

Cercle Hermaphroditos

By

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Cast:

Laureline Reeves - trans female, 38, mastermind and ringleader of the Cercle Hermaphroditos

Ambrose Carlton - trans male, mid 20s, prominent "gynander" looking to marry on his own terms

Bertram Templeton - cis male, 30s, Ambrose's brother, active mover in the banking world

Jennie June - trans female, 22, college student and aspiring author

Phyllis Angevine - trans female, 33, queen of the Rialto "androgynes"

Plum Gardner - trans female, 23, clerk by day, ingenue by night

Officer Leahy - cis male, 30's, an old hand at the beat

Officer Clark - cis male, late 20's, straight laced and by the book

A Gentleman and a Man, played by the actors playing Leahy and Clark

Setting: Rooms of the Cercle Hermaphroditos, an apartment on the upper floors of Columbia Hall, 32 Cooper Square, New York City; the ballroom below; a park bench on the Rialto

Time: Fall of 1895

Note: Throughout the script, *italics* isolate private conversations between two people from the chatter around them.

Act One

SCENE ONE

The rooms of the Cercle Hermaphroditos. Stage left and center, the main parlor. Stylish, tastefully decorated, with the occasional flamboyant touch. Stage right, the kitchen. Bright and cheerful. In the parlor, LAURELINE REEVES, in a dress that manages to be elegant and sensible all at once, arranges a table for tea, taking pleasure in precision. A knock at the door.

LAURELINE

Everything in its place, and just in time. (to the door) Yes?

VOICE

Carlton to see Mr. Roland Reeves?

LAURELINE

Alone?

VOICE

As we'd discussed.

Laureline looks through the door's peephole, is satisfied. She opens the door to reveal AMBROSE CARLTON, wearing a bulky coat over a rather plain woman's dress with curls down his shoulders. Laureline ushers him into the room, and closes the door behind him.

LAURELINE

You'll pardon the excessive discretion - I know throwing caution to the wind sounds grand, but it mostly just ends with you chasing down the street trying to get it back.

AMBROSE

You've always been a wise one, Roland.

LAURELINE

Come now, (gestures to her female attire) I'm already dressed.

AMBROSE

Yes, I beg your pardon.

He takes her hand, kisses it.

AMBROSE

Laureline.

LAURELINE

Ambrose, dear. Lovely to see you.

AMBROSE

And speaking of dress, you won't mind if I make myself comfortable as well?

LAURELINE

I insist! The door is closed, so anything goes. One of the far too many mottos of this place. We really ought to edit more thoroughly.

Ambrose quickly takes off the coat and undoes his dress.

AMBROSE

I don't know. I carry several mottos myself. For instance-

He slips off the dress to reveal a man's shirt, trousers and waistcoat underneath.

AMBROSE

Always come prepared.

He detaches the curled long hair with a flourish and is fully himself.

LAURELINE

That's quite handy. It tends to be a bit more difficult the other way around. May I take your coat and things?

Ambrose pulls out a morning jacket from inside his coat, puts it on.

AMBROSE

That depends. Will I get them back?

LAURELINE

With your taste in women's apparel, absolutely.

Laureline takes his coat, dress, and petticoats; hangs them in a closet nearly bursting with dresses.

LAURELINE

Your flair for suits, however, is impeccable. Though a touch casual for later on. There's to be a masked ball downstairs. Should be quite the jolly affair, if you care to join us?

AMBROSE

A masked ball in a brothel. Doesn't that create problems when it comes to billing?

LAURELINE

The sort of landlords that run fairy brothels downstairs will gladly accept cash from whatever name you choose to give them. How do you think I rented these rooms in the first place?

AMBROSE

The question I'd ask is why risk dealing with that sort of gangster at all?

LAURELINE

Because, as the scripture says, woman cannot live by fellatio alone.

AMBROSE

Your scripture says that? I've clearly been going to the wrong church.

Laureline gestures him over to the table, where they sit down.

LAURELINE

By which I mean that the Underworld tolerates androgynes because of what we do for men. Downstairs, we're an exotic sexual delicacy, which is all well and good so far as it goes. And in certain well-endowed cases, it goes quite far indeed. But it leaves precious few moments to explore one's feminine nature in the flow of the everyday. What am I like as a woman just reading a book? Chatting with friends with no men to impress? Preparing tea? (gestures with the teapot) May I?

AMBROSE

Please.

She pours him tea.

LAURELINE

Sugar?

AMBROSE

None, thanks.

LAURELINE

If we are ever to know ourselves as whole people, we need room to do it in. And if we're going to be accepted by the world as more than circus freaks, we must show them that we're whole.

AMBROSE

So this place is your solution. The Cercle Hermaphroditos.

LAURELINE

Yes. Room for us to just be.

AMBROSE

I'm on a similar quest myself. But fellows like me offer the Underworld nothing, so there's nowhere for us to go. This year, I've had two acquaintances forced into marriages so dreadful they decided ending it all was the only way out. (pause) One even succeeded.

LAURELINE

I'm so sorry.

AMBROSE

I don't intend to end up that way myself. So I've devised a plan, the long and the short of which is this: I've come to your wonderful club in search of a bride.

LAURELINE

From our constituency?

AMBROSE

Of course. It's legally binding that way. All the clergy wants is to see a man and a woman standing in front them. Which one decides to be which behind closed doors is rather out of their jurisdiction.

LAURELINE

So in public, you'd be happy man and wife-

AMBROSE

And in private, we would be the same, but to our specifications, not theirs.

LAURELINE

There is a certain mathematical elegance to it, but would this arrangement leave you entirely satisfied in ... more intimate matters?

AMBROSE

When it comes to the bedroom, I'm strictly a Free Trade man. Whatever you happen to be supplied with, I have a demand for it.

LAURELINE

That's quite lucky.

AMBROSE

But I can't be the only one. The ladies here, are physical men always their preferred partners?

LAURELINE

Most of us keep hunting for our own personal Adonis, but there are a few who are more flexible.

AMBROSE

And one could find them if one were persistent enough?

LAURELINE

Provided a proper introduction to our sisterhood. Which is where I come into your plan, I suppose?

AMBROSE

Yes. What do you think of it?

LAURELINE

It's brilliant in a practical sort of way, but there's not much poetry in it, is there?

AMBROSE

It's all poetry so long as you know what poetry is. Or do you think it would be better if Shakespeare wrote, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day AND an autumn morning AND a winter's evening AND a spring afternoon?" No, he had room in the line for ten syllables and one metaphor, and he damn well stuck with them. Poetry is not mere excess of feeling. It's great passion rendered precisely, within a particular form. And that, my dear Laureline, is exactly what I am proposing.

LAURELINE

Put that way, I like it immensely. So yes, I'll gladly introduce you to our merry band. They should start trickling in any moment now. It's the weekend, so we're guaranteed Jennie June. And of course, Phyllis seldom misses a chance to- what do you tend to fancy in a girl, Ambrose?

AMBROSE

The usual sort of thing - Vivacious, yet delicate. And of course, beauty never hurts.

LAURELINE

Right. When you meet Phyllis, just remember that I wouldn't necessarily recommend her for you.

AMBROSE

Ah, a worshipper of Adonis, you mean?

LAURELINE

Among other things.

A knock at the door, obviously coded, with a specific number of knocks in a particular pattern. Laureline gets up to open the door.

AMBROSE

Laureline, wait. Before you let someone else in, there's something -

LAURELINE

We don't keep people waiting in the hall here. The less time to be seen by prying eyes, the better.

Ambrose sighs as Laureline opens the door to reveal JENNIE JUNE, looking quite serious in fastidious men's attire.

JENNIE

Have you read it yet?

LAURELINE

I'm quite well, thanks. And you?

JENNIE

If the dialogue you expect from me is that dull, I don't know why I want your opinion on the book in the first place.

LAURELINE

All right, if you'd rather I keep it to myself-

Ambrose gets up to introduce himself just as Jennie whirls back around to Laureline.

JENNIE

(overacting excitement)

Dearest Laureline, so divine to see you! Come here, my darling! (embraces her with exaggerated enthusiasm and kisses her on the cheek) You don't know how dreadful it's been to be without you! How are you? How's the family? How's life? You look lovely. Have you done something new with your hair? I so adore your dress! You really must tell me all about it! (catches her breath and reverts to her previous serious manner) Is that better?

LAURELINE

Quite. Thank you.

Jennie starts taking off her hat and jacket. Ambrose steps forward to assert himself. Jennie hands him her hat and jacket, attention still riveted to Laureline.

JENNIE

(to Laureline)

So what did you think?

LAURELINE

I'll collect my thoughts while you get dressed.

JENNIE

You have to collect them? Is it because my prose whisked them off to new worlds, or sent them fleeing in terror?

Laureline pushes Jennie toward the other rooms with a laugh.

LAURELINE

Go!

JENNIE

(as she exits)

All right, but I expect in-depth analysis on my return!

Laureline notices Ambrose standing there, staring at the clothes in his hands. She takes them and hangs them in the closet.

LAURELINE

I'm terribly sorry. I should have explained. We wait to introduce our members as their true selves here.

AMBROSE

Of course. How many members do you have?

LAURELINE

About twenty, but you'll rarely see them all together. A score of ladies trying to stuff their real lives into the margins makes for odd hours.

The coded knocking again. Laureline answers and ushers in PHYLLIS ANGEVINE, a stunning beauty even when tamped down in male drag, which still manages to be bright and fanciful. She carries four large hat boxes.

PHYLLIS

Laureline, darling, such a joy and relief to see your smiling face again.

LAURELINE

There are few who make me smile quite like you.

They kiss each others' cheeks.

LAURELINE

Now that's what I call a proper hello. Can I help you with some of those?

PHYLLIS

Hoping to sneak a peek? You'll see in good time! But honestly, you're going to love them! (to Ambrose, on her way out) And I'm not quite sure who you are yet, but you'll love them too.

Phyllis disappears into another room. Laureline joins Ambrose at the table again.

AMBROSE

Well, something to look forward to.

LAURELINE

You're quite certain about this? There's still time to retreat while they lace their corsets.

AMBROSE

Is there a reason why I should?

LAURELINE

Gynanders and androgynes may share a common goal, but that doesn't make us the most natural bedfellows.

AMBROSE

Yes, we tend to worry that you find us to be overbearing bores.

LAURELINE

And we worry that you find us to be frivolous ninnies.

AMBROSE

Which is why I'd prefer you not mention my ... physical disposition to your friends.

LAURELINE

Ambrose, dear-

AMBROSE

Not just yet.

LAURELINE

I established the Cercle Hermaphroditos as a place where the whole truth is spoken. You're welcome here, but hiding who you are goes against the entire-

AMBROSE

Not hiding, Laureline. Merely saving that information for when it is pertinent.

LAURELINE

Ambrose, really-

AMBROSE

I'm merely asking for the chance to go about my search without all the baggage of what your ladies expect gynanders to do or not do. That's all.

LAURELINE

And you'll tell them before you engage in a relationship of any kind?

AMBROSE

Of course. How else could I hope to make it permanent?

LAURELINE

All right. I'll introduce you as my friend, which you are, and let them make of you what they will. But if anyone asks me the question right out, I'm not going to lie for you.

AMBROSE

That's more than fair.

He holds out his hand. Laureline shakes it.

LAURELINE

When do you plan to begin?

AMBROSE

Immediately. There's someone in pursuit of me now who's a good match so far as my family's concerned, and they're likely to insist on it this time. That makes a very small window of opportunity to secure a life I want, and I'll be damned if it closes before I've made a go of it.

LAURELINE

Well then - a toast!

Laureline grabs a small flask out of her handbag, pours into each of their teacups.

LAURELINE

To jumping through open windows.

AMBROSE

To graceful landings on the other side.

They clink their teacups together and drink.

Jennie enters in a fashionable dress, a good deal less serious in her manner. Laureline and Ambrose stand up.

LAURELINE

Ah, and here we are. Jennie, allow me to introduce my good friend, Ambrose Carlton. Ambrose, this is Jennie June.

Jennie offers her hand, which Ambrose takes with a small bow.

JENNIE

Bon soir, monsieur.

AMBROSE

Bon soir, madame.

JENNIE

(a nod of approval)

French. Meine sehr geliebten junge Herr, wie geht's bei Ihnen?

AMBROSE

Ganz gut.

JENNIE

(another nod)

And German. I miei amici, siete amati da me.

AMBROSE

I'm afraid you've got me there. I never quite took to Italian.

LAURELINE

(to Jennie)

Well, now that we're through the linguistic test portion of the evening, will you join us for tea? Or did you plan to quiz him on state capitals first?

JENNIE

Being introduced to a charming young man is always a test of some kind. Don't you agree, Mr. Carlton?

AMBROSE

Please, call me Ambrose. And I'm not certain that I do, Miss June.

JENNIE

Jennie. And you can romanticize all you like, but flirtation between the sexes resembles nothing so much as a college exam, just with a more sensual session of grading at the end.

LAURELINE

I think your method of flirtation rather differs from mine.

JENNIE

Oh, it's the same for everyone. (to Ambrose, quick and matter-of-fact) Your evaluation began as soon as I came into the room. First question: Does he have manners? You stood when I entered. Answer: Yes. Question two: Is he considering me as a potential beau? You subtly looked me over, then made eye contact that sparkled with expectation. Answer: He is. Question three: Grip - firm, yet gentle. Question four: comparable schooling in languages - Two out of three. With extra credit for admitting what you don't know instead of bluffing. Not a bad start, though there's several subjects to go before my final determination.

LAURELINE

If there's one thing our Jennie is known for in these parts, it's the length and thoroughness of her oral examinations.

AMBROSE

But a test is administered by someone who knows all the answers to a person who has to prove that they do. I wasn't very good at being a student the first time, and I can't say I'm eager to try again.

JENNIE

So what is it that you are good at?

AMBROSE

Dancing. I'm an absolute artist with a waltz. Which is a much better simile for flirting. Not so damned lopsided. We're in it together (takes her hand again) from the moment I take your hand into my firm, yet gentle grip.

(pulls her into a waltz stance) Oh, we may jockey for position, but the steps are for both of us. (takes her through a few dance steps) You learn my moves, I learn yours. We respond to each other's rhythms. Or we don't. And even if that's the case, no one's failed anything. (comes to a stop) We simply smile, bow, spot a new partner, and move on.

JENNIE

That is a very good simile. Perhaps I should have you look at my manuscript as well.

AMBROSE

Yes, your book. What is it? Novel? Poetry?

JENNIE

Memoir. Of my life among the fairies.

AMBROSE

Really? To be so open about such a thing in print, it's unheard of.

JENNIE

I know. I'm quite an exceptional person.

LAURELINE

And if you don't believe her the first time, she mentions it again on page eight, and nine, and twenty-two, and thirty-seven, and fifty-three-

JENNIE

And what am I supposed to do when the world paints us all as imbeciles? If it admits we exist at all?

AMBROSE

Your goal is to publish and set the world straight, then?

JENNIE

Are you mad? Even anonymously, the publisher and editor would know it's me. Perhaps I should get cards printed. "You are cordially invited to blackmail me for all I'm worth from now until I fall down and die." Does that sound like a good idea to you?

LAURELINE

That depends. What color are the invitations?

AMBROSE

Then why contradict the world's view of you if the world won't even see it?

JENNIE

(gesturing to Laureline)

Because she'll see it. And perhaps so will you.

My hope is that it's passed around our little circle and reminds the others that they are not alone in being more than what society brands them.

AMBROSE

A beautiful goal.

JENNIE

Though I must admit that sometimes society has a point.

AMBROSE

Wait- what?

LAURELINE

(sighs)

Jennie, *dear*-

JENNIE

While there's no limit to how we can develop intellectually, our conflicting desires do keep us from harnessing the focus and force of will available to the average person. And so we never quite grow up the way-

LAURELINE

Could you just once quit while you're ahead? Or must every lovely cry of your heart be followed by flatulence from your brain?

JENNIE

I'm merely stating the psychological facts of the-

LAURELINE

You're stating opinions as though they were facts, and speaking for "us" when you've only consulted yourself. You do it all through your book too, and it's even more infuriating there.

JENNIE

This is the same argument we're always having. What do you think of the work as a whole? That's what I want to know.

LAURELINE

And it's rather a large question. I've many thoughts and feelings about several different parts of it. But I will say, to your credit, that you're never less than-

Another coded knock at the door. Laureline immediately stops and heads for it.

JENNIE

Oh for God's sake, finish the sentence!

LAURELINE

You know the motto. "We don't tempt fate by making ladies wait."

She opens the door for PLUM GARDNER, 23, conveying a certain batty innocence, even when barely holding herself together in clerk-ish male drag.

LAURELINE

Ah, here's Plum. Why, Plumkin, you look as if you had lost your last friend!

PLUM

(distracted)

Friends? No. Everything else, but not friends. At least, I hope not. We are still friends, aren't we, Laureline?

LAURELINE

Of course!

PLUM

Oh. Good, good. And - who's this? Oh. Right. We're not supposed to be introduced yet. I always forget.

LAURELINE

May I take your coat, dear?

PLUM

(jumps)

No! I mean, no thank you, not just yet.

LAURELINE

Plum, are you all right?

PLUM

All right? (a strange laugh, relieved to be able to admit the answer) No, I suppose I'm not. I was fired two days ago and haven't been able to sleep much since, so-

LAURELINE

Fired? What for?

PLUM

Exactly what you'd think.

JENNIE

Someone found you out?

PLUM

Trumped up bigot so jealous of my promotion he took to following me after work.

JENNIE

Good god!

PLUM

And found just enough to denounce me to my superiors, so-

LAURELINE

Oh, you poor dear!

Jennie and Laureline both rush to her in concern.

