

**The Play Called Life Is My Disease**

An autotheatricality  
by  
Kurt McGinnis Brown

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## CHARACTERS

- ACTOR 1      Female, mid-30s, an actor. Called NINA in this script, yet the name in production should be the name of the actor portraying her. She plays BEN's wife, Sabina, in the play called *Life Is My Disease*. NINA is the on again, off again lover of KAZ.
- ACTOR 2      Male, mid-30s, an actor. Called KAZ in this script; as above, use the name of the actor in production. He plays Sabina's lover in the play called *Life Is My Disease*. KAZ is the off again, on again lover of NINA.
- BEN            early-40s, the writer and director of the play called *Life Is My Disease*. He plays himself—for the most part.

## TIME

One year after what happened happened.

## THE SET

Empty to start. The actors bring on the props, which initially are grouped downstage center. These are pulled out as needed, until the set is complete. Everything is from BEN's apartment, which becomes represented on stage scene by scene. NOTE: Downstage center is the ideal placement for its emotional effect. If this proves problematic for sightlines, then feel free to change the phrase "downstage" and "downstage center" where relevant in the dialogue and stage directions to conform with a placement of the props that works better for your theater space.

## The Play Called Life Is My Disease

### Week 1, scene 1: Bringing in the props

Bear-hugging a recliner chair, KAZ waddles on stage. NINA follows with two matching floor lamps.

when she dies

NINA

I know

KAZ

makes me cry

NINA

*scares* me

KAZ

With a grunt of effort, KAZ dumps his burden to the stage floor. NINA sets down the lamps.

All these years and just now you...? All these years and you never told me you're scared of it?

NINA

not something, it's not

KAZ

You're never *honest* with me.

NINA

Nina, it's not something you just *talk* about.

KAZ

But you do, you think about it?

NINA

(avoiding her question)

KAZ

This stinking ratty chair, those crooked lampshades. Where'd he get this crap?

NINA

Kaz! You think about it?

KAZ

Yeah, do. Since reading this play especially.

A moment as they express facially and with gestures: their relationship has problems.

NINA

Secrets, Kaz? Us?

KAZ

I know, babe, I know. But not gonna be a problem in the show.

NINA

I'm not thinking about the *show*. In six weeks there won't be a show. But there still will be you and me.

No response.

NINA

Right, Kaz? You and me? Still?

KAZ

Can't get into this now, not now. —More props to haul.

A few moments as she regards the space.

NINA

I never had to die on stage before.

KAZ

He has to find a bed before you can die.

They head off for more props.

KAZ

(while going off, to BEN)

One more trip should do it.

BEN enters pushing a heavy-duty cart on which are two kitchen chairs, a small kitchen table, a

nightstand, and a crate of records. Over all this are draped clothes on hangers. A garbage bag filled with more clothes rides on top. He adds his haul to the items downstage and exits.

KAZ

(off, to BEN)

You got the rest.

KAZ enters wrestling another chair. NINA follows with a desk too large for her. She throws her arms forward with the desk, then lets its legs hit the floor while her feet catch up. Repeat and repeat till she gets it downstage.

NINA

unh ...

unh ...

unh ...

KAZ

Goddamn junky heavy pieces of junk.

NINA

He wants everything ... [*a breath*] hunh—downstage center.

KAZ drags the chair downstage center and sits, staring into the auditorium he imagines will fill with people opening night. He engages that invisible audience with facial emotions. Meanwhile, Nina touches all the props. BEN enters with another load on his cart: a folding chair, a tall stool, a wardrobe dummy, a chest of drawers, a small garbage can filled with toiletries, framed theater posters, and a box containing stuff we can't yet see.

NINA

(explaining for BEN's benefit)

I like to feel the props before I start rehearsing.

KAZ

She gives them names.

Kaz? BEN

Yo. KAZ

Little help? BEN

Oh. Yeah, sure. KAZ

They unload the cart and add to the mixture of items downstage.

I'll call this lamp Kaz. NINA

You called the lamp in your last show Kaz. [To BEN] Cuz I'm so bright. KAZ

BEN looks over the gathering of props, mentally checking that all are here.

Good. Yeah, this is good. We're ready to rehearse. BEN

A bed? NINA

She has to die. KAZ

Have ta figure another way to get the bed here—guy's already driven off with the truck. BEN

Where'd you find this crap? KAZ

In my apartment. BEN

oh I

KAZ

Idiot.

NINA

BEN  
Surrounded her and me daily. Bringing it here turns each thing back into merely what it is. Lamp. Chair. Instead of *our* lamp, *our* chair.

KAZ  
I didn't mean "*crap*"....

