All the accommodations, and no strings attached. Dedo? Dedo?

Lights out MADAME FANCHON. LIBAUDE, looking shaken, rejoins ROSALIE at the table.

ROSALIE: Did I tell you this? One night

MODI, dangerously calm, crosses the stage, muttering words of an old ballad.

MODI.: There were two ravens sat on a tree,
 They were as black as they might be,
 One to the other thus he spake:
 "Where shall we our breakfast take?"

He stops across from UBAUDE and picks up a candlestick from the table.

ROSALIE: One night, as we're about to close, he comes in and takes a seat. (*He sits on the floor, looking for matches*) Just like that. And I snap at him, which I shouldn't have. Cause he's sitting quiet as a door mouse. No poetry, no rough stuff. You can't throw him out! So? I warm something up. He won't touch it. I say, "Are you OK?" And he says.

MODI: I've been to my funeral.

He lights a candle.

ROSALIE: Luigi, my son, goes . . .

She twirls her index finger around her temple. MODI blows out the candle only to light it again. He is doing it over and over, in a kind of stupor.

ROSALIE: (Continued) The story: He finds this rock at the cemetery, he works on it, next morning his beauty is sitting in the dirt, up to the waist. A tombstone! He makes a scene, like the rock was no one's property, and tile grave-diggers give him the boot. They go, "This little thing (*Points at her lap*) she had, we shouldn't of buried it, man!"

LIBAUDE: There's a funny one.

ROSALIE: That's your Modi. He's a schlimazel!

LIBAUDE: I recently discovered that he was Jewish.

He is not particularly happy with the discovery.

ROSALIE: One-half. You can't spoil porridge with butter.

MODI gets up, he is staring at LIBAUDE.

MODI: Porridge *and* butter, I'm afraid. Yes, I am circumcised, in case you failed to notice. No waste in the house, my grandfather's philosophy. Someone has a problem with that?

ROSALIE: (*Pacifyingly*) Amedeo.

LIBAUDE: Actually

MODI unceremoniously sniffs LIBAUDE'S drink.

MODI: My great-great-grandmother's name was Regina Spinoza Garsin. (*As no one is impressed, he adds grotesquely exaggerating Jewish accent*) Great-niece of Baruch Spinoza. (*It may well be a joke but because of his serious demeanor it is impossible to tell for sure*) Is Monsieur a philosophy person by any chance?

LIBAUDE: Finance is more like it.

MODI: Really! Even better! Amedeo Modigliani.

He is pumping the other man's hand.

LIBAUDE: (*Mumbles*) I am glad to meet the . . .

MODI: Oh, the pleasure is entirely mine. You can call me Modi. Or even better, Dedo. Family style.

LIBAUDE is confused by this heartfelt welcome.

LIBAUDE: Libaude--eh--Pierre.

ROSALIE makes a feeble attempt to sneak her way into this idyll.

ROSALIE: Amedeo, may I ask you to help me hang the--

MODI: Later, later.

She gives up and retreats to the kitchen. Now MODI has LIBAUDE all to himself.

MODI: (Continued) You mention the name of Modigliani in Italy and you will hear: "Financiers and bankers!" Who lent money to a cardinal in the Vatican? Who armed Garibaldi's insurgents? And that splendid synagogue in Livorno, second in size only to Amsterdam's . . . blessed by whose purse? And you say, "The Jews!"

LIBAUDE: As a matter of fact I never--

MODI: If you don't have it here, (*He taps LIBAUDE'S head*) don't have it here, (*He pats his pocket*) will you agree?

LIBAUDE: Well yes . . .

MODI: Speaking of which, I am pinched. At the moment.

Uneasy pause. LIBAUDE gets his billfold doubtfully. MODI watches with curiosity as the man agonizes over the sum of money he could spare a needy artist.

LIBAUDE: Here.

He extends some bills, MODI raises his hands in protest.

MODI: No no no!

LIBAUDE: From the bottom of my heart

MODI: You are too kind.

LIBAUDE: I understand how.

MODI: . . . never . . .

LIBAUDE: Just for now.

MODI: I know! I will draw your portrait!

LIBAUDE: My portrait?

MODI has already produced his sketch book which he carries around on a strap.

MODI: I was meaning to ask you this favor but I didn't have the nerve. Did anybody tell you you have a Roman profile?

LIBAUDE: A Roman . . .

CHOUETTE comes out to ask LIBAUDE something. Upon seeing what they are up to, she stops in her tracks. Meeting MODI'S fervent gaze the girl smiles happily, then she withdraws. He resumes his work.

MODI: A Roman profile, yes. Low forehead. Heavy jaw. The look. Hard, unsparing.

Unwittingly, LIBAUDE sticks out his jaw, acquiring a regal posture.

Smart boy.

LIBAUDE: Excuse me?

MODI: Rosalie. Steering her where you wanted her to be--the female models--very smart.

LIBAUDE: Hmm.

MODI: It's all right. *(He indicates that he can keep a secret)* So you are after my nudes, I commend you for your good taste. *(He draws in silence)* And should you decide *not* to buy them, I won't take offense.

LIBAUDE: Why should I decide not to.

MODI: The chin, a bit up. *(He draws)* Front lock, over the forehead. *(LIBAUDE responds dutifully)* Perfect . . . Patrician. Senator. Julius Caesar. I shall replace your frock-coat with a toga, with your permission. *(Very casually)* Just how did you say I finished the rat race?

LIBAUDE: I'm not sure I--

MODI: Miles after Titian? Way behind Giotto? I did well though didn't I. Hold it! Don't tell me I beat Picasso or Braque--we entered different races. *(Louder, for ROSALIE)* Even with "cataracts for eyes" one can see that! Did you know that my first buyer was a blindman? Bizarre, huh? *(Before LIBAUDE can respond)* There. Not bad. Not bad at all. What do you say?

He tears the sheet out and gives it to LIBAUDE, who studies the drawing for a long time.

ROSALIE, a knife in one hand and more cognac in the other, emerges from the kitchen. She pauses, unnoticed, watching the scene.

LIBAUDE: Yes . . . interesting. How much do I owe you?

MODI: Five hundred francs.

ROSALIE rolls her eyes appreciatively. LIBAUDE is comatose. He has painted himself into a corner. It takes him time to recover. His face red, he lays a banknote on the table. MODI signs and shoves it back.