PLUM

But you would have been proud of me, Laureline. I think. I did just as you taught us. Didn't act guilty, or- or beg, or anything. I just said, "There's nothing I do in my private life that hurts any other human being. And it has no bearing whatsoever on how I do my job!" Just like that. Very firm like. I think I may even have been a bit *impressive*. They wouldn't listen, of course, and tried very hard to make me feel ashamed of myself. But I wouldn't let them. If I was going to leave that room with no job and no recommendation after five years of steady advancement, I was at least going to walk out with my dignity. Yes. I'm very glad of that.

Laureline embraces her.

LAURELINE

Plum, you darling, amazing girl! I swear, you're the strongest and bravest of us all.

PLUM

No. No, I wouldn't say that at all. Not when I got home.

An awkward pause. Plum looks over at Ambrose.

PLUM

I'm sorry, I know it's for being our true selves and all, but it just feels so odd pretending you're not in the room when you are.

AMBROSE

Yes, it does at that.

PLUM

So, just - hello, person I'm not supposed to know yet. You have very kind eyes, and I look forward to meeting you officially when I look something closer to pretty.

AMBROSE

I look forward to the official meeting as well, but you're quite beautiful just as you are.

PLUM

Oh. Oh my. (to Laureline) He's quite good, isn't he?

LAURELINE

And we can proceed with the introduction if you like. We all understand if you're not in the mood to dress this evening.

PLUM

Oh, but there's nothing I want to do more! (heads straight to the closet) If those Philistines are going to fire me for being a woman-man, then I'll damn well earn it by being the laciest, frilliest woman-man in the whole history of Creation! I need to be just dripping with ribbons and bows, like some wonderful present they'll never get to open!

She finds a couple extravagantly pretty long-sleeved dresses.

PLUM

Oh, these are just splendid, aren't they? (shows them to the others) What do you think, Mr. Stranger? (holds up one dress) Bright as sunshine? (then the other) Or ocean blue?

AMBROSE

The sunshine, I think, since you've already brought some into the room with you.

Plum blushes bright crimson.

PLUM

Oh. Thank you.

She heads out of the room with the dress.

PLUM

(to Laureline, quiet)

Where did you find him?

Laureline just shrugs as Plum exits.

LAURELINE

Poor thing. But she does bounce back remarkably well.

AMBROSE

Quite charming, I must say.

JENNIE

I only hope she'll be more careful in the future. How about you, Ambrose? Are you one of the more mild type fairies, or do you indulge like the rest of us?

LAURELINE

Really Jennie, must you classify everyone you know into kingdoms and phylums?

JENNIE

Let him answer the question, Laureline.

AMBROSE

I'm sorry. "Indulge-?"

JENNIE

In women's apparel.

AMBROSE

I ... have been known to from time to time.

JENNIE

As a lark, or is it something you're compelled to do?

Ambrose and Laureline share a look.

AMBROSE

Compelled would be a good word for it, yes.

JENNIE

A great bother, isn't it? Having such desires that won't take no for an answer?

AMBROSE

Indeed. How do you manage it?

JENNIE

A strict regimen of control with just enough release to not go mad. I play Ralph, making his way in a man's world Monday through Friday. And I'm able to stomach it because I have the weekends as Jennie to look forward to. It's all laid out in the book. (to Laureline) And you still haven't finished your sentence, by the way.

LAURELINE

Right. I was going to say that, to your credit, you're never less than honest in your work. You lay it all out, holding nothing back. The frankness with which you write is astounding.

JENNIE

So you liked it?

LAURELINE

That being said, personal experience and personal opinion are two different things, and you give us an awful lot of-

Phyllis suddenly makes a grand entrance. Stunning dress. A large, wide brimmed hat that's had songs written about its grandness. And, of course, Phyllis herself, looking every inch the statuesque, soft-featured ideal of the age.

PHYLLIS

I believe there's a gentleman you wanted me to meet, Laureline?

JENNIE

Oh dear god.

Ambrose is on his feet immediately, captivated by her beauty.

AMBROSE

Yes, Laureline, please inform me whether this vision of loveliness has a name that can be spoken by mortal men.

JENNIE

I can think of several that can be spoken, just not printed.

LAURELINE

Ambrose, may I present to you my good friend, Phyllis Angevine? Phyllis, this is Ambrose Carlton, also a dear friend.

Ambrose's face falls at the name Phyllis, but he quickly corrects, and kisses her hand.

AMBROSE

So lovely to make your acquaintance, Miss Angevine. (a look to Laureline) I've heard so much about you.

PHYLLIS

All of it perfectly scandalous, I hope.

AMBROSE

Can scandal co-exist with such angelic beauty?

Jennie nearly chokes on her tea.

PHYLLIS

Oh, it's a cosmetic necessity. Some girls pinch their cheeks, or even apply rouge, but it's scandal that provides the most lasting warmth to a lady's complexion. I highly recommend it. (suggestively) And I am always open to starting a new one.

LAURELINE

The hat and gown are just as divine. (inspecting the hat) One of your own creations?

PHYLLIS

As though I'd wear anyone else! And I had the dress made custom to match.

AMBROSE

An artist as well as a beauty!

LAURELINE

Yes, Phyllis is a milliner by profession.

PHYLLIS

You make it sound so practical, Laureline! Bankers and accountants have professions. I have a calling.

JENNIE

Yes, to so fantastically adorn the head of the modern woman that men don't notice how empty it is.

PHYLLIS

But here we are, talking in detail about our big important careers when that's supposed to be the man's job. (turns to Ambrose) What's your profession, Mr. Carlton?

AMBROSE

Profession? Ah-

JENNIE

Dancer, I believe it was?

LAURELINE

Which is Jennie's way of saying our Ambrose is a member of the leisure class.

AMBROSE

Yes, though I've often thought that having an occupation could do me a world of good.

PHYLLIS

Really? Because you strike me more as a "grand mission in life" sort of person.

AMBROSE

Now that you mention it, I suppose I am.

PHYLLIS

May I ask what it is?

AMBROSE

My mission? To never just take no for an answer.

PHYLLIS

What a coincidence! I happen to be quite partial to that myself. So if you ever need someone to practice with, I trust you'll let me know?

Plum enters, absolutely adorable in her lace and bow accented dress.

LAURELINE

Ah, here she is. Ambrose Carlton, allow me to introduce Plum Gardner, a young lady near and dear to my heart.

PLUM

At long last, Mr. Carlton. I've been looking forward to meeting you since the moment I first ... met you.

Ambrose kisses her hand.

AMBROSE

The pleasure is all mine. And please, call me Ambrose.

PLUM

Ambrose. Yes. It's nice to actually be able to call you something. And you'll call me Plum, then?

AMBROSE

I'd be honored.

LAURELINE

Would you care for some tea, Plumkin?

PLUM

Oh, I'll take any warmth and coziness I can get just now.

LAURELINE

It's wonderful to see you more at ease. I must admit you had me worried.

PHYLLIS

(squeezing Plum's arm affectionately)

You should have seen her in the dressing room. The moment the old clothes hit the floor she seemed so much lighter that I half expected her to float right up to the ceiling.

Plum blushes, embarrassed.

PLUM

It's not just the clothes that do it. I mean, they're very pretty and I like how I look in them. Mostly. But it's the weight off my mind I notice most.

AMBROSE

Really? How do you mean?

PLUM

It's just that sometimes I forget, you know? That people don't see a woman when they look at me. My brain's always been so convinced, despite all evidence to the contrary, that it takes up time and effort when people relate to me as though I'm a man. Like I have to translate to myself what it is they're saying to this imaginary person they think is me. Does that make any sense?

AMBROSE

Perfectly. I've just never heard it put in quite that way before.

Jennie takes out a small notebook, and starts scribbling.

JENNIE

Neither have I.

AMBROSE

But I feel much the same a good deal of the time.

PLUM

So then you- (indicates her clothing) do this too?

JENNIE

Yes, he does. Oh, I'm sorry. Should I be saying 'she'?

AMBROSE

What? No. 'He' is fine, thank you.

PHYLLIS

You needn't be bashful about it. We even have some public dresses if you didn't bring your own. (gestures to her own outfit) Nothing so grand as this, of course, but a few that are perfectly acceptable.

AMBROSE

I'm ... quite comfortable just as I am at present.

PLUM

Or even if there's a name you'd prefer we call you-

LAURELINE

Ladies, please. This is his first visit. Do give him some time to be acclimated.

PLUM

I'm sorry. I just get so excited for others to be themselves, you know?

A knock at the door. Not coded. Everyone freezes. Plum instinctively reaches for Jennie and Phyllis' hands. They grab on tight. More knocking. Laureline goes quietly up to the peephole and comes back to the ladies, puzzled.

LAURELINE

(quietly)

I have no idea who that man is. Anyone?

The others creep quietly to the door to take a look. Jennie looks, shakes her head. Phyllis looks, shrugs.

MALE VOICE

Hello? Hello? I know there are people here - the doorman saw several.

AMBROSE

(at the sound of the voice)

Oh god.

Plum's turn.

PLUM

(whispering)

He looks like one of the bankers where I have an account. You don't think-

MALE VOICE

I know you're there, Vi. Now do be sensible and open the door!

More knocking.

AMBROSE

(sighs, still quiet)

He's looking for me.

LAURELINE

Who on earth is he?

AMBROSE

Someone who thinks I belong to him, apparently.

MALE VOICE

I'm not leaving without you, Violet.

AMBROSE

(under his breath)

Oh, you imbecile!

PHYLLIS

Affair gone wrong, eh?

MALE VOICE

And you're just causing a scene by leaving me out here!

PHYLLIS

I know it well. One dance, a little blanket hornpipe, and suddenly they won't leave you alone!

The knocking grows more violent.

LAURELINE

(to Ambrose)

Go wait in the kitchen. I'll try to get rid of him. Plum, you too, just in case.

Ambrose and Plum run into the kitchen, then listen at the door intently.

LAURELINE

Everyone else, back to the tea table and do your best to look genteel and affronted!

MALE VOICE

Violet! Violet.

PLUM

(to Ambrose)

Violet. Is that your name when you're-

AMBROSE

It's ... complicated.

Laureline straightens up to her full height and opens the door on BERTRAM TEMPLETON, impeccably, if blandly, dressed, and handsome in an uptight sort of way.

His current expression is one of surprise. Whatever he was expecting to see, Laureline in full imperious lady mode is not it.

LAURELINE

And just what do you think you are doing, sir? Laying siege to my private residence in such a barbaric manner?

Jennie and Phyllis do their best "genteel but affronted" huff, right on cue.

BERTRAM

I- I beg your pardon, ladies. I didn't realize these apartments were separate from-

LAURELINE

Here we are, trying to have tea, and you're behaving like it's the Sacking of Constantinople!

PHYLLIS

(under her breath)

I wouldn't mind him pillaging my precious artifacts.

JENNIE

(whispering)

Shh. We're being genteel!

Plum opens the kitchen door just a crack to get a glimpse of what's going on.

LAURELINE

Well? What was it that was so awfully important?

BERTRAM

My deepest apologies. It's just that the doorman told me-

LAURELINE

Did you give him money?

PLUM

(to Ambrose)

Ooh. He's rather strapping, isn't he?

BERTRAM

A- a little.

AMBROSE

I have no opinion on that.

LAURELINE

And you promised him more?

BERTRAM

I- no?

PLUM

Is that the sort of man you tend to like?

AMBROSE

Not remotely.

LAURELINE

If you want accurate information from a doorman, you present two impressive bills, give him one, then promise the second on your return. Otherwise, he can tell you anything he likes, which I suppose he has. Honestly, one would think you've never bribed your way into a building for a fiery confrontation before.

BERTRAM

I've never done anything like this before in my life! And I swear I never would if someone's life and virtue didn't hang in the balance.

LAURELINE

I'm sure that's true. But if it isn't my life and virtue or that of my friends, we should like to get back to tea.

BERTRAM

Then there's no one here named Violet?

LAURELINE

If there were, perhaps they would have let you in. I'm not inclined to answer wild men pounding on my door while screaming my name to the whole world, but that could be a personal preference.

BERTRAM

Yes, of course. (bows deeply to the three of them) I am dreadfully sorry for my behavior, ladies. It was all a terrible mistake, and I hope you'll forgive me.

LAURELINE

That's very kind of you. Good day, sir.

BERTRAM

Good day.

Laureline closes the door.

PLUM

(to Ambrose)

And he's gone.

AMBROSE

Oh, thank god.

Ambrose and Plum emerge from the kitchen.

AMBROSE

I'm terribly sorry about this, Laureline. I thought I'd been careful not to be followed, but -

LAURELINE

It's all right, Ambrose. We've handled it peaceably. That's all that matters.

JENNIE

(to Ambrose)

If it makes you feel better, you're not the first. Phyllis' old beau George has graced us with his presence on more than one occasion.

PHYLLIS

Only when he wants money, the brute. (to Ambrose) But your unhinged stalker seems much nicer.

Another uncoded knock on the door.

AMBROSE

Oh my god.

PHYLLIS

And more persistent, too.

Laureline waves Ambrose and Plum back into the kitchen, then opens the door. Plum takes up her position again, peeking through a crack in the door.

LAURELINE

Just what is the meaning of this, sir? I told you quite clearly-

BERTRAM

It's Templeton. Bertram Templeton, and I can't tell you how sorry I am to disturb you again, but I'm just- I'm so distraught, and you seem like the sort of woman who wouldn't turn away someone in need.

PLUM

It's him again.

AMBROSE

Why can't he just leave me alone?

LAURELINE

That depends on the need. And since I don't teach lessons in manners-

BERTRAM

Please, it's my sister. I fear she may have ... fallen in with a bad crowd. If you could just tell me whether or not you've seen her-

Phyllis joins Laureline at the door.

PHYLLIS

Come now, Laureline. The gentleman is clearly in distress. Let him sit down and unburden himself.

LAURELINE

We are three unmarried ladies without escort, Phyllis.

Phyllis grabs Bertram by the arm and leads him inside.

PHYLLIS

(to Bertram conspiratorily)

I won't tell if you don't.

PLUM

I - I think Phyllis is bringing him inside.

AMBROSE

What?!

Plum steps aside so Ambrose can see. Phyllis leads Bertram to the tea table.

PLUM

She can be unpredictable-

PHYLLIS

Now please, sit down, collect yourself, and tell us all about it when you're ready.

PLUM

- especially when attractive men are involved.

LAURELINE

Quickly. And then be on your way.

AMBROSE

Would you really call him attractive?

PLUM

In a certain way.

BERTRAM

(to Phyllis)

Thank you.

He sits down.

PLUM

But you probably have so many suitors after you that you can afford to be choosy.

PHYLLIS

(to Bertram)

Would you like some tea?

BERTRAM

Oh, that's not necessary.

She pours him some anyway.

AMBROSE

Actually, you'd be surprised at the lengths I have to go to to find even one.

PLUM

Really?

BERTRAM

Ah - thank you.

He drinks a bit to be polite and collect his thoughts.

PLUM

But you're so handsome!

AMBROSE

(taken aback)

Handsome. You're the first person to ever call me that.

BERTRAM

I followed my sister here out of concern for her well-being. If you could just tell me if you've seen her today, or previously? Or where she may have gone?

A thought occurs to Jennie. She leans in to Bertram with interest.

PLUM

You're joking.

AMBROSE

I'm not.

JENNIE

What does she look like?

BERTRAM

She's a young lady, brown curly hair down to her shoulders.

AMBROSE

Most people find my features ...

BERTRAM

Rather ...

AMBROSE

Well, boyish -

BERTRAM

Boyish -

BERTRAM

In appearance.

AMBROSE

At best.

PLUM

Oh, but that's only because they're looking at the wrong things.

BERTRAM

A pleasant, rounded face -

PLUM

Shapes of bones and such -

BERTRAM

Full cheeks-

PLUM

- but you get no say in that.

BERTRAM

She can be quite pretty when she wants to be.

PLUM

I look for features that got that way because of who you are.

BERTRAM

Though more often than not-

AMBROSE

And which are those?

BERTRAM

She holds herself rather ...

PLUM

Well - your lips. Not the shape, but how you hold them.

BERTRAM

Severely .

PLUM

Very firm, but with this upturn at the corners that means you're not afraid to smile.

BERTRAM

She's on the taller side of average height -

PLUM

And eyebrows. You can tell a lot by eyebrows.

BERTRAM

Prefers rather plain dress.

PLUM

Yours furrow in thought, but jump up in surprise or amusement sometimes too -

BERTRAM

Drab gray and brown things, mostly.

PLUM

Which means they're versatile, and that's important, I think. And then there's your eyes.

JENNIE

And her eyes?

BERTRAM

Oh. Yes.

PLUM

Intelligent. Attentive.

BERTRAM

Brown, I think.

PLUM

Quietly making maps and plans for the whole entire world, it seems like.

BERTRAM

Yes, definitely brown.

PLUM

Honest, I can't imagine how someone could look into those eyes-

BERTRAM

Have you seen her?

PLUM

I mean really look, and not find you handsome.

LAURELINE

I think I may have glimpsed her briefly, but she disappeared before I could be sure.

PHYLLIS

Is it possible she knew she was being followed, ducked in here to throw you off her scent, then left through a back door?

BERTRAM

I hadn't thought of that.

PLUM

Oh, but we should be paying attention.

She goes back to peering through the crack of the door.

PHYLLIS

That's what I would do if I were her. Although, being myself, it's hard to think of a good reason to run from such a charming gentleman.

LAURELINE

Jennie, have you seen anyone matching that description?

JENNIE

Not at present, no.

LAURELINE

I'm afraid we're of no help to you, Mr. Templeton. Now if you'll excuse us-

BERTRAM

Yes, of course. (stands up, to Laureline) May I leave you my card in case Violet makes an appearance?

LAURELINE

You may. But let me be frank, Mr. Templeton. You seem very sincere in your concern, but I don't know you. So if I am going to report on someone's whereabouts, I will need to hear their side of the story first, and make my own judgment on what is best.