BEN  
Home in our chair, staring at our pictures I was verging on suicidal.

Silence.

NINA  
It's a fantastic project, so excited!

KAZ  
And these great props. I really didn't mean.... This scratched-up desk with actual drawers that [*grunting effort to open*] stick for real? These old records not one in a hundred people has heard of? An authentic life, man, and the audience'll feel that.

BEN  
Detritus of a life together, and I'm the sole survivor whose beach they wash up on.

NINA  
wow

KAZ  
when you put it that way

NINA  
I mean just ... *wow*. Poetry.

KAZ  
Before you came in we were talking about that scene. You know where she. Where she. You know, where she.

NINA

It makes me cry.

KAZ

Freaks me out. What happens to us last of all: I kinda obsess about it.

NINA

He does, he obsesses about it.

KAZ

And that it's forfucking*EVER*? I'm like: whoa. Know what I mean?

BEN

Of course.

NINA

Thing is, he never told me he obsesses about it. Suddenly, we're in this play and we have secrets.

KAZ

Because it makes me, like.... No, it does, I like hyperventilate I get so wiggled out.

BEN

Then we agree it's no fun being dead.

He hands them cash.

BEN

Hundred each for each week of rehearsals. Wish I could give you equity rates but.

NINA

No, we love that you offered us the parts.

BEN

I've written a lot of plays but this'll be the first time I've acted, so feel free to help me. I'm open.

KAZ

Just be yourself.

NINA

Especially because in this play you play yourself.

BEN

And you two get all the tickets. It's not about the money for me.

KAZ

Course not. It's about making her life last.

NINA

We think it's so strong you dealing with it in public like this. I mean if Kaz ever ...

KAZ

Oh, babe.

NINA

I'd shrivel and shy away from everybody. Hurt too much to ever again talk.

BEN gives them a couple seconds to commiserate, then:

BEN

Got your scripts?

Nina rattles hers.

NINA

I told you how much I love this play.

A moment.

KAZ

(noticing he's being looked at)

Huh? Oh, yeah. *Yeah!* [*Rattles the script.*] Except....

BEN

You're probably wondering.

KAZ

Yeah, I am.

BEN

Those gaps.

KAZ

Like here in the first scene: Ben and Sabina in the kitchen the day they find out.  
And then no words: blank page.

BEN

I wrote that scene, deleted it, wrote it again, deleted it. I remember the words, sure: but *words*. They came out too ... *written*. Da-DA, da-DA, da-DA—you know? The emotions ramming into us were stronger than words. What we need to give the audience is raw. Not *sentences*.

KAZ

Okay.

NINA

I get that.

BEN

So.

So anyway.

So for those gaps in the script we'll improvise. There's one beginning the play and one ending it. In those spaces, our own gestures, hopes, pain. Plus words, sure, but not, you know ... sentences. Pull from your experiences, lend your life to your characters. You've heard of the musical term "cadenza?"

NINA

I think maybe....

KAZ

Mmmm....

BEN

It's where the composer lets the soloist, a violinist say, do her own virtuoso thing for a few minutes. Riffing off what she feels based on what the composer has scored on either side of that moment.

NINA

Love it.

BEN

Every performance will be unique, like our lives.

KAZ

Kinda scary though. Opening the play, sure, no problem. But closing the play with the words not scripted?—*whoa*.

BEN

We need that freedom.

NINA

Like that first scene, the kitchen....

BEN

A couple minutes of improvisation based on how we're feeling it that day. Forces us to be attuned to one another. Then I say a phrase that breaks the spell—in the first scene the phrase is, "It's him"—and we're back on script.

NINA

Remember, Kaz: "Yes, and."

KAZ

Nina and me took an improv class.

BEN

Despite the second blank page at the end of the play that freaks Kaz out, we know where we're headed. The story has an ending.

NINA

We were talking about that just now.

KAZ

Ending scares us.

BEN

Me too. That's why this play.

Awkward pause.

NINA

Gotta say, I love that you trust us to improvise those moments. Great opportunity for an actor.

BEN

And you?

KAZ

Hm-what?

BEN  
What do you think of those empty places? Haven't said.

KAZ  
I

BEN  
If you want.

KAZ  
cuz I

BEN  
Whatever you want to say.

KAZ  
I don't like that she has to die.

BEN  
Neither do I.

KAZ  
You couldn't, I mean, change that?

BEN  
It's why I hired you two. It's the closest I'll get to a different ending.

KAZ  
But she still dies?

BEN  
Of course.

KAZ  
Couldn't make it happy? It's what the audience'll want.

BEN  
It's my life. It's what happened.