MODI: (Continued) From Modigliani. An autograph.

He bows off and vanishes in the dark. LIBAUDE is staring at the banknote refusing to believe that he has fallen prey to a nasty trick. ROSALIE crosses to the table and pours him a drink, which he downs like an automaton. She lingers for a moment, smiling absent-mindedly.

ROSALIE: (*Tenderly, to herself*) Brats, all of them. Pranks, practical jokes. Their favorite: a shot of vodka and a glass of water. They'd play it on each and every stray bird who was dumb enough to open her red beak. She'd chase the drink with water, only instead of water there would be more vodka. The face they'd have! (*She looks at LIBAUDE'S mien*) Close enough. Some jokes were sweet. This Englishwoman Modi lived with.

Enter younger actress, her hair cropped like a boy's, in a black silk dress adorned with flowers and butterflies. She stops in front of ROSALIE, who lends her knife to LIBAUDE and proceeds to zip the back of the girl's dress slipped over her naked body.

LIBAUDE: Beatrice Hastings.

ROSALIE: Hmn. Yet another affair with a painting?

LIBAUDE: The original. The young lady is quite a raconteur.

BEATRICE turns sideways; ROSALIE smacks her lips approvingly. To BEATRICE.

LIBAUDE: (Continued) Did he really give you a tattoo?

BEATRICE: You want to see it?

She acts as if she would take off her dress for him.

LIBAUDE: I take your word for it, Madame.

BEATRICE: As you wish.

ROSALIE: One night she whined she had nothing to wear for a costume party . . .

The two women exchange a knowing look and BEATRICE walks into the other playing area, which is dark at the moment.

. . .so he made her put on an old dress of black silk and he painted it with flowers and butterflies. They were a blasting mix. Two thoroughbreds, hot, jibing.

Animal grunts. light change. MODI sits on top of BEATRICE, banging her head against the floor. She returns the favor by kicking him viciously and scratching his bare flesh with her fingernails. They generously exchange words that come to mind. Just as he seems to have got the upper hand, enjoying a carefree moment of triumph, she bites him on the balls. LIBAUDE doubles, as though it was him. With a scream of pain, MODI rolls over to his side clutching at his groin.

BEATRICE: You never *ever* loved me. SAY IT!!!

Both men moan unintelligibly.

BEATRICE: (Continued) All you need is a little warm-up in bed, and then back to your *main* work. Like they say, all your nudes are painted before or after copulation, and one can tell which by their eyes.

LIBAUDE: Crazy bitch . . . !

MODI: *Merde.*

BEATRICE: Shall I tell you what lens you're looking through at humankind? It's what you

and your chums had galore on that "island of love" in Venice, didn't you? (*She looks from one man to the other*) Cheap and juicy.

LIBAUDE straightens up grimacing from pain while MODI makes an effort to sit up, well, sort of . . .

MODI: Your name at the bottom of that list?

BEATRICE: At the top, I dare say. I pay rent, I pay for food, I pay for your paints and stuff. This bandanna you are wearing, your shoes, your socks, your shirt, your trousers- What are you doing?

The two men are taking off, item by item, the things she brings up.

MODI: Restoration of property.

LIBAUDE: . . . minus wear and tear.

BEATRICE: Stop it.

MODI: Sorry, buddy.

As they remove their clothes, they throw them to BEATRICE.

BEATRICE: Don't!

LIBAUDE: You are not going to wear this?

BEATRICE: (*Throwing things back at them*) No!

MODI: Yes you are!

BEATRICE: NO I'M NOT!

They bombard each other with items of clothing until they run out of steam.

MODI: In that case . . .

Half-dressed, he unfolds a handkerchief to reveal green pellets. He puts two in his mouth and turns to LIBAUDE, who cautiously takes one. ROSALIE looks on in disbelief. MODI

extends his palm to BEATRICE, she shakes her head.

MODI: (Continued) Oh? Just because you published that article about the evils of drugs?

She swoops down on him and licks them all from his palm. They chew hashish silently, then. . .

MODI: (Continued) I never loved you.

BEATRICE: Bollocks.

Stretches out resting her head in his lap, a big purring cat.

MODI: Like you said, the lens.

BEATRICE: For the two years we've been together?

LIBAUDE: Double lens.

BEATRICE: Pig. You never told me about your first tryst.

MODI: You don't want to hear about it. If this poor girl had messed her dress with a tureen of noodle soup, she would have been better off.

ROSALIE: Tell her a *clean* story. Tell her about the Madchen.

MODI: That was definitely not my first.

ROSALIE: She'll love it. *Allora?* LIBAUDE. "I was on a train . . ."

MODI: I was on a train. Geneva - Paris. Across from me, on a home pillow, sat this German lady. A woman in her prime. She rested her hands on the table. Had the cutest little dimples on the back of her hands. Like a baby's. Showed me a picture of her late husband.

LIBAUDE takes over, having heard the story from BEATRICE.

LIBAUDE: The unfortunate man was run over by a car in some obscure town he visited on business. The picture was taken shortly before the accident. A mousy gentleman with a guilty smile. She crooned about not having been there for him.

MODI: *(Takes over)* "If only I had been there--to put my arm around his shoulder--to keep him out of trouble." I got my sketch book and made a drawing for her. A doting couple under the lamppost, her hand resting on his shoulder. She was spellbound. Never saw me step out for a moment, with her daughter.

MODI & LIBAUDE: Did I forget to mention the daughter?

BEATRICE is caught off guard, a moment of triumph for the men, an "I-saw-it-coming" smile on ROSALIE'S face.

MODI: Sixteen, at best. Homely but eager. All the way through she was looking at me like she could eat me alive. I had her in the vestibule--

LIBAUDE: . . . fur coat and all.

BEATRICE: You schmuck.

ROSALIE: I told you she'd love it!

LIBAUDE: *(To BEATRICE)* Are you sure he didn't invent it?

ROSALIE: He didn't invent--he glorified.

MODI notices the grin that seems to be pasted to his lover's face. BEATRICE is stoned. He grins back. They rise slowly, to the music ringing in their ears, and make a step or two, tentatively, to close in, only to fall back. They circle each other, touching themselves, savoring the pain. It is a mating dance, the tantalizing madness of raw flesh. ROSALIE gets totally caught up in her own memory to mind LIBAUDE or pay attention to the two lovers.