BERTRAM

Yes. That's entirely sensible. (hands her his card) And if I may say so, Miss-

LAURELINE

Reeves.

BERTRAM

Miss Reeves, though I regret the intrusion, I am glad to have met such a perceptive and capable lady. Thank you again.

LAURELINE

You are welcome, Mr. Templeton. And I hope matters for your family work themselves out happily.

BERTRAM

Thank you. Good day, Miss Reeves. (to the others) Ladies.

Laureline closes the door behind him. A beat. Ambrose and Plum emerge from the kitchen.

AMBROSE

Well, now that that's finally over with -

Another knock.

AMBROSE

Oh, you can't be serious!

And they head right back into the kitchen. Laureline opens the door again, peeved.

LAURELINE

Really, Mr. Templeton, this cannot be allowed to go on.

BERTRAM

I know, and I'm leaving directly. I just wanted to add that, since you now have my card and my address, there's no need to be timid about calling for purely social purposes, if you like. Good day, Miss Reeves.

LAURELINE

Good day.

She closes the door.

LAURELINE

He has nerve, I'll give him that.

Ambrose pokes his head out of the kitchen door.

AMBROSE

Is he - do you think-?

LAURELINE

Yes, I think he's finally gone.

PHYLLIS

Well, that was exciting! Quite the man about town, isn't he? Comes here in search of his fairy ex lover, tells some cock and bull story about a sister in distress, and still finds time to proposition an androgyne he mistakes for a more straightforward sort of woman. How charmingly versatile.

PLUM

(to Ambrose)

Like your eyebrows.

PHYLLIS

What?

PLUM

Nothing.

JENNIE

And a good actor, too. (to Ambrose, pointedly) Do you know, the way he told that sob story about his sister felt surprisingly genuine. Very convincing, I must say.

AMBROSE

(meeting her eyes with a smile)

Sounds like quite the performance. I'm sorry I missed it.

PHYLLIS

(to Laureline)

Though I still don't see why he made a pass at you when I was the one being accommodating.

LAURELINE

What you were was reckless. Did you even think of the possible consequences of your little-

PHYLLIS

If anything, I made it look like we had nothing to hide. I could tell right away he wasn't the violent sort.

LAURELINE

From your experience. But you've lived something of a charmed life, Phyllis. Not all of us have been so lucky.

Phyllis looks at the others. Flushed faces. Bodies still not recovered from the tension of the intrusion.

PHYLLIS

Yes. It was horribly careless of me. Especially after all you've just been through, Plumkin.
(a sudden thought) And I know just how to make it up to you!

She jumps up and heads to the room offstage.

PHYLLIS

Giving people pretty things to unwrap is always the best penance.

She exits. Plum settles at the table with Jennie, pours herself another cup of tea. Laureline stays back with Ambrose.

PLUM

That's right, the masks! Phyllis always brings the most beautiful things!

JENNIE

She's devoted her life to it. Which is fine for some, I suppose.

LAURELINE

(aside, to Ambrose)

I know it's early, but how does the field look so far?

PLUM

Have you found a very grand gown for the ball tonight?

AMBROSE

So far, Plum has laid claim to my heart-

JENNIE

I have something that will do.

AMBROSE

Jennie exercises the brain-

JENNIE

Unlike some people here, I can't afford to be extravagant.

AMBROSE

And Phyllis ... inspires the other bits.

JENNIE

I vowed early on not to let this part of my life sabotage my prospects. So it's kept to a strict schedule and an even stricter budget.

PLUM

I can't afford much either. But I convinced my sister to teach me how to sew when we were younger, so that helps quite a bit.

JENNIE

She didn't scold you or tell your father?

PLUM

Oh, no. She thought it was amusing, mostly. Also I think she liked the company. And having a secret from the adults is so thrilling at that age, isn't it?

JENNIE

(suddenly quiet)

I wouldn't know. My sisters tortured me for even asking.

Jennie takes a long drink of tea. The room falls awkwardly silent until Phyllis bursts back in with a stack of hat boxes.

PHYLLIS

Prepare yourselves for amazement! I really think I've outdone myself with these beauties!

JENNIE

You say that every time you bring something.

PHYLLIS

I know. And now I've outdone all those other times I outdid myself previously. As I'm sure you will agree.

She brings out a gorgeous unicorn mask and headdress. Flowing mane, bejeweled eyes and horn, it elicits gasps as she raises it out of the box.

JENNIE

Oh dear god, you're right.

PHYLLIS

This one's mine, of course, because why wouldn't it be?

JENNIE

To start with, the fact that historically unicorns are only interested in virgins.

PHYLLIS

Most of them. (strokes the horn suggestively) But I convinced this fellow to make an exception. (to Ambrose) What do you think of it?

He takes the mask from her, looks it over carefully. As he does so, Jennie takes Laureline aside from the others, whispering.

AMBROSE

It's exquisite.

JENNIE

I know your secret, Laureline.

LAURELINE

Surely I've not yet reached the age where I'm thought to have only one?

AMBROSE

Such marvellous craftsmanship.

JENNIE

He's a gynander, isn't he?

Laureline sighs.

AMBROSE

Why, the stitching's practically invisible.

JENNIE

I knew it. That poor man was no actor, and certainly no fairy.

PLUM

Could you put it on, Phyllis? I want to see how it moves!

JENNIE

He was actually looking for his sister.

PHYLLIS

If you insist.

Phyllis puts on the headdress and takes a trot around Ambrose and Plum, who react with delight.

LAURELINE

Can you just once try to enjoy yourself without poking about into what people are or aren't?

JENNIE

How about what you intended by keeping us in the dark? Am I allowed to look into that?

LAURELINE

A friend was looking to marry, he asked me to introduce him to some ladies with similar ... interests-

PLUM

Oh, it's wonderful!

LAURELINE

And wished to keep certain details quiet until they became pertinent. That's all.

JENNIE

Marry? You mean to legally - (it dawns on her)

PLUM

(excited, to Ambrose)

Did you see the swish of that mane?

JENNIE

Of course. It's brilliant.

AMBROSE

A work of genius, Phyllis.

JENNIE

Why didn't I think of it first?

PHYLLIS

Oh, you're so kind.

She takes it off, puts it carefully back in its box.

LAURELINE

Because it's not an easy fit with your doctrine of moderated self-denial, is it?

PHYLLIS

And there's more where that came from.

LAURELINE

Or your tastes in the boudoir.

PHYLLIS

(to Plum)

Would you like to see yours?

JENNIE

For a once in a lifetime chance like that, one can make certain arrangements.

PLUM

Oh, very much!

JENNIE

Am I in the running? Who's my competition? Please don't say Phyllis.

She looks over to the others opening more hat boxes.

AMBROSE

(to Plum)

Although if you're going to cover such a lovely face with anything, it had better be extraordinary.

Laureline and Jennie share a look, then join the others.
Phyllis brings out a peacock mask with a gilded beak and crown of feathers.

PHYLLIS

(hands it to Plum)

I was thinking this one, Plum, would be for you.

PLUM

Oh my goodness. I don't think I've ever held anything so beautiful in all my life!

Phyllis brings out a gorgeous butterfly mask with expansive wings rendered in delicate pastels, hands it to Jennie.

PHYLLIS

This for Jennie.

She opens the last box, brings out a golden sun mask with long bejewelled rays.

PHYLLIS

And for Laureline, our guiding light, nothing less than the splendor of the sun!

She hands it to Laureline. The ladies try them on, look at themselves in a mirror on one of the walls.

PLUM

It's marvellous! I don't think it matches the gown I have for tonight, but I don't care! Oh, and both of yours are just breathtaking!(to Ambrose) What do you think?

AMBROSE

Exquisite, no matter what you're wearing.

PLUM

You will look for me at the ball, won't you?

AMBROSE

I'd love to. But I didn't bring any formal attire. And with no mask at a costume ball-

JENNIE

They always have extra masks for the men, even when there isn't a ball. Privacy, you know.

LAURELINE

And as for evening dress, we have a wide selection across both genders. Shall we see what we can find for you?

AMBROSE

If you don't mind. (to Plum) And if I'm able to find something that fits, I would be honored to have the first dance with you.

PLUM

Yes, please!

Laureline and Ambrose exit into the dressing room. Jennie examines her mask in the mirror. Suddenly has an idea.

JENNIE

This really is fine work, Phyllis. Although ... isn't this here the color of the gown you'll be wearing, Plumkin?

PHYLLIS

That's it exactly. Hmm. Perhaps I had that in mind without realizing it.

JENNIE

(sighs dramatically)

Much as I would hate to part with it, it really does suit your dress more than mine.

PLUM

(tempted)

Do you think so? But what about you?

JENNIE

I'll have the royal blue one for tonight, so really, a trade could benefit us both. Shall we try it?

PLUM

Yes, lets! No harm in just seeing, right?

They trade masks, look in the mirror.

PLUM

Oh, each one's so magical in its own way! I don't even know what to think!

JENNIE

And what about our guest tonight? Do you know what you think about him?

PLUM

Maybe. He's very charming. And kind. And also something else I can't quite put my finger on.

PHYLLIS

Smart. A bit too smart, if you ask me. That stalker of his, though. There's a gent that has what I'm looking for.

PLUM

And what's that?

PHYLLIS

I tend to want the same things from a man that I do from a corset. Supportive, covers my flaws, hugs me all day long, and is laced so tight that when it finally pops off the sensation is extraordinary.

PLUM

I do like the hugging all day part, but I'm not sure about the rest of it. I like things comfier, just at ease together and honest about everything. (to Jennie) How about you?

JENNIE

I could never conceive of a long term attachment that would still fit into the life I wished to have in the world. So it seemed pointless to dwell on which sort of thing that didn't exist I would prefer. But tonight I've begun to wonder if that was a failure of imagination. I haven't decided yet. I suppose we'll see. So what do you think?

PLUM

About it being a failure -

JENNIE

About the masks.

PLUM

Oh! Right. I must admit, this one feels a little more "me" somehow.

PHYLLIS

Now that I see them on you, I agree completely. So, it's settled, then?

PLUM

If that's all right with you, Jennie?

JENNIE

Yes -

Jennie looks at herself in the peacock mask, then to the room where Ambrose is, smiles.

JENNIE

I believe this will accomplish just what I was hoping for.

They continue to look at the masks in the mirror as the lights go down.

Act Two

SCENE ONE

The masked ball downstairs at "The Hall." Sounds of dance music and people having a good time. Bertram stumbles in, looking mortified. A fey GENTLEMAN in a mask spots him and approaches.

GENTLEMAN

Your first time, is it?

BERTRAM

I- I beg your pardon?

GENTLEMAN

I can always spot the new ones. You're at a costume party, and you resemble nothing so much as a panicked banker.

BERTRAM

(alarmed)

Banker? Just what do you mean by that?

GENTLEMAN

I mean that you should relax. Perhaps this will put you more at ease?

He takes a domino mask out of his inside jacket pocket, hands it to Bertram.

GENTLEMAN

It's something of a necessity here for gentlemen of a certain class.

Bertram just stares at it.

GENTLEMAN

Go on. It's not going to bite you. I was nervous my first time too. But you'll find us a very welcoming crowd. Would you care to dance?

BERTRAM

What? Dance? You mean with - I - that is to say-

GENTLEMAN

It's all right. I'll try you later when you've settled in. (gestures to the mask) But you really should put that on. And for god's sake, darling, try to look a bit less respectable!

As the man is speaking, Ambrose enters, wearing a tuxedo and a commedia dell' Arte mask. He sees Bertram and immediately turns around and starts to leave. Then stops, turns back around carefully as the Gentleman finds another masked MAN to dance with. Bertram watches them dance for a moment. Looks down at the mask the Gentleman handed him. Tosses it to the ground in distaste. Ambrose sighs, picks it up off the floor and approaches.

AMBROSE

(an angry whisper)

Bertie, have you lost your mind? What are you doing here?

BERTRAM

What is this? How do you know my name?!

Ambrose sighs, raises his mask.

BERTRAM

Whatever you're playing at, sir, I can - (recognition starts to dawn on him) Oh my god. Violet? What have you done to your hair?

AMBROSE

The curls have been false for years. Now for god's sake, put on this mask before someone recognizes you.

Ambrose lowers his again in punctuation.

BERTRAM

No one in our circle would frequent a place like this!

AMBROSE

I do. And if you think I'm the only one in our circle who has secrets, you're mistaken in a way that could prove very costly.

Bertram looks around the room with new eyes. He fumbles to get the mask.

AMBROSE

Good. Now dance with me. You've stood out enough already.

BERTRAM

(fumbles to get the mask on)

Dance - With you dressed like that? Really, Violet, this is-

AMBROSE

(pulling him into a waltz stance)

I don't answer to that here. For several reasons. Please, call me Ambrose.

BERTRAM

(taken aback)

You still use that name?

AMBROSE

Do you regret giving it to me?

BERTRAM

I - we were children playing make-believe.

AMBROSE

We were children using make-believe to be ourselves. Both of us. You let me take charge and be the man and I gave you room for all the feelings father told you to shut off. Tell me you don't still miss it. Those summer days with your little brother.

BERTRAM

(sighs)

It was .. a golden time. But we've grown up. Things are different now.

AMBROSE

Because **you** made them that way, don't forget. You gave me no choice back then. But now that I have one, I'm going to make it count.

BERTRAM

And what is that supposed to mean?

AMBROSE

It means I'm here for a purpose. And it's not nearly as scandalous as you seem to have imagined.

BERTRAM

Oh, yes. How silly of me to assume improper things were going on after following my sister to a bloody whorehouse!

AMBROSE

Bertie-

BERTRAM

Do you realize what could happen if word got out? Preston's already asked me about rumors of your wandering at night without escort, which I've assured him -

AMBROSE

Is that why you followed me here? For his benefit?

BERTRAM

I know you have your reservations about him, but if you think it's hard finding a suitable husband now-

AMBROSE

I'm not looking for a husband, Bertram. I'm here because I'm looking for a wife.

Beat.

BERTRAM

What?!

Jennie enters in the peacock mask Ambrose last saw on Plum. Laureline enters behind her. Ambrose spots them.

AMBROSE

And speaking of that, I did promise someone a first dance. So if you'll excuse me-

Ambrose pulls away, but Bertram grabs his arm. Laureline sees this, moves in.

BERTRAM

This isn't a game, Violet!

LAURELINE

If the gentleman wants so badly to keep dancing, perhaps I could be of assistance.

She deftly takes Ambrose's place. As Bertram and Laureline talk, Ambrose quickly finds Jennie in the peacock mask, bows to her, extends his hand for a dance. She curtsies, takes his hand, and they start.

BERTRAM

I don't mean to be rude, Miss, but you've mistaken the situation-

LAURELINE

What is there to mistake? Someone no longer wants to dance with you and someone else, namely, me, very much does. Once we've both had our way for the length of a waltz, you can resume your conversation. And you'll have made me happy in the meantime.

She lifts up her mask.

LAURELINE

Does that sound so terrible?

BERTRAM

Miss Reeves!

AMBROSE

At last! I have you to myself again. Shall we resume where we let off?

JENNIE

(uncertain)

Where we left off?

BERTRAM

What on earth are you doing in this sort of place?

LAURELINE

Whatever I like. I believe that's the general idea.

Laureline pulls him into her and starts dancing.

AMBROSE

Our conversation in the kitchen was meaningful to me, and I was hoping -

JENNIE

(doing her best Plum impersonation)

Oh ... of course! But could we maybe just dance for a bit first? That can be meaningful too.

Ambrose and Jennie dance away, focused on each others' eyes. Bertram looks around at the other dancers.

BERTRAM

But for a lady such as yourself to be seen in the company of-

LAURELINE

And what exactly is a "lady such as myself?" I've often heard of this mythical creature, but don't think I'd know her if I saw her.

BERTRAM

Oh, you'd know. A lady of taste and refinement. (studying Laureline's face) But not the sort of refinement that makes her too soft or- or rigid. It's different than that. A strength that's ... flexible. That makes you feel as though she has everything in hand. Or could if you needed her to. (getting more and more lost in her eyes) Capability paired with kindness, like you've never- I beg your pardon, Miss Reeves. I think I misspoke.

LAURELINE

Which part?

BERTRAM

I haven't met another lady such as yourself either.

LAURELINE

(taken aback)

That's ... very flattering, Monsieur. And I can only hope all that is true of me. But it isn't the whole story.

BERTRAM

I'd love to hear the rest of it.

LAURELINE

And I would love to talk a bit less and dance a good deal more.

BERTRAM

If you insist.

They whirl across the dance floor. As Ambrose and Jennie talk, Phyllis and Plum enter. The two gentlemen see them, split off. The Gentleman offers to dance with Phyllis. She accepts. The Man offers to dance with Plum. She hesitates, looks over at Ambrose dancing with Jennie, then reluctantly accepts.

AMBROSE

I know you were worried about it earlier, but the mask actually matches your dress quite beautifully.

JENNIE

Would you look at that? It's a miracle! Like water into wine at the Wedding At Cana.

AMBROSE

It's a pity Our Lord seems to frown on other types of transformations, or my own prospects for a wedding would be much easier.

JENNIE

But you seem to be doing just fine without his help. Isn't that why you're here?

AMBROSE

(caught off guard)

I- what do you-

JENNIE

And really, Christ doesn't frown on so many things as you think. It's really not His fault that churches twist His words to confirm their own prejudices instead of studying the original languages and historical context. That would take actual work and a commitment to understanding that, frankly -

AMBROSE

Wait - Jennie?!

He pulls her mask up.

JENNIE

The religious didacticism gave me away, didn't it? I never can seem to reign that in.

AMBROSE

Where's Plum?

JENNIE

Am I my sister's keeper?