KAZ  
But they don't know that.

NINA jumps them out of the awkwardness.

I love this space!

NINA

Ever done a show here?

BEN

Nina has.

KAZ

I have.

NINA

Two years ago. She was fantastic. She's always fantastic.

KAZ

It's the last show I've done. Haven't worked in a while....

NINA

Two of my plays have gone up here. Rehearsals, opening night. My best moments. So grateful life is here now.

BEN

Let's do this!

NINA

Yeah!

KAZ

He grabs a chair.

Why are you...?

BEN

We need chairs, don't we?

KAZ

Leave them. We start bare, then build. Until the words construct our surroundings, we sit on the floor.

BEN

They sit on the floor, stare down at scripts.  
KAZ fidgets. BEN notices.

Trust the process.	BEN
(to NINA)	KAZ
This is weird.	
Shush.	NINA
You okay?	BEN
Good, I'm good.	KAZ
Time to get serious.	BEN
Let's go.	KAZ
	BEN
Life is My Disease, by Ben Montgomery. Scene one.	

**Week 1, scene 2: Our kitchen**

BEN is on a ladder fiddling with lights. He climbs down, jumps off the stage and runs up to the booth. In a few seconds we see the lighting effects he's playing with. Lights up, down, different color effects, etc. At one point we hear a metal door squeal open and BEN darkens the stage. Then he brings up a spot and NINA is revealed in a winter coat.

NINA

How'd you know?

BEN

(off, over a house mic)

Heard you coming in. That raspy alley door.

NINA

Freezing.

A few moments of silence. She remains captured in the spotlight.

NINA

Do you mind?

BEN

(off, using mic)

Tell me something true about yourself.

NINA

Like what?

BEN

(off, using mic)

Go deep.

NINA

I'm cold and don't like that spotlight blinding me.

BEN kills the spot and brings up general lights. He appears and trots back to the stage.

BEN

Don't leave your coat there. Somewhere off. Can't be in my house.

She disappears briefly to toss the coat off stage.  
When she returns, BEN has taken a coat from  
the garbage bag of clothes downstage.

BEN

This is yours. Wear it around town during the run. Try it on. It'll give you the smell  
and sense of her.

NINA

It was hers?... I don't feel good about this.

BEN

Doing me a favor.... Fits! Keep it. Each day when you get here and take it off,  
leave it laying around our living room.

NINA

Where's the living room?

BEN

Right across the hall from the kitchen, where we'll be rehearsing tonight....  
Kitchen'll go here so ... four paces and ... here's the entrance to our living room.

She goes into the "living room." There's  
nowhere to hang the coat.

NINA

Can I bring that wardrobe stand in here?

BEN

Course not! That's the bedroom, which we bring up out of the words on the page  
last of all. The climax, the denouement, the end.

NINA

Kaz and I talk a lot about that scene.

BEN

Of course you do: life at its cruelest. —Drop the coat anywhere.

She does.

BEN

Where *is* Kaz?

NINA

I don't know. He's. I don't know. Truthfully? We're not. Not anymore. At least I don't think....

BEN

But in auditions he said you're getting married. [*Beat.*] You didn't break up cuz of my show?!

NINA

Well, we're not together anymore. At least we weren't last night. We've never been in a show together and this play is trouble for us. As a couple. Great for our careers, but bad for us as us. Maybe we compare who we are to the two lovers we play in the show.

[*Beat, reset*] So I don't know where he is, I just know he'll be here. He's very professional when he has to be. He won't screw up this chance you've given us. I mean, because the play's by you we know there will be reviews, interviews, people packing the seats, and then all the conversation about this experiment in autobiography....

BEN

Autotheatricality.

NINA

That. We're thrilled to be part of it.

BEN

Let's build our kitchen! Grab other side of this kitchen table and ... we walk it stage left, more to the left, your left.... Then the chairs and ... mine goes here and ... yours there.... Not so far away. Closer. We're married, remember? Good. I'll spike these.

NINA

While you're.... I need to warm up the voice.

While he lays tape to mark spots for the table and chairs, she does her vocal warm up.

NINA

dee dee dee [*lower:*] dee dee dee [*higher:*] dee dee dee [*hard G:*] gee gee gee [*lower:*] gee gee gee [*higher:*] gee gee gee [*exaggerated:*] must expLOde my pLOsives.... [*Distinctly:*] The pretty kitty cat sat back while the rat with a hat in the flat took a look at the book but the hatted fat rat could not read a word so the pretty kitty cat slipped off to sleep so sorry and sad....

BEN watches.

NINA

Feel so. With you watching.

BEN

It's okay.