ROSALIE: Glorified, his own word. And the real thing? Was it body against body or brush against canvas? He painted you . . . physically. Stripped to the buff, he mocked you, fully dressed. Virile, a little feminine, a cherub. The magic of attraction, a velvety periwinkle alone on a sunny glade-whose trophy . . . ?

The two lovers have frozen, their eyes closed, their hands touching each other. LIBAUDE feels abandoned, standing in no man's land. BEATRICE begins to shiver uncontrollably and then she collapses on the floor. Lights out.

ROSALIE: (Continued) I couldn't hang his pictures, could I! I'd go crazy having all this naked flesh around, pining for caress, smoldering with lust. And my Luigi glaring at them behind my back! As if pornographic cards that I found under his mattress were not enough!

LIBAUDE: You couldn't hang his pictures, you said. Did you put them away? Where?

ROSALIE: Are they good? How good are they?

He could kill her with the kitchen knife he is playing with but he comes up with a most sublime and regal shrug of indifference.

LIBAUDE: They are . . . pictures. Canvas and paints.

ROSALIE: I could see what they would do for a jailbird to smooth things out for a poor thing. May I?

She takes the knife from him and gets up.

You arrived and suddenly life has stopped. I can't remember what I came here for. You are a dangerous man, Monsieur Libaude.

She exits.

LIBAUDE: This is madness. I'm wasting my time. What is she up to? You call her a piece of work? She's . . . she's a ... what an ass. Taj Mahal. Greek marble. To have her *and* the pictures. Maybe I *can* have them both?

He throws a flame of cognac down his burning throat losing his voice for a few seconds.

CHOUETTE has returned. She asks LIBAUDE something, which he fails to understand. He struggles to speak, he is hoarse.

LIBAUDE: (Continued) What? Was the meat soft? Agrghh. The serving too small? Hrrrhg. Not the meat? I don't get it. The cake! Do I want something for dessert? Well I think I've had it. A cup of coffee, maybe. Hold it. Sit down.

She does. He stares at her, growing melancholy.

LIBAUDE: (Continued) Long legs, small breasts . . . something they like, huh? Sure. Do you pose first and then get laid or vice versa?

The girl makes an attempt to leave, but he keeps her down.

So shy. After you stretch out, in your birthday suit, in front of a total stranger. And for a song, too. Three francs?

He counts the bills and puts them in front of her.

Here's thirty.

She turns away.

Not with me, though. You'd rather do it, mum as a fish, with this prince in the soiled jacket. Tell me if I'm wrong.

She is very uptight.

You think I didn't notice how you beamed at him? All he needs to do is beckon you with his finger. True?

She gives him a hard look. He turns to the decanter.

Shall we drink Bruderschaft? As you wish.

Pours himself.

What did you find in him anyway? Modi, *le maudi*. The cursed. It's written on his face.

He swallows more cognac with a grimace.

He'll freeze to death, sloshed, in a ditch. Or else die from consumption in a charity hospital.

The girl gesticulates desperately. There are tears in her eyes.

You silly one. It's his only chance. Modigliani, there is no such painter. As long as he is alive. Here.

He pulls some snapshots from his billfold and lays them out on the table. CHOUETTE looks down at them, in spite of herself.

LIBAUDE: (Continued) French Sahara. Interesting place . . . when you are two days away from the watering hole.

He laughs quietly.

Scuffle between a buffalo and a lion.

He points at the snapshot.

Not the best quality-I shot it from my truck, with the window rolled up-but at least the blood is real.

He is enjoying her revulsion. He brings the snapshot even closer to her so she can see it is no hoax.

One of them is going to die. From thirst rather than wounds. Which the loud yapping of coyotes will promptly communicate to the entire desert.

Raising his glass.

To coyotes who inform the world that the king of beasts is dead!

A shot--Champagne cork popped out--and whooping are heard, accompanied by occasional bursts of lively music. It is New Year's Eve or what MODI still hears of it in his troubled mind. As lights go up, we see "the king of beasts" on all fours, in the middle of what can be described as a desert of a room. MODI, stoned, ushers in his imaginary guests with exaggerated welcome.

MODI: Kiesling! Happy New Year! A souvenir?

He extends his joint, it slips between his fingers and falls on the floor. He is now trying to pick it up with his teeth. CHOUEETTE looks away. LIBAUDE challenges her with a good-natured laugh.

LIBAUDE: And I thought you had good faith in him.

She watches painfully as he struggles. LIBAUDE pours her a drink. MODI finally succeeds, a radiant smile on his face.

MODI: Jean Marchand has smoked one too many and now he is slobbering as he waits to be crucified.

CHOUEETTE swallows her drink almost gratefully.

LIBAUDE: Good girl.

Already pouring her another glass and showing signs of impatience in his urge to get her drunk. MODI has overheard a professional argument.

MODI: Landscape? Don't make me laugh. What can't be hurt doesn't exist.

LIBAUDE: Pearls of wisdom! (*Jotting it down in his pad*) And I was told he couldn't put two words together. Look, I've got pages of his aphorisms in no time!

A new guest.

MODI: Ilya Ehrenburg! Hey-ho!

To other guests.

Kremegne, Archipenko! Someone to keep you company! Russian secret: chase your vodka with a smell of rye bread and you will be sober as they come. Did I get it right, Ilya?

LIBAUDE and CHOUEETTE clink and drink.

LIBAUDE: "Modigliani on Art." Edited by Pierre Libaude. What do you say?

She beams at him, although his words make no sense to her.

You like it.

MODI fancies someone is studying his sketches on the wall.

MODI: That's Chica. Pretty, isn't she? But the main thing here is her fishnet stockings. She has two lovers. They joined their efforts and bought her this wonderwork.

He trips and falls into a bathtub, until this scene hidden under the couch. He is quiet for a while, perhaps asleep.

LIBAUDE: Or better yet: "Amedeo Modigliani: A Biography" written by his art dealer and close friend. Huh? All these stories she is dying to tell somebody--anybody.

He refers to ROSALIE in the kitchen.

And what about you tootsie?

Helps her to her feet, pulls her toward the studio.

Amedeo's Silent Muse. I bet you have your own stories to tell.

They are dancing.

Maybe you could chip at his posthumous fame . . . with some help from Pierre Libaude?

In the tub, MODI sticks out his head waking up to someone's remark.

MODI: Rembrandt? Of course he was Jewish!