AMBROSE

I've given you this dance under false pretenses, so if you'll excuse me-

JENNIE

But I'm not the only one here under false pretenses, am I? Or should I ask your brother over there instead?

Ambrose freezes.

AMBROSE

What is it you want?

JENNIE

To congratulate you. Having Laureline bring you in to find a suitable match was sheer brilliance! You're the first gynander I know to have thought of it, which has me very impressed, a little bit jealous, but mostly quite interested in your proposition.

AMBROSE

Since I haven't actually proposed it yet, it seems premature to discuss it just now.

JENNIE

Why? I already know you're clever and charming. And I flatter myself to think you see me as an equal in those regards. We both need a safe place to be ourselves, and someone who won't take us at face value. What more do we need to know?

AMBROSE

Those are the mathematics of it. What about the poetry?

JENNIE

Romance, you mean? Well, that we may have to import. But I'm sure we can make suitable arrangements.

AMBROSE

With certain third parties?

JENNIE

And forth and fifth if you like. It will all be so sophisticated, so decadent, so very *French!* I like the idea better every minute.

AMBROSE

You're right, Jennie. I do think you're very clever. And I'm amazed that, with all your powers of observation, you still manage to entirely miss the point. Now if you'll pardon me, I have a promise to keep.

And he's off searching for Plum. Bertram and Laureline come back around. Bertram watches Ambrose closely.

JENNIE

Fiddlesticks!

LAURELINE

(to Bertram)

I know Ambrose is quite pleasant to watch, but dancing tends to work better if you look at your actual partner on occasion.

BERTRAM

Ambrose? Is that how sh- how you were introduced?

LAURELINE

Not the first time. On that occasion, he was Sir Walter Raleigh and I was Madame du Pompadour. Aren't masked balls wonderful? You can learn so much about a person from how they decide to hide themselves, don't you think?

Ambrose recognizes Phyllis' mask, goes to her.

BERTRAM

Not when their disguise is all you see of them. Miss, I'm afraid you've been deceived. The person you call Ambrose is-

LAURELINE

Is more honest than you give him credit for.

AMBROSE

Phyllis, which mask did Plum-

PHYLLIS

The social butterfly over there.

LAURELINE

It's you who have been deceived, and almost entirely by yourself.

Ambrose spots her, deftly pushes the man dancing with Plum out of her arms and takes over.

AMBROSE

Pardon me, cutting in.

MAN

Wait - but I -

But Ambrose and Plum are already spinning across the floor.

LAURELINE

Whatever assumptions you've made about him are -

BERTRAM

It's not "him." There is no "him!" Miss Reeves, that is my sister Violet who I've been looking for!

BERTRAM

"Ambrose-"

PLUM

Ambrose!

BERTRAM

-as you call him, doesn't exist!

PLUM

I thought you'd forgotten about me.

LAURELINE

His existence, sir, is not up to you!

AMBROSE

Never! Merely misdirected.

LAURELINE

Now, you may have grown up calling that person the name your parents told you to -

PLUM

Oh right!

LAURELINE

But *he* says his name is Ambrose.

PLUM

Because the last mask you saw me in- (laughs)

LAURELINE

Call me old-fashioned, but I tend to listen to someone when they tell me who they are.

PLUM

And you spent all that time thinking-

AMBROSE

It was my own fault for not asking straightaway.

BERTRAM

So then ...

AMBROSE

But I'm very glad to finally be dancing with you.

BERTRAM

... You knew.

PLUM

Me too.

They just dance, connected, moving gracefully together.

BERTRAM

The entire time I was in your rooms, you knew that Violet was-

LAURELINE

The name you insist on calling the gentleman hiding in my kitchen? Yes.

BERTRAM

You said you hadn't seen her!

LAURELINE

I said I may have glimpsed her briefly, but she disappeared before I could be sure. Which is precisely what happened. A person in the dress you described rushed into my rooms, took off said dress, and then was suddenly Ambrose.

BERTRAM

But why would you aid and abet her if you knew the truth?

LAURELINE

Because I know the truth is harder to get at than folks like you seem to think.

BERTRAM

Folks like me?

LAURELINE

As opposed to folks like Ambrose and myself.

BERTRAM

And -? (it slowly dawns on him) No.

LAURELINE

I aided your brother because I'm just like him the other way around.

BERTRAM

That's impossible.

LAURELINE

Of the two of us, I'm fairly sure I'm the one who would know.

BERTRAM

You're lying again. There's no way you could be a ... a-

LAURELINE

An androgyne? A molly coddle? The first is my preferred nomenclature, but-

BERTRAM

You're trying to distract me from getting Violet-

LAURELINE

Ambrose-

BERTRAM

From getting out of this baffling place! But you can't fool me. I'll get to the bottom of it right now!

Bertram plows through Jennie and the Man on his way to Ambrose, and grabs him by the shoulder. The Man exits angrily. Jennie sees Laureline standing alone, and goes to dance with her.

BERTRAM

Violet, that woman over there, is she-

Plum suddenly steps in between Bertram and Ambrose.

PLUM

Now see here, you big bully! We are trying to dance!

BERTRAM

This doesn't concern you, Miss. It's between me and the ... person I'm addressing.

PLUM

No, *I'm* between you and the person you're addressing. And we are on a dance floor, not a "bother your ex-lover even though he clearly doesn't want to be with you anymore floor." So if you find us on one of those, feel free to interrupt. But until then, be on your way so we can do the thing this place is designed for us to do in it!

BERTRAM

I - come now, Violet, this is serious.

Ambrose steps toe to toe with Bertram, all icy firmness.

AMBROSE

It's Ambrose. And I'm quite serious too. The lady and I are enjoying ourselves. And she has told you to leave us be. So if you continue to ignore her wishes, I will have to ask you to step outside.

BERTRAM

Is that so?

AMBROSE

It is.

A switch flips in Bertram's brain. He sees Ambrose the man clearly for the first time since they were children. He takes a step back.

BERTRAM

Very well. We shall finish the conversation later.

Yes, I suppose we shall.

AMBROSE

Ambrose turns back to Plum, who embraces him rapturously.

My hero!

PLUM

She kisses him impulsively. Bertram watches them, a million different thoughts racing through his mind. He heads back toward Laureline. Phyllis sees him, pushes the Gentleman she's dancing with aside and intercepts him. Elsewhere, Plum and Ambrose start dancing again, bashful, hesitant - as the Gentleman storms off.

In need of a partner?

PHYLLIS

What I'm in need of is information. (points to Laureline) You know that woman over there?

BERTRAM

(to Ambrose)

I'm sorry. Was that ... too much?

PLUM

I know everyone, Monsieur.

PHYLLIS

No. Just unexpected.

AMBROSE

Is she genuinely a woman? Physically, I mean? I need a straight answer.

BERTRAM

Oh darling, you're in the wrong place for straight anything.

PHYLLIS

He leaves her abruptly and heads for Laureline again.

He's here again. Shall I -

JENNIE

Laureline nods. Jennie joins Phyllis for a dance, but keeps her eye on Bertram and Laureline.

LAURELINE

So ... are you back because you believe me, or because you don't?

BERTRAM

I don't know what to think, much less believe! I'm surrounded by all sorts of wicked people who seem nicer than they're supposed to be, my sister turns out to be a stronger brother than I am, and with you- I've never in my life felt what I did when I first met you. It was as if my heart leapt out of a box I didn't know I'd put it in. All my life, there have been so many rules but - But you're all just doing what makes sense to you! And no one's keeping score, or staring at anybody else, and - and it may be my only chance to do what makes sense to me right now..

LAURELINE

And what's that?

Bertram takes Laureline into his arms. A pause, seeking consent. She puts her arms around him too. He kisses her. Long, passionate. When they part, they stare at each other for a moment in stunning silence, full of feeling.

BERTRAM

I knew you were really a woman.

Laureline freezes, then pushes him away with both hands.

BERTRAM

Laureline -

LAURELINE

No! You don't know it, but there is nothing more dangerous to me right now than you are.

She rushes from the room.

BERTRAM

Laureline - Miss Reeves. Wait!

He follows her out. The other two couples don't notice.

PLUM

So ... about that kiss, could we maybe do it over?

AMBROSE

Do it- ?

PLUM

And I don't mean to be so forward. It's just - I think that maybe part of why I did it just then was for show. A bit of "Ha, take that!" to your old flame. You know? And if we are going to have a first kiss - which I guess we do now, either way, but still - I'd like it to be just for us.

AMBROSE

And I'd like for there to be nothing hidden. There's something I feel it's time for you to know. I hope it doesn't change how you may feel about-

Two police officers suddenly appear striding down the aisles of the house.

FIRST POLICEMAN

Police! Everyone stay where you are!

Ambrose, Plum, Jennie, and Phyllis all freeze. Sudden sounds of a large crowd in pandemonium. Shouts, screams, furniture being knocked over in a mad scramble. Jennie is frozen in place, eyes riveted on the approaching officers.

JENNIE

It's happened. All this time, I've been so careful.

Phyllis quickly looks behind her, then over to Ambrose and Plum.

PHYLLIS

They're only coming from the front. Servants' staircase, back that way.

JENNIE

But it didn't matter.

Ambrose and Plum immediately head in the direction Phyllis indicated. Phyllis tugs on Jennie's arm -

PHYLLIS

Time to go, dear.

Jennie doesn't move.

JENNIE
Everything I wanted for my life-

PHYLLIS
Jennie, come on!

JENNIE
It's all over.

PHYLLIS
Oh, for god's sake!

Phyllis throws her arms around Jennie and half-carries her through the back door just as the police make it to the stage. Lights out.

SCENE TWO

The rooms of the Cercle Hermaphroditos. Laureline enters at a run, closes, and locks the door behind her. She leans against it for a moment, trying to catch her breath. From offstage, sounds of one pair of footsteps down the hallway, getting closer.

BERTRAM (OFF)
Miss Reeves. Miss Reeves, wait!

LAURELINE
Go away!

BERTRAM
It isn't what you think. What you told me about yourself ... I believe you.

LAURELINE
Then what are you doing here?

BERTRAM
I - I don't entirely know. This is all so new to me, and -

LAURELINE
What was it that made you realize?

BERTRAM
What? If you'd just let me in, I could explain it all much-

LAURELINE

You were so certain after you kissed me. So when did that change? The exact moment.

Beat.

BERTRAM

It was the way you looked at me. After I'd ... said what I said. Words of mine put that same fear in Violet's eyes once, and it changed everything between us. I swear, Laureline. The last thing I want is to be the cause of that look again.

She grabs an umbrella by the door, takes a deep breath.

LAURELINE

All right. I'll unlock the door if you count to ten before you come in. Out loud. Is that understood?

BERTRAM

Yes.

LAURELINE

Start counting. Slowly.

Bertram starts counting out loud. Laureline slowly unlocks the door, trying to make it as quiet as possible. Then she retreats to the other side of the room. Bertram finishes the count to ten, carefully opens the door. Muffled noisy crowd sounds filter up through the floor, easily mistaken for merriment from upstairs.

BERTRAM

They seem to be having quite the time down there.

LAURELINE

Yes, but a few might still break away if they suddenly heard screaming, I imagine.

BERTRAM

Please, you don't have to imagine that with me.

LAURELINE

I'm afraid I do.

BERTRAM

Others have doubted you before?

LAURELINE

Yes.

BERTRAM

And when they ... were convinced, they hurt you?

Words won't come out, so Laureline just nods.

BERTRAM

I'm so sorry.

LAURELINE

You don't need to be sorry. You just need to be the exception.

BERTRAM

Yes. Of course. (gestures to the sofa) May I sit down?

LAURELINE

That would be preferable, yes.

He gently closes the door behind him, and sits down.

LAURELINE

Well, go on. Say what you came to say.

BERTRAM

My plan really only extended to getting in the door. I didn't want those words to be the last ones you heard from me. But now that I'm here, more words don't seem like the answer.

Beat.

BERTRAM

Did you know that when we were children, Violet came to me one day and announced that she was more boy than girl? And I just listened. I looked at her, or him, or-I looked for a long time, and I could see that it was true. Then he said he needed a new name now, so I gave him one. And was happy to do it. It was the last time I can remember when my heart didn't feel like a weakness. So maybe I didn't come up here to say something to you. Maybe I just wanted to be that boy who sits and listens and does my best to see you as you are. If you're still even willing to show me.

A pause as Laureline studies him.

LAURELINE

Tell me something first. Did anyone else in your family know about Ambrose?

BERTRAM

The full extent of it? No. She drove mother to exasperation with her roughhousing, but that sort of thing's not unheard of. Father was suspicious of ... something. I'm not sure what. He started leaning on me to "stop humoring her." Then leaning became demanding. And that turned- my father can be a hard man. But it tends to get him what he wants.

LAURELINE

So accepting Ambrose meant you were alone too.

BERTRAM

Yes.

LAURELINE

I spent most of my youth that way. Only child. Only one I knew who couldn't take their body for an answer. All the other children seemed just fine with the label adults ascribed to them. "Young man," "Little lady," those words held no pain for them the way they did for me. I did my best to hide that difference. Tried for a while to fight it. But then I discovered that being on the outside of them all gave me special powers. My different tongue could explain men and women to one another in a way each understood. My outsider eyes could detect an invisible burden on someone's back, or a secret in their heart. And most importantly, my face was etched with an openness to the outcasts that only they could see. People felt safe in my presence. Would tell me things they'd never whispered to another soul. It's then I saw that Loneliness, this monster hovering over my whole life, was a horrible liar. There is no such thing as aloneness. Only isolation caused by fear. There will always be someone who feels on the outside too, and understands. The trick is to find them. So that became my mission. I made connections, quiet introductions, weaving misfits together into one great colorful tapestry. You wanted to listen to who I am? Well, here it is, far more precise than man or woman or androgynous. I am a knight in the war against Loneliness. Wherever I find it, I push back and make a family. I am a recruiter in the campaign for the meek to inherit the earth. I am a warrior of the unity of God. What is or isn't beneath my skirts will always be secondary to that. So you're welcome here, Bertram. And free to be whatever version of yourself you wish.

A sudden, panicked coded knock on the door, different than the previous one. Laureline freezes.

BERTRAM

What is it?

LAURELINE

An emergency.

PHYLLIS (OFF)

(strained, the first half of a passcode)

"Laureline, are you decent?"

LAURELINE

(the second half)

"Never, though I am fully clothed."

Phyllis and Jennie burst through the door. Phyllis helps a still shell-shocked Jennie to the sofa.

PHYLLIS

Thank god! I was afraid they'd gotten here before us.

LAURELINE

Who?

PHYLLIS

The police. It's a raid!

LAURELINE

Oh god.

PHYLLIS

Dozens of officers pouring through the front door, and on their way up looking for stragglers! We only just escaped.

JENNIE

(to herself)

It's over for all of us. Two years hard labor, just like Eunice got.

LAURELINE

Plum. Ambrose. Where are they?

PHYLLIS

They're not here? They were ahead of us up the servants' stairwell. I thought -

Bertram starts immediately toward the door.

BERTRAM

I have to go find them.

JENNIE

Are you mad?!

LAURELINE

They're not just looking for androgynes, Bertram. They could arrest you on suspicion of sodomy.

He stops for a moment, but shakes it off.

BERTRAM

If it happens, it happens. But I came here for Violet -

LAURELINE

Ambrose.

BERTRAM

(loud, frustrated)

Well, I won't leave without both of them, how's that?!

Laureline grabs his lapels and kisses him.

LAURELINE

Godspeed, you chivalrous idiot.

He throws open the door. And crashes right into
Ambrose and Plum.

PLUM

You?!

LAURELINE

It's all right, Plumkin. Just get inside. NOW.

Ambrose quickly closes the door behind them, then is
immediately wrapped in an embrace by Bertram..

BERTRAM

Oh, thank god you're safe!

PLUM

Um -

PHYLLIS

You were in the lead. What happened?

PLUM

Police on the stairs at the other end of the hall. We just had time to hide in the broom
closet.

PHYLLIS

We must have come up just after they went into the first apartment.

JENNIE

Oh my god. Oh my god. If they suspect even one of us, they'll take us all!

LAURELINE

Jennie, this is far from over. Now focus! Phyllis, grab everyone's street clothes from the changing room and bring them here. Everyone else, start getting undressed. Quickly.

Phyllis runs out into the changing room. Laureline, Plum and Jennie start the arduous process of getting out of their ballgowns.

LAURELINE

Bertram, there's a pack of cards in that drawer there. Make a draw and discard pile, then deal out five hands.

AMBROSE

Wait, isn't it six?

LAURELINE

Once you're done, pour some drinks from the bar. Hard stuff.

BERTRAM

Right away.

AMBROSE

If you get the cards, I'll get the bar.

Laureline stops Ambrose.

LAURELINE

I'm sorry, dear, but when I said for everyone else to undress, that included you.

AMBROSE

(quiet, tense)

They're not going to be looking for me.

LAURELINE

I still can't risk anything giving us away. I'm sorry. But this is as far as it goes.

PLUM

Wait, what's going on?

AMBROSE

That's why you said five hands. Because of course the "lady" won't be playing.

LAURELINE

I need three minutes of pretending, Ambrose. Three minutes and you save four lives from utter ruin.

Ambrose curses under his breath, and whips off his tuxedo jacket.

AMBROSE

My clothes are still in the closet?

LAURELINE

Yes.

PLUM

So then, you're-

JENNIE

A gynander. You honestly didn't know?

LAURELINE

Ambrose is more than capable of answering that question for himself, Jennie. Or have you forgotten the rules?

Waistcoat and shirt off, Ambrose frenetically unwinds the bandages binding his chest.

AMBROSE

I had hoped to meet you all on my own terms. I should have known that was asking too much.

At the sight of Ambrose disrobing, Bertram turns crimson and turns his back to the sight.

AMBROSE

(to Bertram)

You don't have to - I'm not - (gesturing to his underwear) It's one of your old union suits, for Christ's sake!