Long pause: Nina looks away.

NINA

sorry, it's

BEN

Remember, when the play starts we've been married fifteen years. For this play to make sense we need to cram fifteen years into three weeks of rehearsal so that by the time we open we're where we need to be as a couple.

He kisses her.

BEN

To speed up the getting-to-know-you process.

NINA

I

BEN

You cool with it?

NINA

No. I mean yes. It's just.

BEN

Finish your warm up while I get this ladder off the stage and then a couple things I gotta do in the booth. Let me know when you're ready.

NINA

I mean, I'm not *certain* Kaz and I have broken up.

BEN

I'm not after you, I'm after my wife.

He disappears with the ladder. She continues her vocal exercises.

NINA

dee dee dee [*lower*] dee dee dee [*higher*] dee dee dee— No it's good, I'm good! Ready to rehearse that first scene!

He returns from storing the ladder.

BEN

Sure?

NINA

Didn't mean to slow us down.

BEN

It's okay. —Ready? Scene one. Lights up with her and me coming home the morning after we got the, after we came back from the.

Pause.

NINA

Always let me know if I'm playing her the way you want.

BEN

You're perfect. I told you that. —So, welcome to our breakfast nook. It's September, which means the afternoon light arrows in low through the window there. [*Points.*] The kitchen counter's behind you, fridge and stove over there. We'll imagine those.

NINA

Is everything from your apartment here?

BEN

Except the bed. Gotta figure a way to bring that. Maybe Kaz and me. Weird hustling it through the streets but so what, I'm just five blocks. Do you think he'd?

NINA

I guess he can carry half a bed.

BEN

Then we'll have everything we need. —So the play starts in darkness.... We'll imagine that until I get a friend to work the booth. Then: lights up—imagine it—and you and me entering our apartment. You first.

NINA

I open the door—where?

BEN

Think of it as here. But no actual doors, no walls. I want the set to lack circumference. Lets us breathe. That’s been a problem for me this past year. Right here in the chest: a constriction that makes me think about breathing which makes me stop breathing.

Which now comes true.

NINA

You okay?

BEN

Need a sec.... Yeah, good. Let’s do this.

NINA

So we pretend the door is here.... And I walk in first.

BEN

With a look on your face that alerts the audience. And I’m right behind. “Anything you need, Sabina. Only have to say.”

NINA quickly looks at the script, sees nothing.

NINA

So we do? Right away we improvise the opening?

BEN

Yes, and ... “kiss me.”

NINA

You want us to....

BEN

As a for instance.

Kiss.

BEN

Until I say “It’s him” we’re off script, alone, saying and doing whatever seems right. Kissing you seemed right just then. [*Back in character*] “We should. We should talk. About, I think, him.”

No response from NINA. In character, she lets the pause drag on. BEN is animated by the awkwardness of the silence.

BEN

“Food! Let me get you something from the fridge.”

He shapes where the fridge is.

NINA

“I don’t want to talk, and I don’t think I’ll want to eat ever again.” —That didn’t feel right. Too grammatical maybe? Which makes it too tame? Let me take that again. More, you know, in the face. Less articulate, more facial. Give me a line.

BEN

“Want something to eat?”

NINA

“Are you *serious!* Food!? You think what I want is food?!”

BEN

(shocked by her sudden vehemence)

That’s not the right tone—

NINA

(continuing playing the role)

“I’m. What? Stunned is what. *No*, Ben, I don’t want any fucking thing to eat. I want to know *how* this, *why* this, why the *fuck* this is happening!”

BEN

Good, yeah, but no.

NINA

It felt right.

BEN

She never bothered questioning what happened to her.

NINA

But I'm not her. Not exactly. Give me freedom to build a character.

BEN

You said to let you know if you're playing her right.

NINA

I take that back. Let her go. Let me be her now.

BEN

Still has to accurately reflect who she was, and anger wasn't it. She was never angry at the world for being whatever the world is.

NINA

Let me find it.

BEN

She didn't waste time raging about the unfairness.

NINA

So she's immediately all calm and accepting.

BEN

Right away. Door opens on our apartment and right away.

NINA

Bullshit.

BEN

I'm telling ya.

NINA

What you're remembering—calm, philosophical—doesn't feel credible. She's angry. The audience will connect with that.

BEN

[It's] Not how she was.

NINA

Get behind me.... Behind me! We're going into our apartment. Ready? Here we go. I enter, then you come in behind and: your line—whatever you want to say to get us started.

BEN

“Turn around, look at me. We need to talk—”

NINA

(overlapping)

“No no no!”

BEN

(continuing)

“about *him*.”