He hobbles up getting ready for his speech.

Look at the Talmudic blackness creeping in, seeping through the pores, eating at the human flesh. The unblinking eyes that saw pillage and rape and desecration in the wake of God's grisly covenant with His chosen people. The frailty of a body wasted by three thousand years of atonement.

LIBAUDE: (*Scribbling away*) Is it true he and his good friend Utrillo did a mural here, by way of paying for their meals, and Rosalie got so mad she made them rub it off with rags and turpentine?

CHOUETTE shows eagerly how they did it, giggling through the demonstration. MODI gets out of the tub. A newcomer.

MODI: Maurice! Tell them: there are only two great painters in Paris now. Did you all hear him? Utrillo and Modigliani. We are the only ones. who study the old masters. You, you're a pile of shit who don't know a fart from a sparrow. My little niece fares better--no dirty tricks.

LIBAUDE: I don't believe it myself, frankly. Surely she must be smarter than that.

MODI: (*In response to a passing comment*) Vlaminck says he's never been to a museum? Right. And I've never been to a bordello.

LIBAUDE: Did I tell you how I snagged this door he had painted over? Cost me next to nothing. Do you know what it will be worth *tomorrow*?

MODI staggers. Has to sit on the floor.

MODI: Everything dances around me as in a Soutin landscape. Beatrice? Where's my dark lady of the sonnets?

Declaims verses he has learned for her sake.

As an imperfect actor on the stage

Who with his fear is put besides his part

He goes into a bad coughing fit. The dancers crash into a chair and CHOUETTE finds herself sprawled out on the table.

LIBAUDE: Here's a killer: we could make love on it--the door--what do you say, Merry

Legs?

MODI has recovered, he hollers across the room.

MODI: Kiesling! I told Beatrice you'll have to find yourself another model.

Instantly sobered up by these words, CHOUETTE pulls away from LIBAUDE, gesticulating angrily.

LIBAUDE: Huh?

MODI: *(Mutters)* When a woman poses for a painter, she gives herself to him.

CHOUETTE runs off, LIBAUDE calls out to her.

LIBAUDE: You can't be faithful to a pig--a *dead* pig! Ah, what do I care.

MODI: Women, pfffff.

LIBAUDE: They can go hang themselves . . .

MODI: . . . by the G-string on . . .

LIBAUDE: . . . April Fool's Day!

MODI: Here's to women!

He gets up, thrilled by an idea.

Glasses! Everyone! I'll show you . . .

They are collecting the glasses all over the place and emptying them into an enamel bathtub.

MODI

LIBAUDE

There you are. There you are.

What would *I* do with a million

Punch! Matches? . . .

dollars? I'd stack them up, one

(Finds them.)

Archipenko, what do

big heap, in the center of the

you say?

Place Pigalle--

They are lighting matches and throwing them into the tub, but the punch refuses to bum. So LIBAUDE grabs a kerosene lamp and adds the real thing. This time the cocktail goes up in flames. They are both in a state of frenzy, dancing and chanting like some ancient shamans.

MODI: Born born born again. Born born born again.

LIBAUDE: . . . my eyes floating on the lake of my face, two iridescent bubbles . . .

MODI: . . . my nape buried in the silt, crowned by the weeds and anemones . . .

LIBAUDE: . . . crawfish in my beard, eels threading my ears back and forth . . .

They are taking off their clothes.

MODI: Big and growing, dark and swelling.

LIBAUDE: Feel my solidity, pluck my ripeness.

MODI: Slide down my knees onto the throbbing welcome of my penis.

They expose themselves.

MODI & LIBAUDE: Take it in and die and be reborn!

Paper garlands catch fire. The entire room is aflame, it seems. Wild music, then the sirens of fire engines overlapping. MODI passes out. For a brief moment LIBAUDE regains his senses, although his speech is blurred.

LIBAUDE: Another quiet Christmas night. If crazy is the synonym for gifted, Amedeo Modigliani is the champion of new art.

He collapses next to MODI. They are sleeping soundly, locked in an embrace. Blackout in the studio. ROSALIE pops out, an empty tray in hand. She stares into the darkness of the studio, a raging Fury.

ROSALIE: Is there a point? "Hear me out and fuck the rubble and a few loonies left

behind" . . . ? Is that what you came back for? Let me tell you something. Life is not about opening people's eyes for them. Or spelling out the divine message. Why don't you leave it to the angels. Shall I tell you what life is about? Mending socks and doing dishes and making coffee

She smells something in the air.

ROSALIE: (Continued) *Mamma mia!*

She disappears in the kitchen. Lights up in the studio. Morning after the night orgy. On a couch, we see an outline of the body, a lifeless frame under a blanket. BEATRICE, her short black hair pulled back into a sparse bun, in an exquisite Kate Greenaway dress burst at the seam, with bruises on her face, is standing amid the havoc.

BEATRICE: I'm leaving. Why should I tolerate all this? Playing Othello! Shall I tell you what we were talking about? Gardening. Hollyhocks, nasturtiums, roses. And now look at me! Look what you did to my new dress! Look at my face! All because you don't understand English? What an idiot!

Pause.

And your rudeness is even worse than your jealousy. Did you assume that I heard nothing? Someone in the kitchen said, "Seeing that flat-chested Englishwoman naked gave me goose-flesh." And your response, as you walked in? "I flatten her between two planks." And you regard yourself a gentleman. From a good family.

Pause.

I've stopped writing, do you know that? Not a line in a month's time! What is it? A non-stop quadrille of self-destruction? Well you can dance yourself to death, if that's what you want, but leave me out of it. It's your show.

Pause.

We curse like drunken sailors. Not one intact chair left in the house. Free spectacle for our neighbors. Do you know what they say? "These nuts, they are at each other's throats again . . ." And you expected things to continue as though nothing had happened?

Pause.

BEATRICE: (Continued) You just stopped short of burning this place down. And this party, in your studio, when you were peeling plaster with your bare nails! You're sick. You are seriously sick, Modi.

Pause.

You've lost faith in yourself. So nothing sells. They recognize a loser from a mile away. It's a contagious disease people want to stay away from.

The real truth is out. BEATRICE dons her trendy black coat, powders her bruises. The body has not moved.

You can leave the keys with the concierge. I'm not coming back. Did I tell you? I'm moving in with Alfredo Pina.