He looks down at his undergarments. Sighs. One last crowning indignity.

AMBROSE

I'm going to need a corset.

LAURELINE

You didn't have one when you came?

AMBROSE

That's what the bulky overcoat was for. But I can't very well wear it inside, now, can I?

Plum holds her corset out to Ambrose.

PLUM

It's probably not the perfect fit, but I can try to compensate with the lacing.

AMBROSE

All right.

Ambrose clasps the corset on in front. Plum starts to lace the back. Phyllis rushes in with a giant armful of shoes and clothing. Sees Plum lacing Ambrose in.

PHYLLIS

So ... I seem to have missed something.

LAURELINE

(sharply)

For god's sake, Phyllis, stop staring and hand me my pants!

Phyllis divvies out clothing to Laureline and Jennie, then starts taking off her gloves and shoes.

PLUM

(to Ambrose)

Is this what you were trying to tell me? Before the police?

AMBROSE

Yes.

PLUM

So ... Bertram was telling the truth? He really is your brother.

AMBROSE

I'm afraid so.

PLUM

Then I made quite a fool of myself back there.

AMBROSE

You didn't know the whole story because I wasn't ready to tell it yet. That's not foolishness. It's just ... damned awful timing.

Plum struggles with the corset ribbon, jostling Ambrose.

PLUM

Sorry. It's these gloves. The ribbon keeps slipping right through-

She yanks one off. Then immediately remembers why she left them on. Her wrist is bandaged, the cuts fresh enough that a little red peeks through. Everyone turns to see why she suddenly went quiet.

BERTRAM

What happened? Are you all-

Phyllis puts a finger to her lips. Bertram takes the hint. The others say nothing. A look of acknowledgement, then they move on, knowing better than to ask. They've all thought about it. Some have tried before. Plum quickly get the other glove off, other wrist bandaged the same way, goes back to lacing the corset.

AMBROSE

There is about right.

PLUM

Okay.

She ties the ribbons off. Ambrose turns and looks her in the eye.

AMBROSE

Thank you.

Plum nods. Jennie and Laureline have finished dressing. Ambrose and Plum throw on their day clothes as quickly as they can.

PHYLLIS

(to Jennie)

If you're done, can you unbutton me?

Jennie gets right to it.

LAURELINE

All right. What am I missing? Oh! (to Bertram) Do you have any cigars?

BERTRAM

Let me - (checks his jacket pocket) Three.

LAURELINE

Light them!

Bertram lights a cigar, puffs on it to get it going, wafts it around the table, then sets it down and moves on to the next one.

JENNIE

(to Phyllis)

Why on earth would you wear a dress with this many buttons in the *back*?

PHYLLIS

Because usually there's a gentleman undoing them and it helps to build suspense. But there's quite enough of that right now, so just get me out of the damned thing!

Laureline rushes over to assist.

LAURELINE

(to Jennie)

You go top to bottom, I'll go bottom top.

AMBROSE

(to Plum)

Oh, and don't forget - (gestures to ears)

PLUM

Oh, right!

She takes off one of her earrings. Hands it to Ambrose.

AMBROSE

Are these clips?

PLUM

You get used to them.

She starts on the other. A loud uncoded knock on the door. Everyone freezes. Laureline and Jennie still haven't gotten the dress off of Phyllis.

LAURELINE

(thinking fast, deep loud masculine voice)

I say, who the devil could that be at this hour? (to Phyllis, whispered) Take the clothes, you know where to put them. Then lie down. You're passed out drunk. If any one comes in, do your best to stay that way!

Another knock. Phyllis quickly starts gathering up the discarded clothes.

JENNIE

(whispered to Laureline)

You can't be serious! That's exactly what they'll be looking for!

LAURELINE

(whispered)

Do you have a better idea? (loud masculine voice) That had better not be another friend of yours, Johnson. I told you this was a closed game.

As she speaks, she gestures for everyone to sit down at the table. Phyllis runs off with the pile of clothes.

MALE VOICE (OFF STAGE)

Police. Open up!

LAURELINE

(loud masculine voice)

Gertrude, would you be a dear and get the door?

AMBROSE

(whispered)

Is that supposed to be me?

Laureline nods emphatically, then rushes to close the closet, bursting forth with dresses and petticoats. She sees something on the top shelf that makes her gasp.

LAURELINE

(to Ambrose)

Wait! Hair!

She throws Ambrose his clip-on hair. He catches it, quickly attaches it, then opens the door just as Laureline lands in her seat at the table.

Behind the doors are officers Leahy and Clark. Leahy is the senior officer, older, taller, more at ease. Clark is a little too rigidly on guard.

AMBROSE

(assuming a bubbly feminine manner)

Yes? May I help you?

OFFICER LEAHY

Oh. Good evening, Miss.

OFFICER CLARK

(studying him)

If that is indeed who you are.

Leahy gives him a look.

AMBROSE

You've caught me, Officer. I am not a Miss. I'm a Mrs. Isn't that right, George?

LAURELINE AND BERTRAM

Yes.

They look at each other.

BERTRAM

That's right. This is my sister Gertrude, and my brother-in-law George.

OFFICER LEAHY

If you'll excuse us, Ma'am, we need to search the premises.

They walk past her without waiting for permission.

AMBROSE

But what ever for?

Ambrose follows the officers to the table - and notices that Plum never got around to removing her other earring. He stands behind the policemen and gestures to Plum, pointing at his own ear.

LAURELINE

Let me assure you there's no organized gambling going on here.

JENNIE

Yes, it's just a polite game between friends.

BERTRAM

In fact, if you'd like to join us for a hand or two-

JENNIE

Or try some whiskey. Very fine stuff.

She takes a generous gulp of hers.

OFFICER LEAHY

Don't worry, we're not here about the cards.

Plum sees Ambrose's signal, questioningly grabs her own ear. Feels it. Her eyes go wide. She leaves her hand there, and leans on it with her elbow on the table as casually as possible.

OFFICER LEAHY

I assume you heard some sort of commotion from downstairs?

LAURELINE

Yes, but that's a rather common occurrence, unfortunately.

OFFICER CLARK

Then you do know the nature of the establishment downstairs, and the sort of *things* they do there?

Ambrose crosses to the other side of the policemen from Plum.

AMBROSE

We do our best to know as little as possible about such persons, the same as any virtuous citizen would!

When the officers turn their attention to him, Plum quickly throws the remaining earring behind her.

LAURELINE

It's not the sort of place we'd prefer to live above, of course, but one rents the rooms one can afford.

OFFICER CLARK

Then it may interest you to know that Columbia Hall has been shut down for extreme public lewdness. We discovered several men illegally dressing as women in public!

PLUM

No!

OFFICER CLARK

And are here to make sure none of these degenerates has escaped.

AMBROSE

(playing femme to the hilt)

Oh, you brave, brave men! How courageous you are, protecting us weak defenseless women from the terror of other people wearing our clothes!

OFFICER CLARK

We do what we can, ma'am.

OFFICER LEAHY

Is there anyone else here at the moment?

BERTRAM

(looks to Laureline, who nods)

Well, there is our cousin in the bedroom.

AMBROSE

Who may have had a bit too much - (gestures drinking)

PLUM

(playing boorish)

Just say it, Gertrude. Passed out drunk on the bed. Why is it that women can never just say what they mean?

The officers laugh, and everyone else laughs with them. At a moment when they're not facing her, Plum shoots Laureline an "Ick, I just said that" look, but goes back to laughing when the officers turn back.

OFFICER LEAHY

Isn't that the truth! We will need to check the other rooms. Nothing personal, just protocol.

LAURELINE

Oh, of course. Feel free.

OFFICER LEAHY

The other rooms are over this way?

LAURELINE

That's right. A study and the bedroom. And the kitchen is over that way.

OFFICER LEAHY

Clark, take the kitchen. (to Ambrose) We'll be out of your hair in a moment, ma'am.

AMBROSE

Oh, take your time. It's an honor to watch two gentlemen so committed to their duty.

Leahy tips his hat to Ambrose and exits. Clark enters the kitchen, pokes around in cabinets, but doesn't find anything unusual.

JENNIE

Oh my god. He's going to go in there, and he's going to find-

PLUM

Someone passed out on the bed, just as we said.

JENNIE

But that's - it's not - we don't even know if she was able to get out of the damned dress!

BERTRAM

That's why I said cousin. It's the only relational title that doesn't have a gender baked into it.

LAURELINE

You see, Jennie? We're thinking our way out of this. Stay focused and -

Clark enters from the kitchen

LAURELINE

I raise you three.

JENNIE

(trying to pull herself together.)

I'll see that.

BERTRAM

Too rich for my blood.

PLUM

I'm out, too.

OFFICER CLARK

(to Ambrose)

Everything seems to be in order. Are there any other rooms on this side? What's this here?

AMBROSE

Oh, that's just the closet-

But he's already opened it. The densely packed dresses expand to fill the newly available space.

OFFICER CLARK

That's quite a collection for one lady on a budget.

LAURELINE

You try coming between a woman and "just one more gown."

BERTRAM

And if you don't end up with a scratched face, you must tell us all how you managed it!

Exaggerated masculine laughter from the table. Plum's laughter causes her to cough on her own cigar smoke. Clark pulls out a particularly feminine dress, holds it up to Ambrose.

OFFICER CLARK

This one doesn't strike me as your style.

AMBROSE

Surely you don't mean to hold a woman to just one mood, Officer? We're frightfully changeable creatures, you know.

OFFICER CLARK

Do you often change height? This is much too tall for you.

AMBROSE

Of course that one is. It's not mine.

BERTRAM

(to Jennie, nearly frozen in panic)

Well, don't just sit there. Call the man!

JENNIE

Oh. Yes. Right. I call.

OFFICER CLARK

Let me guess. You're holding onto it for a friend?

AMBROSE

Not exactly.

LAURELINE

Two pair.

Groans from the table. Ambrose takes Officer Clark aside.

PLUM

I knew he was bluffing!

BERTRAM

Then why did you fold?

AMBROSE

(whispered)

He'd be mortified if I shared this in front of his friends. You know how men can get about being the breadwinner and all that.

JENNIE

Three queens.

BERTRAM

(applauding)

Well played.

AMBROSE

The truth is we've fallen upon rather hard times, and to supplement our income, I've taken on some work myself. Just alterations. Mending tears, hemlines, and the like.

PLUM

Shall we deal another?

LAURELINE

Why not? It's not so very late.

OFFICER CLARK

Do ladies pay well for that sort of work?

AMBROSE

The sort of ladies who can afford to hire others to do the work for them certainly do. When it's someone whose skills they trust.

Clark studies him closely, suspicious.

OFFICER CLARK

Hmm. Then I wonder if you might be able to help me with something?

AMBROSE

I'll certainly try my best.

OFFICER CLARK

It's just that the sleeves of this uniform have always been too long. That shouldn't be too hard of a fix for such a skilled seamstress as yourself, should it?

AMBROSE

Oh, no trouble at all! (to Laureline) George, dear, did your sister bring my sewing machine back after those pinafores she made for the twins?

LAURELINE

Yes, love. She put it right back on (subtle emphasis) the table in the study, where you like it.

AMBROSE

Wonderful! Then we'll sort you out in a jiff! (to Laureline) I'm just going to assist this gallant officer with a drooping sleeve problem, if you don't mind, dear?

LAURELINE

Of course not! Anything we can do for the gents in blue!

AMBROSE

It's right this way, officer.

He ushers Officer Clark ahead of him, then sneaks a look to Laureline, who mouths "the first door on the right."

AMBROSE

The first door on the right.

They exit.

PLUM

(to Bertram)

He does know how to sew?

BERTRAM

I think so. To be honest, I never really took notice.

The last straw for Jennie. She jumps up and heads for the door. Plum rushes to restrain her as quietly as possible.

LAURELINE

Jennie - Jennie, wait!

JENNIE

(frantic)

For what? My arrest? He's being tested, Laureline, and he's going to fail! And why has the other one been in the bedroom for so long? Something's gone wrong and - and-

PLUM

(bringing her in close)

And so what if it has? One of my worst nightmares came true two days ago, but look at me now. You can still laugh after the worst things. You think you won't be able to, but your body just ... knows the way. (nods toward the table) Especially if you don't have to go it alone.

JENNIE

All right. But I'm going to need a lot more whiskey.

BERTRAM

(opening the bottle)

Now that is an excellent idea. Whisky all around?

LAURELINE

Dear god, yes.

Bertram pours whiskey for everyone. Jennie holds up her glass in a toast.

JENNIE

To a memorable evening we hope to remember as little as possible of!

BERTRAM

Hear, hear.

Officer Leahy enters in good humor, a light smear of lipstick around his mouth.

LAURELINE

Everything in order, Officer?

OFFICER LEAHY

Oh, fine, fine. (calling out) Clark?

LAURELINE

He's in the study, there. My Gertrude's taking in his sleeves, or something like that.

OFFICER LEAHY

What? While we're on duty during a raid?! Clark!

PLUM

Ah, you may want to - (wipes her mouth)

Leahy touches his mouth, sees a little red on his finger, then quickly rubs his face.

OFFICER LEAHY

Oh. Oh yes. Thank you very much.

He storms off.

JENNIE

Oh. My. God.

OFFICER LEAHY (OFF, STERNLY)

Officer, does this strike you as the best use of our time?

OFFICER CLARK (OFF)

I - it's not just-

OFFICER LEAHY (OFF)

Get your coat back on, and get back to work.

AMBROSE (OFF)

Oh, but I've already detached the lining.

OFFICER LEAHY (OFF)

He's a professional, ma'am. He can deal with it.

Leahy stomps back in, with Clark behind him, frantically getting his uniform coat back on.

OFFICER CLARK

Leahy, wait! There's more to this than you think. Have you checked in the closets?

Is there a dead body?
OFFICER LEAHY

If you'd just look, you'd find -
OFFICER CLARK

A skeleton?
OFFICER LEAHY

No, but something very -
OFFICER CLARK

Then it's none of our business, is it?
OFFICER LEAHY

Just look, goddammit!
OFFICER CLARK

Officer Clark! There is a lady present!
OFFICER LEAHY

AMBROSE
(in faux state of shock)
Such language ... in my home! Why, never in my life ...

He "faints" dramatically. Plum scrambles to catch him before he hits the floor.

There! Do you see what happens when we behave recklessly?
OFFICER LEAHY

I - it's not - I didn't -
OFFICER CLARK

PLUM
(gravely)
I think you had better go.

Yes. We've troubled these fine people enough for one night.
OFFICER LEAHY

But -
OFFICER CLARK

He pushes Clark out the front door, then turns back to the room.

OFFICER LEAHY

My apologies, gentlemen, for the conduct of my partner. New recruits don't always realize what's expected of them. Good evening to you all. (to Bertram) Oh, and give my warm regards to your cousin whenever she's ... feeling more herself.

He exits, shuts the door behind him. A beat. Then Ambrose springs back to life again.

AMBROSE

So what the hell just happened?

JENNIE

(collapsing on the table with relief)

Don't ask questions. It's enough just to be grateful for it.

BERTRAM

I can't believe we all made it out of that in one piece.

PLUM

Did we, though? (calling back to the bedroom) Phyllis, are you in one piece?

Phyllis enters, still in her ballgown.

PHYLLIS

If that man was any indication, I'm very well put together.

LAURELINE

God, Phyllis. What did you even - actually, I'd rather not know. I just - don't know if I want to scream at you for taking such a risk or sing hosannas for the fact that it worked!

JENNIE

(pouring herself another drink)

In the gospels, Hosanna translates as "Hooray for coming to save us." So I vote for that.

PHYLLIS

It wasn't nearly so much of a risk as you think. I was listening the whole time, and the moment I heard him say Officer Leahy, I knew we were in good hands.

AMBROSE

An old friend of yours?

PHYLLIS

Yes. My very first arresting officer. I'd been out in feminine finery with these two artillery men from Fort Q - you know how I am, Laureline; I worship at the altar of the strapping soldier - and, long story short, they drank too much, started a brawl, the police arrested the whole lot of us, and I had to 'fess up that I wasn't a bona fide girl, per se. The others got out in the morning, but the judge was wild to punish me for going out in women's garb. He sentenced me to thirty days or until I could pay a hundred dollar fine. Well, the police just wouldn't believe I was the sort of business owner that could pay that amount. But dear, sweet officer Leahy looked at me with those kind eyes of his - don't you think he has kind eyes? - and actually listened to my story. Which reminded me what my old sweetheart Tony used to say back when I was the gang's girl down in the Bowery. "The best way to keep the cops out of your business is to deal 'em in. It's a tough world, Philly girl, and most men won't say no to perks they don't gotta work for." Since I had two perks the officer was interested in, I let him have a good feel, or three. And the next morning he contacted my lawyer to post my bail and get me out. Every now and again afterwards, I'd stop by the precinct, and regale the boys with some female impersonations. Even in men's attire, I can put on a show. They always gave me a great time. Thought it was out of gratitude, but really, I was making Tony's plan work for us. Give 'em perks. Save up some friends for a rainy day. And lo and behold, I have. I know I've caught a lucky break, passing for the genuine article like I do. But I also know enough not to take it for granted. So I've pressed every advantage I've been given as far as it would go in preparation for nights like tonight. You're welcome, by the way. And now, I suppose I should finally get out of this dress!

She sweeps out of the room, leaving the others in
dumbfounded silence. After a moment -

PHYLLIS (OFF STAGE)

Jennie, would you be a dear and give me a hand?

JENNIE

Well ... if you'll excuse me, I have to go follow that woman to the very ends of the earth.

LAURELINE

(to Plum)

And we should also get the wigs out of the secret compartment before the life is crushed out of them.

Jennie, Laureline, and Plum exit to the bedroom. Bertram
looks down at the table.

BERTRAM

No one else is going to smoke these cigars, are they?