She exits. The blanket slides down revealing LIBAUDE, who is crying soundlessly. Enter ROSALIE with a coffee set on the tray.

ROSALIE: In tears.

LIBAUDE: What?

She sets the tray on the table.

ROSALIE: How do you drink your coffee?

LIBAUDE: With cream.

He struggles out of bed, crosses to the restaurant area, sits at the table.

ROSALIE: Chouette. (*Pouring*) Snivels in the kitchen. She often cries. At the drop of a hat. I tried to help and then I told myself: Let her be. It will pass. How many?

LIBAUDE: Two. (*Using her hand, she puts two lumps of sugar in his cup*) How long has she been around?

ROSALIE: Since the war. (*She sits down*) When my son, Luigi, got his draft notice I started looking for a hand. Then he tells me about this little adventure. You know . . . "the happy district"? So there. A girl of fourteen. Shows him: five francs. Brings him home. When the time to pay comes, her pimp shows up.

LIBAUDE: (*An old hand*) They were lovers.

ROSALIE: Right. Same old story: "It's a ten, buddy." Well my Luigi's a hothead. Lost his cool. Two days later he sees her again, and she has a black eye. You see, Luigi gave it to her friend, and he gave it to her. Her friend, by the way, was her own father.

LIBAUDE whistles through his teeth.

He seduced her when she turned ten. When she turned thirteen, he put her on the street.

LIBAUDE: Did he give her her nickname? Chouette?

ROSALIE: He sure did. I tell you something: If he ferrets out her whereabouts, he will. . .

Shows: slash her throat.

LIBAUDE: He may.

ROSALIE: She hasn't been out much in four years. Groceries and back.

LIBAUDE: What about boys?

ROSALIE: What about them? (*Shows him her big hand*) I don't remember seeing many volunteers.

LIBAUDE: Not even Luigi?

ROSALIE: Luigi won't touch her as long as I am around.

LIBAUDE: Four years, and you are telling me that--

ROSALIE: Who with? This gang? (*Scornfully*) "Free artists"! So that one of them, freely, can get her pregnant?

LIBAUDE: We know at least one guy who wouldn't have missed his chance.

ROSALIE: Modigliani?

As if hearing his name, MODI strenuously emerges from behind the couch. He is fighting back the nausea, then he makes an effort to stand up. He inspects the room for booze-there is none left. His hangover is so bad he has to sit down. The dialogue between LIBAUDE and ROSALIE continues uninterrupted.

LIBAUDE: They say women jumped into bed with him even before he asked them.

ROSALIE: They say pigs fly.

She gives him a mischievous look.

LIBAUDE: You are not really interested in her?

ROSALIE: Who? Chouette.

MODI turns his head to hear a response.

LIBAUDE: What an idea.

Pause.

ROSALIE: I looked in the attic.

She shakes her head sadly.

LIBAUDE: Paintings?

ROSALIE: Madonna is my witness, I didn't throw them away. What would you pay for them anyway?

MODI gets up again and cautiously propels himself to the restaurant's main area.

LIBAUDE: Must look at them first.

ROSALIE: Roughly?

LIBAUDE: Pencil drawing, seventy . . . a hundred. Oil painting . . . it depends.

ROSALIE: Five hundred? (*A flicker in her eye*) A thousand?

LIBAUDE: Depends on the condition.

But ROSALIE has heard all she wanted to hear. She is already turning astronomical figures in her head. Meanwhile MODI got hold of the decanter on their table. His hands are shaking so badly he cannot pour himself a drink. ROSALIE takes over. She holds the glass for him while he drinks, spasmodically, spilling his cognac. The effect is miraculous. Instantly feeling better, he recovers the glass and retreats to the cupboard--a vantage point from which he can follow their negotiations.

LIBAUDE: (Continued) Do you remember what sort of pieces they were?

ROSALIE: Nudes, most of them. For all tastes.

LIBAUDE knits his brow to conceal his excitement. ROSALIE bites her tongue.

What? Something wrong?

LIBAUDE: You haven't heard about Berthe Weil's private exhibition, have you?

ROSALIE shakes her head preparing for the worst.

The lady has a gallery on the Rue Taitbout. (*Snorts*) Gallery! A hovel. Wires strung across the room and pictures hanging from them. Pinned with clothespins. (*Jeering*)

"Exposition of Paintings and Drawings by Modigliani"! In the window, to attract attention, this nude. A policeman stops by. "What is this?" "A nude." "No this . . . *this* . . . ?"--pointing at the crotch--"She has *hair*!" Big crowd, big scandal.

ROSALIE: Sweet Jesus.

LIBAUDE: Dragged her to the police commissioner.

ROSALIE: Just because she had--

LIBAUDE: What do you think! It's a public place. Little children, you know. She was lucky to get away without a fine, I'm telling you.

ROSALIE: What about the exhibition?

LIBAUDE: She had to close. The crowd was happy.

ROSALIE: Imbeciles!

The dream popped.

LIBAUDE: You're not buying my nudes.

ROSALIE: Too much of a hassle.

LIBAUDE: Not one? Why should I want to suffer losses? I'll never sell it.

ROSALIE: Four hundred? (*He shakes his head ruefully*) Three? Two?

LIBAUDE: You are twisting my arm.

Deep inside he is jubilant, he has won this round or so he thinks.

ROSALIE: See for yourself. You might like something. You could.

LIBAUDE: All right, I will take a look, but you understand, Madame . . .

ROSALIE: No Madame please.

LIBAUDE: . . . Rosalie . . .

ROSALIE: Yes.

LIBAUDE: I made no promises.

Apologetically, he raises his hands, which she innocently takes in hers and holds for a while.

ROSALIE: Have I?

LIBAUDE: N-no.

ROSALIE: Well then?

LIBAUDE: Uhhhhhh . . . ?

ROSALIE: Do you see my point?

LIBAUDE: Y-y-yes.

ROSALIE: As soon as I saw you, Monsieur.

LIBAUDE: . . . Pierre, please . . .

ROSALIE: Pierre, I knew we clicked.

LIBAUDE: Oh?

ROSALIE: Just as we both know these nudes are priceless.

LIBAUDE: Now wait, wait a second . . .

ROSALIE: No you wait a second. You're not angry with me, Pierre, are you? I didn't mean to keep you at bay-I'm talking about the pictures. It's, I don't know, the "reduce the heat and let it simmer for thirty minutes" thing, I guess. But when it's ready, it's ready, right?