AMBROSE

I'll take one if you don't mind.

BERTRAM

You? All right.

He relights one for himself and one for Ambrose, who sits at the table next to him. He hands Ambrose a cigar, watches him in amused expectation of a choking fit. But Ambrose puffs away without incident. Bertram is impressed. They smoke, taking in the experience of enjoying a masculine ritual together.

AMBROSE

So -

BERTRAM

So ... when you said you came here looking for a wife, you meant one of them?

AMBROSE

It would look perfectly ordinary from the outside, if that's what you're worried about. But with her in private, I'd be free.

BERTRAM

To be a man?

AMBROSE

Yes.

BERTRAM

Did you always want to be? Even before you told me?

AMBROSE

"Want" isn't the right word. It's more this ... deep certainty in spite of everything. But yes, from the moment I knew the difference.

BERTRAM

And it never stopped?

AMBROSE

No. That was just you. Stopped calling me by my name out of nowhere. Threatened to tell father if I kept insisting on it. To hear those words from you, the only one I trusted - I learned to keep it quiet after that. But it never, ever "stopped." (pause) So what happens now, Bertie? Do you run back home to reveal my plan before it's too late?

BERTRAM

Shouldn't I? When it puts you in this much danger?

AMBROSE

It's more dangerous for me to do nothing.

BERTRAM

More -? Do you realize what would have happened if they'd caught us? Your prospects, my career -

AMBROSE

I tried to leave you out of this. You took that on yourself.

BERTRAM

And if you were to be discovered and arrested, or worse, do you think our family will be left out of that public disgrace? That the grief of losing you like that would somehow miss us because you acted on your own?

AMBROSE

No. But I only have so many choices here, Bertram. And this way, your losing me was just a possibility! If I stayed where I was it would be certain.

BERTRAM

I don't understand. What could possibly happen that would -

AMBROSE

You don't understand because you think prisons are just buildings with bars on the windows. And you're so scared of those that you don't see the cage I'm in already. At least in a visible jail everyone agrees that you're miserable! But this horrid invisible trap where the key to my entire life is about to be handed to a man I didn't choose and do not trust and I'm supposed to be happy about it? Let him lock up my true self forever and never speak of it again? You will absolutely lose me that way, Bertram. And it will be more painful because you'll be alone in it.

BERTRAM

So what am I supposed to do? I - I feel for your dilemma. I don't want you to suffer like that. But if I say nothing and something goes wrong, I will be complicit in whatever horrible thing happens to you. I will have to live with that.

AMBROSE

And if you tell father, you will be complicit in what he says. And where he will send me.

Beat.

BERTRAM

That's - you know I don't want that. But this involves so much more than just you and me, and - and would it be responsible of me to turn a blind eye while you risk your life and reputation and that of our family - ?

AMBROSE

You're right. It would be irresponsible. Naive sentiments overpowering sound judgment, and therefore exactly what the big-hearted brother of my childhood would do.

Beat.

BERTRAM

And that's the sort of thing my manipulative little brother always said to get what he wanted. (A pause. Bertram sighs.) I've missed him so much.

Plum enters.

PLUM

It was a struggle, but Phyllis is finally out of the dress! (sees Ambrose smoking with Bertram) So you smoke?

AMBROSE

On occasion. I don't get many opportunities. Does it bother you?

PLUM

What? Oh. No. It's just another thing I didn't know about you.

Beat.

AMBROSE

I'm sorry you had to find out about everything this way. I really did try to tell-

PLUM

I know. And it's all right. There's some things people have to earn the right to know. If they find out before you're ready- well, you end up with the week I just had.

Phyllis enters, back in street clothes, with Jennie behind her.

JENNIE

(to Phyllis)

And you'll be with me the whole way.

PHYLLIS

Right to your doorstep, darling.

JENNIE

And if they stop us, we refer them to Officer Leahy.

PHYLLIS

Exactly. Though, honestly, I'll probably know quite a few of them.

PLUM

And you don't need to rush out. Laureline said we could stay for a while if we feel safer that way.

JENNIE

Part of me does, but I think a larger part needs to curl into a foetal position and sob in my own bedroom. But thank you anyway.

PHYLLIS

All right, then. Once more, dear friends, out in our breeches!

Phyllis and Jennie exit. Plum starts to head after them.

PLUM

Well ... good night.

BERTRAM

Good night.

AMBROSE

Plum, before you - when I started to tell you before the raid, it was because you'd earned the right to know.

PLUM

Thank you. That's good for me to hear, I think. Well - (turns to leave again)

AMBROSE

(too caught up in the moment)

And also because you captured my fancy from the start. Every moment together was one I wanted to hold onto and I knew I wanted to see you again. I also knew that if you felt the same as I did, you deserved to know more about who you were seeing. To make sure you weren't wasting your time. Because it wouldn't be a waste of mine.

PLUM

What wouldn't?

AMBROSE

You know ... courtship. Marriage. Life together. All of it.

PLUM

So there's all of that stuffed into - oh my.

AMBROSE

I - I mean - those are some of the options open to us. It wasn't my intention to suggest-

PLUM

(growing increasingly nervous as she goes)

I'm sorry. It's just - this night has been a lot. And it was so nice meeting you and you're very sweet, but it's only been a few hours, you know? And with all those possible forever parts hanging over us already, I don't - I mean, I can't commit to - I - I had better catch up with Phyllis and Jennie. Safety in numbers, you know. Good night!

Plum exits as quickly as she can. Ambrose helplessly looks over to Bertram, who gestures for him to go after her. Ambrose throws opens the door.

AMBROSE

(into the hallway)

Plum! Plum, wait!

He runs out the door. At the sound of it closing hard, Laureline rushes in carrying her wig and a brush.

LAURELINE

Is everything all right?

BERTRAM

Yes, just my sis- Ambrose and Plum leaving.

LAURELINE

You didn't go with them?

BERTRAM

There was an implied need for privacy. And, well, these cigars aren't going to smoke themselves.

LAURELINE

Were they very expensive?

BERTRAM

One of them was. Old banker's trick. Always have at least two cigars, an impressive one to offer to the client and a cheap one to smoke yourself.

LAURELINE

Please tell me you're allowing yourself the good one tonight.

BERTRAM

I am.

LAURELINE

You deserve it, keeping a cool head through all of that.

BERTRAM

Is it often ... like this around here?

LAURELINE

No. But it's always a possibility.

BERTRAM

Should I go as well?

LAURELINE

Do you wish to?

BERTRAM

So long as you feel safe, I've ... thought of something I came up here to say.

She looks at him for a long moment.

LAURELINE

(gestures to her masculine appearance)

Even after seeing the full picture?

BERTRAM

I don't think you realize how singular a picture it is. Most of us are - well, I like to think that I got up this morning and picked out this suit for myself. But really, it was chosen for me on the day I was born. I was the eldest, expected to take on the family business, be the maintainer of order. It wasn't a natural fit, but I put it on anyway. My whole life's been laid out by other people, and for the most part, that's what I've been. But tonight I watched you slip into these (touches the lapel of her jacket) expectations.

He pivots around her, examining the collar.

BERTRAM

You wore them well enough, but - (gently places his hands on her shoulders) May I?

LAURELINE

Oh god, please.

He slips the jacket off of her, folds it over a chair.

BERTRAM

But they didn't change you at all. Through that whole charade, I still saw you in there, clear as day. (slowly reaches to undo the buttons of her waistcoat. She lets him)
Maternal. Caring. Constantly thinking one step ahead to protect this family you built yourself.

She looks at him. Pulls her shirt tails out of her pants. He starts to undo her shirt buttons.

BERTRAM

I didn't know that was possible before tonight. That someone could wear the life the world demanded of them so loosely -

He opens up her shirt to reveal the woman's camisole underneath.

BERTRAM

That all the truth beneath it stayed untouched.

He takes off the shirt and waistcoat. Laureline kicks pants and shoes from off of her feminine pantalettes and stockings, and starts to put her wig back on.

LAURELINE

"Untouched" may be overselling it. It's not nearly that complete a victory. Every shred I've managed to keep has been an all-out brawl.

BERTRAM

But still, here you are. Every inch your own woman. Intelligent. Compassionate.

He steps back to take in the full sight of her.

BERTRAM

And so very, very lovely.

They stand there, each transfixed by what they see in the other's eyes as the lights go down.

Act Three

SCENE ONE

Laureline's bedroom in Cercle Hermaphroditos, morning
Laureline sits up in a bed, makes a few last adjustments
to get her wig on perfectly straight.

LAURELINE

Well, that's ready enough for the day, I suppose.

She starts to get out of bed, but a man's arm pokes out of
the covers and latches on to her wrist.

BERTRAM

Not yet.

LAURELINE

I'm sorry, dear, but I have actual work to do today.

She shakes him off easily, tosses the covers back from
Bertram's face, then picks her corset up off the floor.

BERTRAM

Why would you listen to anyone who forces you to work on Saturday?

LAURELINE

Because they have a newspaper to get out on Sunday, and they work later than I do..

BERTRAM

You didn't stop our fun for this last week.

LAURELINE

Our politicians were courteous enough to make fools of themselves further off from
deadline last week. But no such luck this time. Now come on, lace me up

Bertram sighs and reluctantly goes about tightening her
corset strings.

BERTRAM

So you work the political beat, then?

LAURELINE

Must you gobble up every scrap of information like a starving puppy?

BERTRAM

When scraps are all I have to go on, yes!

LAURELINE

(playfully melodramatic)

I know, it's just horrid of me to confide all my hopes, dreams, and aspirations to you instead of a handy list of names, occupations, and workplace addresses. How ever do you cope?

BERTRAM

I'm not saying those things are as important. It's just - (holding the laces good and tight) Right there, yes?

LAURELINE

Perfect. You see? You know exactly how tight I like my corset. How many other men on earth can say the same?

They share a playful kiss.

LAURELINE

I really do tell you everything that's not dangerous. I swear.

BERTRAM

I know. But - do you honestly think I would ever blackmail or expose you, or do anything to cause you harm?

LAURELINE

Of course I don't, darling. (pause) But I still can't bet my life on it. I hope you understand.

Bertram falls back on the bed in frustration.

BERTRAM

I do. Which just makes it more awful. I mean, here I am with this enchanting person who accepts all of me, and I want to give that back, but I can't.

LAURELINE

You give me so much of that, Bertram.

BERTRAM

But your work is important to you, yes?

LAURELINE

Very.

BERTRAM

Which makes it important to me. So yes, I want to know all about your career - what drove you to it, what you hope to accomplish. Your successes, your failures, I want to be there with you through them all. And it would be so much easier if I could just blame you for keeping me in the dark, but I know it's not you. It's *them*. And "them" is-

LAURELINE

Amorphous. You can never quite land a clean punch.

BERTRAM

Right. So what do you do instead?

LAURELINE

This.

She leans in for long kiss that teases at more.

LAURELINE

But you do it after you've gotten your work done, then changed into male clothes to take it to your boss who pays you so you can afford the den of iniquity you come back to with your lover to do it in.

BERTRAM

That's ... very specific.

LAURELINE

Specificity is important. That's why the tea I make is so delicious.

BERTRAM

I thought it was because you put bourbon in it.

LAURELINE

A specific amount of bourbon. I was just about to make myself a cup. Would you like some?

BERTRAM

If you do have to shut yourself in your study and work, alcohol would be some consolation.

LAURELINE

Excellent.

She heads to the door, looks at him, then suddenly runs back to the bed, and tackles him for one more kiss.

LAURELINE

I'm so glad you're here.

She gets up and rushes out. He lets out a lovesick sigh, then starts to get dressed. As he does, he notices a stack of typewritten pages on the end table.

BERTRAM

(calling out to Laureline)

These pages here - is this Jennie's book?

LAURELINE (OFF)

Oh, yes. I keep forgetting to get it back to her.

Bertram opens to a random page, reads aloud.

BERTRAM

"It is better to suffer than to inflict suffering. The bigoted and pharisaical judges and juries who have hauled hundreds of innocent androgynes off to prison should remember the Old Testament doctrine: "Vengeance is mine!" saith Jehovoah." Those who incarcerate the innocent in this world will in the next have to serve time in the darkest dungeons of a just God."(calling out to Laureline) Not exactly light reading, is it?

He flips through the pages.

BERTRAM

Good god. (to Laureline) This all really happened to her? (quieter, more to himself) All this abuse? The beatings, the - (realizes Laureline hasn't answered) Laureline? (no answer)

Laureline enters reading a letter.

LAURELINE

(distracted)

Tea is on. Should be ready in a moment.

She sits down on the bed, eyes locked on the letter in her hand.

BERTRAM

Is everything all right?

LAURELINE

Oh. Fine. Not the best news I've ever received, but ... nothing I didn't see coming eventually.

BERTRAM

Let me guess. There's pressing business, so you won't be able to see me tonight after all.

LAURELINE

(looking up from the letter)

Does it mean so much to you? Spending yet another night in with me?

BERTRAM

Another night in Paradise.

He kisses her.

LAURELINE

You should be careful with that. I hear it tends to get lost rather easily.

BERTRAM

All the more reason to spend every moment there I can.

Another kiss. Interrupted by the sound of the tea kettle.

BERTRAM

No, don't trouble yourself. I'll fetch the tea while you get dressed.

He gets up and heads to the door.

BERTRAM

So was I right? Is it something important calling you away tonight?

LAURELINE

The plans we made are important. Why let anything get in the way of that?

BERTRAM

(smiles)

I'll be right back.

He exits. Laureline looks back at the letter.

LAURELINE

(to herself)

After all, it's only the end of the world.

SCENE TWO

A park bench on the 14th Street Rialto, afternoon. Ambrose sits in his severe women's street clothes, looking for someone. Jennie enters behind him, wearing kid gloves and a flashy jacket with a large red neck bow. She's surprised by Ambrose's presence, studies him for a moment.

JENNIE

Looking for someone?

AMBROSE

What? (turns and sees her) Oh. What makes you say that?

JENNIE

The folks here are promenading for one of two reasons: park bench rendezvous or showing off their Sunday clothes. And since you're dressed like the temperance speaker at a stenographer's convention, I assumed it was the former.

AMBROSE

You're right. I have no interest in peacock displays. Or questions about my personal business. So if you'll excuse me -

JENNIE

But I'm afraid I do have business pertaining to you. Laureline's asked a few of us to spread the word at the various fairy haunts today. She received notice from her landlord two days ago. The raid made it too expensive to harbor us, so he's giving her the heave-ho. Barring a miracle, the Cercle Hermaphroditos will be closing its doors for good.

AMBROSE

What? When?

JENNIE

A week from tomorrow.

AMBROSE

Dammit! Why must everything crumble just when - (heaves a deep sigh, defeated) And she's not coming.

JENNIE

Plum?

AMBROSE

(nods)

After the raid, we agreed it would be best to get to know one another gradually, with no expectations. So we were to meet here. Twenty minutes ago.

JENNIE

Oh.

AMBROSE

I thought - it felt mutual. But with how she had to find out about me, I shouldn't be surprised.

JENNIE

Was she really your only hope? Out of all of us?

AMBROSE

Who seemed to potentially have what I was looking for? Yes.

JENNIE

What in heaven's name were you looking for, then?

AMBROSE

The capacity for a real, enduring love between us -

JENNIE

You honestly don't see the possibility of that with me and - ?

AMBROSE

- and compatibility in ... all the intimacies of married life.

Beat.

JENNIE

Ah.

AMBROSE

You're an attractive, fascinating girl, Jennie. And I like you. But would you be able to love me, body and soul?

JENNIE

I - I could try. There is ... a certain compulsion in me for giving moments of release to men that, even with God's help, I haven't overcome. But then, I've never been with someone like you. So perhaps together, we could-

AMBROSE

No - I don't want my love to carry the burden of being a cure, or yours to be some grand sacrifice! I just want-

JENNIE

There are many different kinds of love, Ambrose. If I could offer you true, lasting Platonic love - what many call the highest, purest love of all - would that really be so terrible?

AMBROSE

No. But it still wouldn't be what I want.

JENNIE

Why on earth not? When the most likely alternative is being trapped for life with someone who will never understand you? Who you will always have to hide from in some way? We're sexual cripples, Ambrose, and we have to take love where we can find it.

Beat.

AMBROSE

Is that really what you think of us?

JENNIE

Yes. (pause) I don't know. (a small explosion) I mean, don't you feel it too?! The teeth of this horrible trap where you will never be entirely what they expect you to be **or** who you feel you are? That you'll always be inadequate at both?! And yes, there are moments when I think that maybe it's the opposite and we're actually the next step in the Nietzschean evolution of mankind, a great reconciliation between male and female. But mostly, I just feel cursed.

AMBROSE

Because of how it feels, or because of how society treats us?

JENNIE

It's not exactly an easy thing to separate them from one another!

AMBROSE

Which is why we have to do it! There comes a point where settling for whatever love we can find is as good as admitting to the world that that's all we deserve. And I don't believe that. I don't believe we're crippled. And if I'm going to keep that belief out of myself, I have to draw a line. So here it is. I will believe that I am worthy of a great and passionate love. I refuse to stop reaching for it. No matter what becomes of me, I will hope for what everyone else does and not feel ashamed for it. Your line may be different from mine. It may make more sense. But this is where it is for me. And I won't move it for anyone.

Beat.

JENNIE

Well. That is, without a doubt, the most glorious and inspiring refusal from a gentleman I have ever received. It will all be downhill from here, I'm afraid.

AMBROSE

Sorry about that.

JENNIE

It's all right. I may steal it to use myself on occasion. Perhaps with a Marxist twist. "It's not you, dear, it's the system." Could come in handy, don't you think?

They share a wry smile.

JENNIE

So what will you do now?

AMBROSE

Try my luck here on the Rialto. In public, with women's clothes on. I'm not optimistic, but it's the only avenue still open to me, so -

JENNIE

So you keep reaching for what you want.