She goes to the cupboard and, gently but firmly, brushes MODI aside to get access. She starts to sweep out kitchen utensils, packages of flower and groats, a string of dried mushrooms, cans of jelly, etc., which she gives to MODI. LIBAUDE is looking doubtfully at her "art repository." ROSALIE dives into the cupboard's bowels and next she is brandishing a roll of canvases tied with a colored ribbon.

LIBAUDE: Hm.

ROSALIE: What did I tell you! All here . . . Chica, Fanchon, Beatrice, Chouette . . .

Jeanne too. She was different, his last one. So quiet, so . . .

MODI crosses downstage. After some struggle ROSALIE has untied the roll. There are big holes in the paintings. ROSALIE and LIBAUDE are staring at each other.

ROSALIE: (Continued) Mice?

LIBAUDE: Mice.

Lights up in the studio. MODI downstage in the spotlight. There is a new face in his studio, JEANNE HEBUTERNE. She is not yet another flame of his. Before our eyes, she is turning the pigsty he lived in into a home. She is not a talker either, which adds to her being so much like the mute CHOUETTE. The change in her appearance: long braids and a nine-months-along stomach. MODI is talking to her, but facing the audience. It sounds, at times, like an unsent letter, which encompasses almost three years of what fate has meted out for both of them.

MODI: Jeanne.

LIBAUDE: Jeanne!

An agonizing cry over the ruined portrait. She looks up, briefly, then goes back to her chores.

MODI: Did I tell you this? That day Roger and I went to La Rotonde to pick up broads. You two sat in the comer, little sparrows, easy prey. I set my eyes on the redhead. Was it Germaine? She spoke for both of you. You were drinking punch. Roger and I were showing our witty side. Lent, a propitious theme. You didn't crack a smile. Never opened your mouth. I left without having heard your voice. No big deal, I could read it all in your eyes. But nothing to suggest what you were in for

LIBAUDE: Jesus Christ!

He is gently touching wounds on the maimed "body."

Do you have any idea what you have *done*?!

ROSALIE: What have I?

LIBAUDE: You've ruined the most extraordinary artwork we don't even know what to call!

ROSALIE: You called it junk.

LIBAUDE: Are you trying to be smart with me? Look at this!

He grabs a canvas.

Look at this nude! Have you ever seen anything like it? A congealed drop of amber. A mute concord with life. No mythology, no landscape, no people. Morality? Ideology? Nothing! Only the self-evidence of the naked body. No one, do you hear me, no one, except maybe Cézanne, comes even close to it!

MODI: So you're a Catholic! That explains a lot. I'm afraid, I didn't impress your gentle Mom-ah and Daddy-oh. Or maybe I impressed them too much? An artist. A Jew. I wonder what's worse: a homeless artist or a homeless Jew? How could they possibly send you to art school, that "house of sin"? *(Pause)* All evening I felt this urge to say, "I swear by Jehovah's name, your daughter will be the first wife in my harem!" You walked in and out, quiet, pensive. Did you already have these thoughts? That one day you would?

LIBAUDE: Look at her!

He is shoving the canvas in the poor woman's face. ROSALIE, dejected and listless, offers no protest.

She doesn't care if we are watching. She may have never heard of such a word, lust. Sterile beauty beyond eroticism. She gives me vertigo.

MODI: You couldn't. And then of course Zbo rented this studio for us. Our first HOME!

(He sounds like a child who has uttered a new word) Gauguin, who lived on the floor below, had a crack in the wall and when he set to work the sunlight shone right through it. Very convenient. *(Pause)* You were afraid of fires. Said the rope ladder for emergencies was rotten. *(JEANNE stops her chores, waiting for the resolution)* One day we ran out of bread, so I went to Ortiz de Zarate, by way of the rope ladder. He didn't have bread either, but the ladder held. *(Pause)* Life was tough but we were too busy to notice. Or did you see it coming?

LIBAUDE has mounted his hobby-horse: Modigliani. He rants about MODI'S artwork, but the threatening urgency in his tone is gone now, and ROSALIE is recovering her composure.

LIBAUDE: Do you feel it?

ROSALIE: Uh-uh.

LIBAUDE: You do?

ROSALIE: Yeah.

LIBAUDE: The coolness of the body against the warmth of the bed covers. Sleeping nude—he didn't do many of those. Their eyes are usually wide open. Wide open and blank.

ROSALIE: Why?

LIBAUDE: Who knows. *(Chuckles)* Maybe we're not fun to look at.

MODI: But you couldn't. Not on the night when you came to get me at La Rotonde, remember?

ROSALIE: *(Staring at the canvas)* She looks so-so—How do I say it? I don't understand much in.

LIBAUDE: And who does? Perhaps there's nothing else to it: the face--the person--one big

puzzle.

MODI: We were celebrating Utrillo's release from the institution.

LIBAUDE: A huge mistake, to let him go. He paints so much better under surveillance.

MODI: . . . and the next thing I knew I was out in the cold, stuck in a trash can. As you helped me out, I was blabbering, (*He blabbers*) "Where is Maurice? I promised his mother that he won't have a drop." (*His drunkenness gone. A joyful glee in the eyes.*) "Are you sure? I want to listen."

JEANNE covers her belly.

"Come on, nobody is watching. Too early, I know. It's a girl."

JEANNE removes her hand. He puts his ear to an imaginary belly, then announces in all seriousness.

"She said, Daddy, you apply too much vermilion."

ROSALIE: (*Studying the nude*) At least she has eyes.

LIBAUDE: I wonder if she is still seeing him who painted her? Waiting to be told that the sitting is over?

ROSALIE: Are you trying to scare me out of my mind?

MODI: I know when. Our little Nannoli turned one and you visited her at the nursery outside Paris. I asked you if she was calling her wet nurse a Mom yet?

JEANNE begins to cry.

"Don't. We'll get her back, I promise--As soon as something sells." Is it when you thought about it in earnest?

LIBAUDE: You see, a picture, like a human being, lives a life of its own. Take Jeanne.

He is telling her the story which we won't hear. Overlapping: MODI, totally at a loss,

unsure whether he should celebrate or fall apart.

MODI: "Pregnant, again?! Oh, but that's . . . wonderful." We had just got home, having spent a year in the South, which did a world of good *(He goes into a frightful cough)* to my lungs. We were lucky, were we not, to make it to Paris, after they had stolen my wallet in Nice. May of 1919, the month of good news.