AMBROSE

Yes.

JENNIE

Well, if time and experience ever change your mind, you can always-

Jennie sees Plum rushing in behind Ambrose.

JENNIE

But perhaps they'll be kinder to you than that.

She gets up and exits. Confused, Ambrose turns to see Plum standing there, dressed similarly to Jennie.

PLUM

Hello.

AMBROSE

Hello.

SCENE THREE

Rooms of the Cercle Hermaphrodites, nearly stripped bare - several packing crates, a wine chiller on the floor, and the sofa the only things left. Phyllis digs in one of the crates while Laureline fetches the tea kettle from the kitchen.

PHYLLIS

(calling to Laureline in the next room)

Are you sure they're in this crate? I don't see them.

LAURELINE

Under the plates, wrapped in newspaper.

Phyllis finds and pulls out some tea cups from the crate as Laureline comes back into the main room.

PHYLLIS

All these lovely things packed up with nowhere to go. There's really no place you can move us to?

LAURELINE

That doesn't require real names, or references? This was a very specific arrangement, Phyllis. I've reached out to every friendly place I know of since the raid. And I don't think it's replicable. But if you like the tea set, you should take it. I can see them going quite nicely with the decor of your shop, don't you think?

PHYLLIS

Laureline, that's it! We could move the Cercle to my shop after hours! It would be perfect - we'd have a sea of fashionable ladies' hats at our disposal every night!

LAURELINE

Hats currently on display in what I assume are far too many windows.

PHYLLIS

We could cover them.

LAURELINE

It's very sweet of you, Phyllis. But a dozen or more young dandies walking through a business district to a closed ladies' hat shop with covered windows after dark? We might as well advertise.

PHYLLIS

(sighs)

I know. I just can't bear the thought of losing you all.

LAURELINE

We'll see plenty of each other in our street clothes at the Comfort and on Rialto.

PHYLLIS

Oh, but it's just not the same!

Beat.

LAURELINE

I know.

Jennie enters from the bedroom, all dolled up.

LAURELINE

And here's Jennie, just in time for tea. Your timing is impeccable, as usual.

JENNIE

Thank you. I have a precise mathematical system that has nothing to do with waiting to hear the kettle whistle before I come in.

LAURELINE

And how is Plum getting along back there?

JENNIE

Just about put together in her day dress, since the use of the one (to Phyllis) you helped her find is still uncertain.

The coded knock on the door. Laureline runs over to open the door, revealing Ambrose in street clothes. He carries a bouquet of wildflowers.

LAURELINE

Ambrose. So good to see you again.

AMBROSE

And you, my dear.

He kisses her hand. Laureline ushers him in the room and closes the door. Ambrose sets the flowers down to the side of the sofa, and repeats his quick transformation from the beginning of Act One.

AMBROSE

Thank you again for facilitating this. I feel dreadful for even asking to impose on -

LAURELINE

Nonsense. It's time invested in something that just might last beyond this place. Really, I couldn't have planned it better.

AMBROSE

(to Jennie and Phyllis)

Ladies.

Plum enters, looking every inch the charming Gibson Girl. She holds something behind her back.

PLUM

Ambrose! I thought I heard you come in.

AMBROSE

Yes. It's wonderful to see you again.

PLUM

You too.

They look at each for a long moment.

LAURELINE

(to Jennie and Phyllis)

All right, ladies. Shall we start packing up the dressing room?

Laureline ushers Jennie and Phyllis out of the room.

JENNIE

(sighs)

If we must.

PHYLLIS

I'm warning you both now that I'm most likely going to weep profusely while we do this.

LAURELINE

That's fine, dear. Just try not to get too many tears on the wigs. They don't deal with moisture at all well.

As they exit, Ambrose quickly grabs the bouquet of flowers and presents them to Plum just as she brings a book of sheet music from behind her back.

AMBROSE AND PLUM

I brought this for you!

Sheepish laughter as they exchange gifts.

AMBROSE

Wait - is this - Faure's new Allegro Symphonique for four hands!

PLUM

He's your favorite, yes? I just kept thinking about how you never had anyone to play duets with and how wonderful it can be making music with someone else, so I thought that sometime maybe we could play this one together.

AMBROSE

(moved)

Yes. I would love that.

PLUM

Mmm. They're so fragrant.

AMBROSE

You said a good wildflower was worth a dozen roses, so - though for future reference, what's your favorite color?

PLUM

Oh, I don't believe in them.

AMBROSE

In ... colors? Or-

PLUM

In having favorites. It never made sense to me. Can you really separate how you feel about sky blue from how you feel about the sky? And then what are you left with? If you say one is your favorite, do you mean you'd want everything to be that color if it could? Because I'm very fond of fuchsia, but I'm not sure it's the right choice for grass.

AMBROSE

I see your point. (Pause) Mine's orange, by the way.

PLUM

Oh. (Pause) What's your favorite thing that's orange?

AMBROSE

The leaves in autumn.

PLUM

That is a very nice one. I think mine is that sunset orange where it's this mellow contrast to the pink and gold on each side of it.

AMBROSE

That's a good one, too. (pause) Were you able to find a dress?

PLUM

Oh, yes! Phyllis was wonderful and had some boutiques send a sampling over for an "important client." It was the first time I've ever gotten to try dresses on in a shop, with the big mirrors and everything like I always dreamed about! And I found this really lovely one with - oh, but I shouldn't tell you about it. You know, in case -

AMBROSE

Right. Trying to cram a whole courtship into a few minutes! Is it too much pressure?

PLUM

(shrugs)

It's what we have.

AMBROSE

But if we decide to ... go through with it, there will be more time. Bertram will bring you by the house so we can "meet," and we'll have a whole courtship period for my parents' benefit. We can walk away from that at any point, no harm done.

PLUM

But that will be with all sorts of disguises in the way. No, if we do this today, I want it to be the real one. As ourselves, in front of the people who really know us, with no parts to play. That's what I want to remember. So if we get done talking, and you're not certain ... please don't ask.

AMBROSE

All right.

Beat.

AMBROSE

In that case, I suppose we should take care of our unfinished business before we get interrupted again. (holds out his hand to her) Would you care to dance?

PLUM

Yes, I'd love to.

Ambrose pulls her into position, and they start to dance to silence.

AMBROSE

I'm sorry for the lack of orchestra this time.

PLUM

That's all right. It just means we get to pick any song we want to play in our heads. Do you have a favorite?

AMBROSE

Sidewalks of New York?

PLUM

Yes! What's our tempo?

Ambrose sets it, calling out "1-2-3s."

PLUM

So if it were on piano, the left hand would be doing -

She wordlessly sings an approximation of the left hand of a piano waltz.

AMBROSE

And the right hand would bring in the last line of the melody as an intro, with some trills.

Ambrose's voice adds the right hand over Plum's sung version of the left, and we start to hear the actual piano they're listening to in their heads.

PLUM

(singing)

DOWN IN FRONT OF CASEY'S OLD BROWN WOODEN STOOP,
ON A SUMMER'S EVENING, WE FORMED A MERRY GROUP.

Ambrose joins in with harmony.

PLUM AND AMBROSE

(singing)

BOYS AND GIRLS TOGETHER, WE WOULD SING AND WALTZ
WHILE JAY PLAYED THE ORGAN ON THE SIDEWALKS OF NEW YORK.

AMBROSE

You're right. It is wonderful making music with someone else. I look forward to doing it more often.

Plum smiles. A long moment lost in dancing and each other.

AMBROSE

And I like imagining my future with you in it. Evenings spent dancing. To actual music on a phonograph.

PLUM

(laughs)

Yes! Coming home to you, shedding the world's expectations.

AMBROSE

Playing duets until the neighbors complain!

PLUM

Reading and a warm cup of tea before bed. You do like to read, yes?

AMBROSE

Passionately.

PLUM

Oh good.

AMBROSE

Waking up in the morning together.

PLUM

And maybe sharing a kiss before we dress for outside, to remind us who we are through the day.

AMBROSE

Would ... now be a good time to try that again, do you think?

PLUM

Try ...?

AMBROSE

The kiss. From the masked ball. If you still want to do it over.

PLUM

(thinks for a moment)

Yes, I think I do.

Ambrose brings Plum in close. They come together, tentatively at first, and kiss. It starts off light, cautious. Then blossoms.

PLUM

Yes. That one was just for us. Thank you.

AMBROSE

It was my pleasure. I have to say, (leads her through a twirl) I think we move together very well.

PLUM

I think we do too. Though we might want to try it the other way. You know, for in public?

AMBROSE

Oh. Right.

They awkwardly trade dance positions, and give the waltz a go with Plum leading and Ambrose following. They dance a few steps, but then get a little tangled up.

PLUM

I'm sorry. Did I- ?

AMBROSE

No, it's fine. If you could just -

He adjusts Plum's hand on his back.

AMBROSE

- there.

PLUM

Oh. I see.

AMBROSE

And don't be bashful. You can really move me about.

PLUM

Okay.

They try again. Ambrose still doing some "backseat leading".

PLUM

Ah, Ambrose? If I'm supposed to really move you, you kind of need to, um, let me.

AMBROSE

Yes. I have a hard time with that. One more try?

Another go. Much smoother this time.

PLUM

Is that more like it?

Takes Ambrose through a couple of turns.

AMBROSE

Considerably!

PLUM

This could start to feel normal with some practice, I think. You?

AMBROSE

The same.

They bring their dance to a close. Step apart. Plum starts to curtsy, Ambrose to bow. They catch themselves, stop, and reverse.

AMBROSE

With practice.

PLUM

So reading, dancing, playing piano, kissing. We've covered a good deal so far. What else?

AMBROSE

(uncomfortable)

I really do hate to ask, but it's the first thing Father will want to know

PLUM

Employment?

Beat.

AMBROSE

Yes.

PLUM

Better, actually. I'm working for Clarence Jenkins now. Handled his account at my old job, and he swooped me up as soon as he found out I'd been let go. So far, his attitude seems to be, "If you don't do it in the office, it's none of my business," so we'll see. I'm in accounting now, and I love it. No people to deal with for the most part. Just numbers. It's a peaceful world, mathematics. An equation has the same answer no matter what gender you try to assign it. It feels safe there. And now it's my job.

AMBROSE

That's wonderful to hear.

PLUM

So why did you hate to ask?

AMBROSE

Just because of ... all you've been through with that.

PLUM

"All I've been through." If we're serious about this, there shouldn't be anything we can't talk about, right? So you can just say it.

AMBROSE

I'm not sure what you mean. There's nothing I'm trying to-

PLUM

I mean this.

Plum pulls down one of her sleeves. The bandages are gone, but some scarring is still visible.

PLUM

I know you saw it that night. There's no reason to pretend you didn't. (pause) Did it make you feel sorry for me? Is that part of why you're here?

AMBROSE

No. It made me angry. At the coward who betrayed you. At your employers for being so blind that they couldn't see the beautiful soul in front of them. At any world cruel enough to make someone so kind and resourceful feel like you had no other options. I wish I could have protected you. And maybe in the future I can.

PLUM

Protect me? From ... what, exactly?

AMBROSE

From, well, everything.

PLUM

But what if I don't want that?

AMBROSE

If you're going to be a wife, you'll have to get used to it.

PLUM

(offended)

Will I, now?

AMBROSE

(not sure where he went wrong)

I mean, because that's what men - what husbands do. They protect their wives from the harsh realities of the world.

PLUM

I've dealt with plenty of those for a long time now.

AMBROSE

I know. And if we decide to go through with this, you won't have to anymore. You'll finally be able to rest.

PLUM

From reality.

AMBROSE

Yes.

PLUM

I think that's called going crazy. And, while it's tempting sometimes, I try to keep it off my list of things to do.

AMBROSE

You think I wouldn't be able to?

PLUM

What?

AMBROSE

That I'm not strong enough to shield you from those who would -

PLUM

Wait. No. That's not -

AMBROSE

I know I don't always look the part, but manly courage is not just a matter of body.

PLUM

I know that. But -

AMBROSE

(stands)

I thought you of all people would understand that appearances don't tell the whole story, but I can see now-

PLUM

(grabbing his hand)

Ambrose, I know you're strong. I never doubted that for a moment.

AMBROSE

Then what are you even trying -

PLUM

And I know for a fact that you could protect me if that was something I wanted. But it's not. At least, not in that way.

AMBROSE

You don't - but men long to protect and women long for a protector. That's how it works.

PLUM

But what if it's not? Do you really like everything that all men are supposed to like?

AMBROSE

You're doubting my manhood now just because - ?!

PLUM

No! I'm talking about me too, and it's just - (grand announcement) I don't much care for poetry! Women are supposed to swoon over it, but I'd rather puzzle out theorems than have a man recite at me all night! And the thought of decorating a room sends me into a panic! I don't know what colors go with which things, or where the most tastefully appointed place for an ottoman is, and I don't want to know! Does that make me less of a woman? Or more than just a theoretical one?

AMBROSE

But those are surface things. I'm talking about fundamentals.

PLUM

Most everyone thinks our bodies are fundamentals. But look at us. So if they're wrong about what we even are, what makes us think they're right about what it is we need?

AMBROSE

Because I do feel that desire! Something deep inside me wants to be your white knight!

PLUM

You still are. When we kissed just then, I felt safe in a way I never knew I could! And I needed that. But not to shield me from the world. It made me want to face it with you.

AMBROSE

I think I can do that.

PLUM

I know you can.

They kiss again. And again. It get hot and heavy very quickly. They finally break away, shocked at the passion they've unleashed.

AMBROSE

So ... was that our first fight, then?

PLUM

I think so.

AMBROSE

But we listened and talked our way through it?

PLUM

Seems like.

AMBROSE

And the conciliatory lovemaking doesn't seem like it's going to be too difficult?

PLUM

(still catching her breath)

No, I think that's ship-shape.

AMBROSE

Good!

They go back to kissing passionately. With great restraint, Ambrose breaks away again.

AMBROSE

Wait. Plum. I know what this feels like. But let's try to be honest. It's probably too early to be love.

PLUM

(trying to wind herself down)

You're right, you're right.

AMBROSE

That being said, I think we have the tools to get us there.

PLUM

I think so too.

Beat. Ambrose kneels down in front of her.

AMBROSE

Plum Gardner, I want to build that love with you. Will you marry me?

Plum immediately bursts into tears.

AMBROSE

Are those "Yes" tears or "No" tears?

PLUM

Yeses! So many yeses!

A cheer from the bedroom.

AMBROSE

Well, it seems we've had complete and total privacy this last fifteen minutes. That's good to know.

Laureline, Jennie, and Phyllis rush in with girlish glee.

LAURELINE

I'm so happy for you, my darlings! So very, very happy!

JENNIE

Congratulations. You make a lovely couple.

PHYLLIS

(to Plum)

And I'm sooo excited that you get to wear the dress! Aaaah!

LAURELINE

(wiping her eyes)

All right. The movers are coming at seven for the sofa and the bed, so if you're going to have any wedding night to speak of, we need to move quickly.

PLUM

Yes. Right.

Plum heads to the changing room, hand in hand with Phyllis, Laureline right behind them.

PLUM

Oh, I can't wait to put it on!

They exit. Jennie finds herself alone with Ambrose, and awkwardly goes to join the ladies.

JENNIE

Yes, well, I suppose I had better -

AMBROSE

Thank you for agreeing to officiate, Jennie. (with meaning) It's very kind of you.

JENNIE

It's about time the years of seminary paid off, so - and for what it's worth, I think you'll be very happy together

AMBROSE

Thank you.

Laureline bustles in, carrying formal attire.

LAURELINE

All right, Phyllis has her started, and we'll have you sorted out momentarily!

Jennie takes the opportunity to slip out of the room.

LAURELINE

Here's a proper tailcoat for you, white tie and waistcoat, and a fresh buttonhole for the occasion.

Ambrose takes off his own jacket and waistcoat and exchanges them for Laureline's.

AMBROSE

Laureline, you think of everything.

LAURELINE

No, I think of the details and leave the big picture to you.

Coded knock on the door. Laureline opens the door for Bertram, who is aghast at its sudden bareness.

LAURELINE

Bertram, darling, you're just in time. (kisses him on the cheek)

BERTRAM

What happened to everything?

LAURELINE

Packed in boxes. I told you I needed to.

BERTRAM

But when you said that, I didn't think you meant tomorrow. Don't we have to the end of the month?

LAURELINE

Our landlords aren't the sort to put much stock in lease agreements, dear. But here you are, asking about practicalities when your brother is standing next to you positively exploding with news!

Bertram's focus turns on a dime to Ambrose.

BERTRAM

She said yes?

AMBROSE

She said yes!

They embrace.

BERTRAM

And you're certain that -

AMBROSE

Yes. You brought the rings?

BERTRAM

(bringing a ring box out of his jacket)

It's happening right now?

AMBROSE

As soon as she's in the dress!

BERTRAM

Oh my.

LAURELINE

And I should go check on her progress. If you'll excuse me.

BERTRAM

Laureline, wait. I -

But she is already gone.

BERTRAM

I'm sorry. I shouldn't be distracted.

AMBROSE

It's all right. Your life doesn't stop just because mine is at a climax. So ... what was that?

BERTRAM

That's the thing, I don't really know. (gesturing to the empty room) I mean, why would she keep something like this from me? There's some distance creeping in between us that wasn't there before.

AMBROSE

When did it start? The last you told me, everything was wine and roses.

BERTRAM

A few days ago. It could be a passing mood. Natural growing pains. I'm probably overreacting. I really can't believe this is what I'm taking the time to tell you right before your wedding!

Meanwhile, Ambrose has lost the fight with his bow tie.

AMBROSE

And I can't believe you go to the trouble of putting these on every evening!

BERTRAM

Here. Allow me.

Bertram goes about putting his bow tie to rights.

BERTRAM

Not the sort of rescue I imagined when I followed you here, but I'm glad I could of some help.

AMBROSE

You've been more than "some help," Bertie. You've been ... that courageous big brother I remember from all those years ago.

BERTRAM

Yes, well ... I'm sorry it took so long to get back to that.

AMBROSE

If you were going to pick a day for it, this would be fairly high up on the list.

Bertram finishes fixing the bow tie.

BERTRAM

And now you're ready for it.

AMBROSE

How do I look?

BERTRAM

Quite dashing.

AMBROSE

I just hope I know what I'm doing.

Jennie enters, wearing an ecclesiastical vestment over her dress and carrying a bible. She briskly walks over to Ambrose and Bertram.

JENNIE

Everything is prepared back there. Are you ready to begin?

AMBROSE

I - I believe so.

JENNIE

(patting her Bible)

I'll be handling the belief for the duration of the ceremony. Your job here is certainty.

AMBROSE

Yes. Yes, I'm ready.

JENNIE

(yelling back to the dressing room)

We're starting!

Laureline enters with a basket of flowers. She and Jennie sing Wagner's Bridal Chorus in its original German. Laureline spreads a path of petals leading to Jennie, Ambrose, and Bertram. Plum enters, resplendent in her stunning wedding dress, and walks slowly down the path of flowers. Phyllis manages the train behind her. Once she reaches Ambrose, Jennie goes into full preacher mode.

JENNIE

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to bind these two together in holy matrimony. Which isn't officially binding. And many people would debate its holiness, but I'm wearing the vestments so I get to say it is. Take that, Union Theological Seminary!

Plum looks at her vestments.

PLUM

This really is beautiful! Where did you find this?

JENNIE

Phyllis brought it. (a look to her) And assured me it wasn't stolen.

PHYLLIS

Of course not! I bartered for it. Downstairs, with a vicar looking for a more reliable ecstatic vision than prayer had been supplying of late.

Jennie reacts with shock.

PHYLLIS

What? Even the clergy needs to be shown a good time now and then. You of all people should know that.

JENNIE

(to the others)

I don't suppose I have time to go and wash this?

LAURELINE

We really do need to get on with it.

AMBROSE

Bertram, the rings.

BERTRAM

Oh, yes. I-

JENNIE

Wait, wait! The minister's homily comes first.

Groans from the assembled parties.

LAURELINE

Jennie, dear, you know we're on a tight schedule -

JENNIE

(to Plum and Ambrose)

You asked **me** to officiate, so you had to expect some sort of grandiose speech was coming.

PLUM

It's really only fair.

AMBROSE

Yes, but we'd prefer you keep it on the shorter side of grandiose.

JENNIE

I'll see what I can do. This couple stands before us all to heed the call of the Apostle John, who exhorted, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love ... and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him ... There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." Everyone in this room knows the torment of fear all too well. We're afraid of being ourselves, of being discovered. Afraid the world is right when they say neither God nor love can dwell in people like us. But these two courageous souls are here today to declare that isn't true. Ambrose and Plum, do you pledge to love one another and cultivate that love in good times and bad, so that through your lives together the world will see that you dwell in God and God dwells in you?

AMBROSE

I do.

PLUM

I do too. So much.

JENNIE

I confess I feel unworthy to stand here before you, still so imperfect in love. Until the age of nine, I prayed every night for God to fix the mistake and change me into a physical girl. At ten, I realized that wasn't possible, so all through my teens, I sought solitude in an abandoned graveyard - my own Garden of Gethsemane. I would throw myself on the grass, writhe in an agony of moans, and even shriek. All my muscles seemed to be rigid, and my fists were clinched.

I would dig my fingernails into the dirt and cry, "Change my nature, O God! This very moment. By a miracle. Give me the mind and powers of a man." But no answer came.

LAURELINE

Jennie, dearest -

JENNIE

I haven't lost the thread, Laureline. I swear there is a point to this. Because, after years of that same prayer, a new thought pierced through the pain. Perhaps it wasn't that God refused to answer my cries to take these feelings away. Perhaps He did answer them, and His answer was, "No, because there's no need to. You are loved, you are valuable, and you can fulfill My will for your life just as you are." Such a beautiful answer had never occurred to me as a possibility. There are still more days when I can't believe it than ones when I can. But seeing you, Plum, and you, Ambrose, standing here aglow with love, you are proof to me that that answer was true. Because you've chosen to be that answer for each other. (to Bertram) Do you have the rings?

Bertram fumbles the rings out of his pocket, and hands one to Ambrose, one to Plum.

JENNIE

Ambrose, place the ring on Plum's finger as a symbol of your faithfulness and devotion. And as you do, speak aloud the words you commit to showing her in your actions every day - "You are loved. You are valuable. And with you by my side, we can achieve our true purpose."

AMBROSE

Plum, with this ring I swear that you are loved, you are valuable, and with you by my side, we can achieve our true purpose.

JENNIE

Now, Plum, you do the same.

PLUM

Ambrose, with this ring I swear to you that you are loved, you are so, so valuable to me, and with you by my side, we can achieve our true purpose.

JENNIE

And on that journey together, may your love be made ever more perfect. May it cast out fear from every corner. May the answers to your prayers be the ones you didn't dare expect. And may you have ears to hear those answers when they come. So with the power invested in me by ...well, no real church or government in particular, I now pronounce you man and wife. And leave it to you to sort out which is which when! Ambrose, you may kiss the bride. If she lets you.

PLUM

Oh, I'll say "I do" to that all day long!

A long, passionate kiss between Ambrose and Plum. The others cheer. Phyllis runs to the wine chiller, and pulls out the bottle.

PHYLLIS

Quickly, quickly! A toast!

LAURELINE

Oh yes!

Laureline grabs teacups, passes them out as Phyllis pours behind her.

LAURELINE

Here we are - one last hurrah with the good china!

BERTRAM

What happened to the wine glasses?

LAURELINE

Already packed.

JENNIE

(to Phyllis)

Only the tiniest bit for me. Thank you.

BERTRAM

I don't understand why you didn't tell me you were doing all of this yesterday. I could have helped.

PLUM

(to Phyllis)

And more than a bit for me -

LAURELINE

That's sweet of you, darling -

PLUM

Including all that you would have poured in Jennie's!

LAURELINE

But I know how taxing work has been for you this last week, and I didn't want to trouble you with anything else.

AMBROSE

The same for me.

BERTRAM

When you took on all of this yourself?

AMBROSE

I want this to be an equal partnership -

LAURELINE

Not all of it, Bertie.

AMBROSE

So we'll start by getting equally smashed!

LAURELINE

I hired movers for the sofa, the bed, and the vanity. They're coming this evening -

BERTRAM

What?

LAURELINE

- so if this lovely couple is going to have any time alone together before they're guarded by chaperones for six months, you had best come up with a charming or profound wedding toast right this minute! Like this: (holding up her teacup, to Ambrose and Plum) To the Bride and Groom! May your lives together be like the wildflowers Plum loves so much - one of beauty thriving in unexpected places!

JENNIE

Hear, hear!

LAURELINE

(to Bertram)

Now it's your turn.

BERTRAM

Wha- I - ah- (does his best to focus back on Ambrose) to my brother Ambrose, for knowing deep in his heart that someone as wonderful as Plum was out there waiting for him, and not stopping until he found her.

PHYLLIS

To Plum, my undying admiration for how utterly divine you look in that dress! And to Ambrose, my heartiest wishes of good luck for when you have to help her out of it!

LAURELINE

Jennie?

JENNIE

I think you all have heard me speak enough in the last fifteen minutes to tide you over for weeks. So what say we give the people this day is actually about a chance to talk instead?

PLUM

To all of you for giving me the wedding I've always dreamed of! When we're out in public and have to pretend, whether it's for the official one of these, or just day to day, I'll be able to go back to this little nook in my memory and know the truth. So thank you for that.

AMBROSE

To Laureline, for creating a place where miracles like this could flourish. It has shaped our lives, and we all carry it with us in our hearts.

JENNIE

To the bride and groom and Cercle Hermaphroditos!

PHYLLIS, LAURELINE, BERTRAM

The bride and groom and Cercle Hermaphroditos!

They all drink. Then Laureline rushes to embrace Ambrose while Phyllis hands out small bags of rice to Jennie and Bertram.

LAURELINE

Now go, my lovelies! Go, and all the blessings of heaven with you!

Bertram, Phyllis, Jennie, and Laureline throw rice with cries of "Huzzah," "The Bride and Groom," "Make way for the happy couple," etc. Ambrose and Plum quickly go down the line, embracing each of them, then rush toward the hall in a hail of rice. Just before they exit, Ambrose looks at Plum. She looks at him. He picks her up in his arms and exits. Bertram and Laureline stand next to each other, watching them go.

LAURELINE

(to Bertram)

I think they'll do just fine.

BERTRAM

Yes. (a pause) And what about us?

LAURELINE

Us? Well, we've had a wonderful time, haven't we?

She kisses him playfully.

BERTRAM

A wonderful time?

Laureline quickly turns to Jennie and Phyllis.

LAURELINE

All right, ladies.

BERTRAM

(to himself)

I thought we were having more than that.

LAURELINE

I'm afraid it's time to change into street clothes and give the lovers in the next room some privacy.

Jennie and Phyllis start to head off.

PHYLLIS

(sighs)

If we must.

They exit. Laureline saunters over to Bertram and throws her arms around his neck.

LAURELINE

And my dear, handsome, sulking Bertie.

She kisses him, quick, with no time or room for passion.

LAURELINE

We've had such fun. It really is a shame to say goodbye.

BERTRAM

Then let's not say it.

LAURELINE

If we don't, we'll have to contend with the sounds of your brother in the throes of Eros, which isn't my idea of a romantic atmosphere. So I'll just say it's been a thrilling two weeks, and I'll think of you often. Have a wonderful night, darling. (another quick kiss) A whole wonderful life.

She turns to leave.

BERTRAM

No.

LAURELINE

You won't have a wonderful night?

BERTRAM

Just what exactly are you trying to do?

LAURELINE

Well, I had hoped for a pleasant send off, but if you're not in the mood for that-

BERTRAM

Is that what our time together warrants for you? Pleasantness?

LAURELINE

I could think of another word if you'd like-

BERTRAM

How about intimacy? Because that's what I've been having. Not a romp, not a fling. This has been real to me. I have felt so much for you in the last two weeks that I can't even -

LAURELINE

Bertie, dear-

BERTRAM

And up til now, you've given me no sign that this was just some casual affair! So either you were pretending before, or you're pretending right now, and I want to know why!

LAURELINE

(frustration breaking the happy facade)

Because I'm trying to make it easier, you dolt!

Beat.

LAURELINE

I have cherished every moment I've spent with you, Bertie. But there isn't some magical loophole for us the way there is for them. So please, let's just kiss and -

BERTRAM

But if there were, you'd want to be with me?

LAURELINE

Are you really so thick that you don't know that?

BERTRAM

So if you have those feelings and I have them for you, then -

LAURELINE

What, Bertram? Have you even thought about what that would mean? No children or grandchildren to brighten your old age? No wife that could become part of your family, that you could actually dance with in public? You're sure none of that matters to you?

BERTRAM

I - I don't know.

LAURELINE

(tenderly)

Of course you don't. We've known each other two weeks, Bertram. And they've been wonderful. But we hadn't even started the discussion that would lead to what you want. Perhaps if we'd had a year here, six months even, we could make that leap. But not now. It wouldn't be fair to either of us.

BERTRAM

So - what, then? We just chalk it up to bad timing and walk away?

LAURELINE

There's not much else we can do.

BERTRAM

We can give ourselves more time. We'll meet as friends - lunches at Keens! We'll eat mutton chops and drink bourbon and no one will suspect what it is we're really talking about!

LAURELINE

People know me at Keens.

BERTRAM

So?

LAURELINE

So if we were to meet there, anywhere outside the fairy haunts, I'd have to give my legal name. (pause) And I'm not ready for the danger of that. I'm sorry.

BERTRAM

Laureline, how could you think I would ever - ?

LAURELINE

It wouldn't even have to be you! All it would take is your father growing suspicious. An unguarded moment seen by the wrong person. It could all come crashing down on us so fast, Bertie.

BERTRAM

Then we'll meet at one of the fairy resorts. The Hotel Comfort. A park bench on the Rialto. You won't have to give away anything you don't want to, but we can still make an effort!

LAURELINE

For what? A lifetime of worry, hoping to god that everyone accepts our "confirmed bachelors" act at face value, so we don't end up exposed, or imprisoned, or worse?!

BERTRAM

Since when have you just shrugged your shoulders at restrictions? You built this whole place through sheer wit and determination, and - !

LAURELINE

And now it's falling apart. That's what happens to things that defy the status quo, Bertram. Nine chances out of ten, that's what would happen with us.

BERTRAM

That didn't stop you the last time. That day you got the letter, you said you knew it would end eventually, but you took the risk of starting this place anyway.

LAURELINE

That was different -

BERTRAM

Yes. Because you did it for others.

He takes her into his arms.

BERTRAM

I remember who you are, Laureline, even if you don't. You are a knight in the battle against loneliness. And you're so brave in pushing against it for every one but yourself.

He kisses her tenderly .

BERTRAM

But that's all right. I'm willing to push against it too. Meet me at the Comfort. Seven o' clock. Tomorrow night. We'll talk. We'll drink. And see where it takes us from there.

LAURELINE

I'll think about it.

BERTRAM

I'll be waiting.

He takes one more long look, then exits. Laureline closes the door behind him, then sits on the sofa. Finally alone, all the emotions she's held back for the last week come pouring out in quiet sobs.

After a few moments, Phyllis bursts into the room in street clothes, fully loaded with suitcases and hat boxes. Jennie enters in street clothes behind her, carrying a single case. Laureline quickly tries to pull herself together before the others see her.

PHYLLIS

That's really all you're taking?

JENNIE

I'm not even sure I have a safe place to keep this! I may have to settle for my ornamental dressing gown - passable for a man to have, but looks very much like a dress with a few adjustments.

Phyllis just manages to set her pile down by the door.

LAURELINE

No, here's what you do. Go buy a luggage tag, and in your most feminine hand writing, put down one of your sisters' names. Most gentlemen wouldn't presume to open a lady's suitcase. And if anyone asks, a perfectly reasonable explanation. She forgot it here on her last visit, and you're bringing it back to her the next time you go home.

JENNIE

Huh.

LAURELINE

Only if you feel comfortable, darling, but it's a thought.

PHYLLIS

And you're still certain you want to part with the china?

LAURELINE

I insist. If you can manage to carry one other thing down the stairs with you.

Phyllis looks her pile of cases.

PHYLLIS

Yes. I don't suppose you could bring them by the Comfort, say, Wednesday?

LAURELINE

It would be my pleasure.

PHYLLIS

You know what you should do? When you're at home in your favorite dress, write me a letter. Start with a description of what you're wearing, plus whatever else you like, and deliver it when we meet. Then I'll read it in private wearing something gorgeous myself, and voila! The Cercle is alive. We could all write to each other that way. Spread out across different rooms, but still able to come together as ourselves. What do you think?

A pause. Laureline and Jennie look at each other, shocked that it's Phyllis who's thought of this. Laureline embraces Phyllis, kissing her cheeks.

LAURELINE

Phyllis, you're a genius! That's precisely what we'll do! And we'll begin at once. Jennie?

JENNIE

(to Phyllis)

It's a brilliant idea. From you. Which I don't quite know what to do with. But now I'll be able to write down my feelings about it at such great length that you'll regret having asked me to.

They embrace and kiss each others' cheeks.

PHYLLIS

Wonderful! I love regretting my decisions. It gives a sense of accomplishment I rarely find anywhere else!

She gathers up her luggage and starts to exit.

JENNIE

Phyllis - I never ... properly thanked you for getting me to safety during the raid. And I ... I just ...

PHYLLIS

No need to trouble yourself, love. Finally seeing you at a loss for words is more than thanks enough! Ta ta, darlings. Come see me soon!

She exits.

JENNIE

Reckless, impossible girl! I miss her already. It really is a thrill, watching her do and say everything I don't quite dare to.

LAURELINE

Phyllis' bravery comes more from good luck than experience. It's easier to say, "Damn the consequences!" when you've never faced the serious ones. But we're all brave in our own ways. You did get your manuscript back?

JENNIE

Yes. (pats the suitcase) It's in here. You never did tell me what you thought of it so far.

LAURELINE

Did I not?

JENNIE

Or were you hoping to keep it that way?

LAURELINE

(takes a deep breath)

Your book, Jennie, is ... honest and infuriating and daring and priggishly judgmental, and makes far too many assumptions that it presents as facts, which is only made more complicated by the fact that no one has ever had the guts to write anything like it.

Beat.

LAURELINE

I made some notes in the margins, which I'm sure you'll ignore. But ... it's a start for us. And could stand to be seen by more than just our circle.

JENNIE

Published for the wide world, eh? Ha! Could you imagine? Being one of the first voices to plead our case to the world? Offering solace to even one of us desperate for a way out? If there's one thing I can think of worth risking it all for, it would be that. Perhaps if I had a bit more of Phyllis' brand of bravery.

LAURELINE

I think you might be surprised by what your own supply of it can do.

JENNIE

And I hope you know even a little of what yours has done for me.

She kisses Laureline on the cheek - Quiet, reverent.

JENNIE

Thank you, Laureline.

A last look, then she exits. Laureline closes the door behind her with a sigh. Then walks toward the changing room, starts to unbutton her blouse. She reaches up to take off her wig when something in her stops. She freezes in place. Looks down at her blouse. Buttons it back up. Goes to the door gingerly. Turns the knob, lets it swing open. Stares out into the hall. Looks back inside the mostly empty apartment. Back out to the hall. Takes a deep breath. Then strides out into the world and closes the door behind her.

End of Play.