He mumbles Kaddish, a Jewish mourning prayer.

MODI: (Continued) Yitgadal veyitkadash shemei raba bealma divera chireutei, veyamlich malchutei bechayeichon uveyomeichon uvechayei dechol belt Yisraeil, baagala uvizeman kariv, veimeru: amein.*

JEANNE is now ironing Nannoli's, their first child's, newborn clothes as LIBAUDE concludes.

LIBAUDE: . . . but get this: I don't think he ever painted her nude, and we may never know why.

MODI: You asked me recently why, in nearly three years, I never painted you nude.

LIBAUDE: Maybe it's her face . . .

MODI: Haven't figured out your face, to begin with.

LIBAUDE: . . . its enigma.

MODI: There's something in your face that I just don't get . . . much less can render. How can it be so open and so inscrutable at once? And this sadness, what color is it?

LIBAUDE: She seems so different from his other models--but look at their neck, their eyes--

MODI: For years, long before we met, I was doing female portraits, whose neck, they said, I had borrowed from a swan and eyes from a blindman. Until they saw: *you* have "my"

neck, and "my" eyes.

*Let the glory of God be extolled, let His great name be hallowed, in the world whose creation He willed. May His kingdom soon prevail, in our own day, our own lives, and the life of all Israel, and let us say: Amen.

LIBAUDE: . . .they are his invention, and already people in the street are saying: "Look at her, she has a Modigliani neck! She has Modigliani eyes!" Mother Nature is reproducing a new female species after the one he created on canvas.

ROSALIE crosses herself in awe as she stares at the portraits.

MODI: All those years I was drawing one woman . . .

JEANNE pauses for a moment, as if to give his words a thought, then starts to fold baby's clothes.

. . . the woman I didn't know enough to . . . Jeanne? *(She looks up)* Did you have to do it?

LIBAUDE: But one thing is really beyond me. *(He gets up and approaches MODI who is waiting for the conclusion)* How can this tortured soul, on canvas, be so at peace with himself? Where is his illness? Drinking? Drug-taking? His proverbial womanizing? As though someone has erased his life from his paintings, all of it! *(He is searching MODI'S face for clues)* Maybe . . . *(MODI waits)* Maybe this canvas was his life?

MODI gives him a smile. Lights out LIBAUDE, MODI and ROSALIE. JEANNE reaches out and retrieves a razor from under a stack of children's clothes. She holds it in her hands for a long time before putting it down. She picks up a rope and ties a noose, her gaze now wandering in search of a hook to hang herself on. Then a simpler idea crosses her mind: she steps onto the walkway, upstage right, and moves to the imaginary window. She peeks

out, then turns away, her eyes closed, her head swooning. It is high. Cross-fade. In the restaurant area, LIBAUDE, scissors in hand, is cutting out pieces from the ruined paintings. ROSALIE watches him doubtfully.

ROSALIE: Don't. *Please.*

LIBAUDE: Why?

ROSALIE: It doesn't feel right.

LIBAUDE: Oh, what do you know! At least I'm trying to save *something*.

ROSALIE: Yes but . . .

LIBAUDE: Death is a short cut to fame.

ROSALIE: But this . . . (*Pointing at the scrap on the floor*) . . . is not a *picture* anymore.

LIBAUDE: A fragment. Even better. What brings you more money, a whole cake or slices sold separately?

ROSALIE: How would they know this slice is Modigliani?

LIBAUDE: By way of indigestion.

ROSALIE: I have a reputation as an honest woman.

LIBAUDE: For a bottle, Utrillo will, in all honesty, counterfeit his good friend's signature for you, so no one will know the difference.

ROSALIE: I don't like this whole thing.

LIBAUDE: What are you afraid of? Didn't you say yourself: Some of his pictures Modi wouldn't even sign.

ROSALIE: When he was not happy with them!

LIBAUDE: (*As he cuts*) In our business it's "make the customer happy."

ROSALIE: I see it so clearly: soiled bed sheets, blood-spitting, those sardines that he ate

during his last week

LIBAUDE: I haven't finished my coffee.

ROSALIE: Poor Amedeo, he would go and die like a dog!

LIBAUDE: But the funeral! Coffin, wreathes. All artistic Paris. When they brought him out, the policeman stood at attention. Models wept. There's your dog . . . of royal pedigree!

(He is counting the "fragments." An idea.) We should speak to Jeanne!

ROSALIE: Jeanne?

LIBAUDE: If she acknowledges that these canvases were done recently, there's a good chance we could step up the price.

ROSALIE: She won't.

LIBAUDE: Don't underestimate Pierre Libaude!

ROSALIE: Unless she responds from the better world.

LIBAUDE: You mean . . . she too?

ROSALIE: So you haven't heard yet.

LIBAUDE: No.

ROSALIE: The other night. Out the fifth floor window.

LIBAUDE: Pregnant?

ROSALIE: Near her time.

LIBAUDE: Ai ai ai.

ROSALIE: Her parents refused to bury her next to him.

LIBAUDE: Mmm. They were not officially married, as I recall it.

ROSALIE: Poor girl!

LIBAUDE: Yeah it's a shame. Won't work. But let me cheer you up a bit. Pincus Kremegne

inherited Modi's brand new shoes which led him straight to a bistro! life, my dear, doesn't recognize mourning. *(Holds up his glass inviting her to clink)* To Modi, for whom everything only begins now . . . and to those, who were first to know it.

ROSALIE puts her glass down. She sweeps all bits and ends together, grumbling to herself.

ROSALIE: They lay around for years and let them stay that way. I may be a sucker for art but at least the mice know better: they won't eat rubbish!

LIBAUDE collapses against the back of his chair in exhaustion. He also gets his share.

ROSALIE: And you! Snooping around with your notebook. You must have it all: his artwork, his thoughts, his woman! She's told me in the kitchen, Chouette. Don't you sing well! A nightingale, aren't you. One song sweeter than the other: paintings, toilet bowls . . .

LIBAUDE: You!

He lurches forward. Sound of ripped cloth. He takes off his frock-coat there is a scrap hanging loose. He shows it hatefully to ROSALIE.

LIBAUDE: (Continued) Now you're happy! Do you know how much I--

She does not heed, looking past him. He turns back, confused.

LIBAUDE: (Continued) What!

ROSALIE: A nail.

LIBAUDE: Really!

ROSALIE: I hammered them in myself.

LIBAUDE: I can see that.

ROSALIE: It's not my point. *(She runs her hand against the back of the chair)* The upholstery, see?

LIBAUDE: Yeah, canvas!

Pause.

Canvas. Are you saying . . . ?

ROSALIE: (*Lame excuse*) You have any idea how much good leatherette costs?

LIBAUDE: Are you saying that you upholstered these chairs with Modiglianis?

ROSALIE gives a sigh acknowledging her guilt, followed by a vague gesture towards the other table.

ROSALIE: And the other ones.

LIBAUDE: I see. (*Gives it a thought*) Do you have pliers?

ROSALIE: Pliers?

LIBAUDE: Forget it. Here. (*He counts the bills and puts them next to his payment for dinner*) We are quits, all right?

Takes a chair in each hand. He vacillates trying to crack a hard one: should he attempt to make off with a whole bunch of chairs or take his chances with the other two. Lights on the second table where MODI and CHOUETTE sit looking at each other. The girl suddenly begins to wave her hands. LIBAUDE turns to ROSALIE.

LIBAUDE: What is it?

ROSALIE: He is asking if he can help you.

LIBAUDE: Help me?

Silent as he is, MODI somehow communicates it to CHOUETTE, who explains it by way of sign language, while ROSALIE interprets it for LIBAUDE.

ROSALIE: With the chairs.

LIBAUDE: If it's OK with him

Same procedure.

ROSALIE: He says it's OK with him.

Same procedure.

He says . . . life is a gift . . . from those who have . . . to those who have not.

MODI is now on his feet, looking at LIBAUDE, waiting for response. Pause. LIBAUDE puts the chairs down and makes for the exit. ROSALIE calls out to him.

ROSALIE: (Continued) Monsieur Libaude! Pierre! Your Modiglianis?

She picks up the chairs prepared to act on his order. He stops on his way out.

LIBAUDE: They will be safer in your hands, Madame. *(His must be the last word)*

By the way, the chop was underdone.

Exits. CHOUETTE begins to "speak" to MODI while he interprets.

MODI: "Can you . . . *(He points at her)* . . . go with me . . . *(He points at himself)* . . . now?" You must be out of your mind! What? "I said . . . *(Touching his own chest)* . . . someday. . . without even speaking . . . we can be perfect lovers . . ." Jesus. Chouette, listen. Listen to me. What? "You have . . . *(Again pointing at her)* . . . all your things . . . packed." HOLD IT THERE! CHOUETTE!

She is gone.

MODI: (Continued) Are you sure Nefertiti nabbed her toothbrush before settling down in her sarcophagus?

ROSALIE, who has laid the ruined paintings out on the floor, is studying them silently.

MODI is sipping his drink.

MODI: (Continued) What I like about the cemetery: unexpected company. On my right, a life insurance agent; on my left, an infantry Captain who got killed at Verdun. I read to them from memory. Dante, Lautréamont.

He recites.

What's that creature down there, on the horizon, who dares to approach me fearlessly, with oblique, tormented leaps? What majesty, mixed with serene sweetness! You must be strong, because your face is more than human, sad as the universe, beautiful as suicide. It's you, toad!. . . fat toad . . . unfortunate toad. What are you doing on this earth of the damned?

Pause.

I recite. They listen.

Pause.

Not a single artist. Well it won't take long. In a wink, all the Montmartre mishpocheh will be here. I wonder if they will slip a bottle of absinthe in Maurice's coffin? Why do I have this feeling that Jeanne and I will soon be together? Would that be funny! A headline: MODIGLIANI EXITS LOSING SIGHT OF FORTUNE'S REAR END.

LIBAUDE re-enters. He stands at a loss. ROSALIE is looking at him questioningly.

LIBAUDE: *(To no one in particular)* Why would I forget my coat and my hat? I'm sane. I'm sensible. I know what I'm doing and I do what I'm knowing. Hm, it doesn't sound right. It's been a rough day. I should spend more time with my kill . . .

ROSALIE: Are you out of your mind? Here are your pictures, what else?

LIBAUDE: My coat.

ROSALIE: Oh.

LIBAUDE: *(As he dresses up)* We have this reproduction in the sitting room: Botticelli. Primavera. Did I say the sitting room? The bathroom. Well, here I am, sitting in front of it, trying to connect, and, it's not working.

CHOUETTE returns with a small suitcase.

LIBAUDE: (Continued) The girl is covering her breasts with one hand and her, um, with the other. Bashful damsel. I beg your pardon? Subtle corruption. Renaissance quackery. Maybe *I* should take a stab at it?

MODI: Oh boy.

CHOUETTE, happy as a bird, is looking at MODI, ready to leave with him.

MODI: (Continued) You're going out like this?

CHOUETTE is still wearing her apron. She puts her suitcase down, unties the apron and takes it to ROSALIE. They embrace. And then, much to LIBAUDE'S surprise, CHOUETTE comes over and gives him a hug. ROSALIE, close to tears, blots her nose with the apron.

MODI: (Continued) THAT'S IT!!!

They all freeze.

MODI: (Continued) If there's one thing that will ultimately make them see where I belong it is this. A rekindled echo of Quattrocento. My tribute to the old masters. Rosalie, Chouette, Libaude--"Sancta Famiglia". I have captured it all, finally!

Tableau: A benevolent Father comforting his prodigal Daughter with a tearful Mother looking on. A perfect composition. MODI steps back for a better view.

MODI: (Continued) Brushwork--is that all? A framed "picture"? Square inches of ego? It's only "canvas"! Relish for the eye, tidbit for the stomach. And what was it before it became *food*? A flash of lightning when, for a split second, you saw it all so clearly.

He turns to go.

ROSALIE: Can I . . . move?

He stops, enjoying himself.

MODI: Can you?

She uses her arm, fearfully. Pause. Then they all move, tentatively, awkwardly, like someone who is in the process of discovering his own body. Eventually they realize that they fell prey to their own fright.

LIBAUDE: Is it some kind of a joke?

ROSALIE: Modi. What do you expect!

CHOUETTE covers her mouth to stifle a cry.

MODI. I thought you knew. There is no such thing as still life.

Beat. Lights begin to fade.

END OF PLAY