NINA

“Leave me alone!”

BEN

You’re doing it wrong—

NINA

“Shut up!”

BEN

Let’s stop a second, figure out what we need to accomplish this opening scene.

NINA

“I said: shut up.”

BEN

Is this you? Or her? Are you speaking to the then me or the now me?

NINA

“Both! Now-Ben, then-Ben, you don’t own my feelings and I’m fucking angry and you can shove your controlling bullshit up your ass!”

BEN

(back in character)

“You have no right to yell at me, Sabina! I’m the one who’s angry! You break my heart and now and NOW I gotta take care of you?! knowing now that you were going to leave me if you hadn’t got sick?!”

The squeak and rasp of the door to the alley.

KAZ

(off)

The question before us is where's the clitoris [*to rhyme*]! You ever write musicals?! I think I'd like to be in a musical!

KAZ enters taking off his winter coat and tossing it on top of the other coat.

BEN

Not there—

KAZ

I'm a terrible singer but I think I could do one of those kinda-singing kinda-not-singing parts. It's the swagger and the boom. Convince them without being able to carry a tune.

BEN

Don't leave your coat there. Jesus! This is my house!

KAZ

But there's one here already....

BEN

Get your coat out of my house!

KAZ starts to take both coats off stage.

BEN

Leave hers!

KAZ

What's your deal, dude?

NINA

That's my coat.

KAZ

This? Is your coat?

NINA

And it belongs in the apartment.

KAZ

What apartment? It's just a floor.

BEN

Room by room. We start here in the kitchen with that first day. And then living room, bathroom, bedroom.

KAZ exits with his coat.

BEN

(to NINA)

Just not so angry.

NINA

(not angry, just matter-of-fact cursing)

Fuck you, Ben. And that's not your wife talking this time. You hired me to play her and I think it went well, it felt right.

KAZ returns.

KAZ

You two seem.... What's going on?

NINA

We're in the kitchen. That first scene where we come home knowing. And I want to come in raging. "The fuck's happening?! Why me!"

KAZ

I like it.

NINA

It works, doesn't it?

KAZ

Sure it does.

NINA

"But my husband is terrified of my feelings and won't let me be fully *alive*."

KAZ

Improv, dude. You're supposed to let us out of the cage so we can be virtuosos.

NINA

“You’re healthy and have decades left to cry and laugh and fuck other women! And I hate it, and I hate you!”

KAZ

Wow, dude, what are you gonna do with that?

BEN

Sabina wasn’t angry. You might not believe it, but she never questioned what was happening. Or why. She accepted that she had to die.

NINA

I told him that’s bullshit.

KAZ

Sure is.

BEN

You might want to believe the guy who was there.

KAZ

Because she confessed to you about Gabe just, what?, a few days after you two found out about the

NINA

my illness, and that’s where, that’s when I’m

KAZ

she’s gotta be like

NINA

because it’s all packed in there, the fear, the loss, the pain she brought you, the confusion

KAZ

So, yeah, rage. Seems about right to me.

NINA

Let me create my own Sabina. Freedom, you said. No walls, you said.

KAZ

We’ll take care of our roles, you worry about learning to play yourself better. That first read through you seemed to have trouble being Ben.

BEN

It's my chest. I told her about it. I have trouble breathing sometimes thinking about breathing. Oh, shit....

He needs to gather his breath back.

KAZ

We can wait.

BEN

I'm okay.

NINA

(to KAZ)

Are you here now?

KAZ

I'm here, babe.

NINA

I mean in the apartment. [*To BEN*] You want him here now? Because if he's in the apartment, then the improv is over. You say, "It's him," he comes in, and we're back on script.

BEN

(to KAZ)

We're not ready for you. I still have something to say to Sabina. Stay on the other side of the door.

KAZ

What door?

KAZ, confused, looks for a spot outside "the door" while BEN crowds NINA aggressively.

BEN

"Remember that day? Remember coming home and broken words and then no words and then him and then finally alone again and sitting in silence exhausted for hours and then bed, each alone? Remember what I told you when later I stood over the bed in the dark, remember how I startled you?"

NINA

Ummm no, because I'm not her and you didn't put it in the script and so I can't remember.

He kisses her roughly.

BEN

“Before goodbye—”

KAZ

Suddenly I know what I don't like about this play: you kissing her all the time.

NINA

Rehearsal, Kaz. It's okay.

BEN

You're not here yet!

Obediently KAZ backs up to find his spot.

KAZ

Am I sufficiently outside the fake door for ya?

BEN

(ignoring KAZ, who after all can't be seen)

“That's goodbye to our marriage, our last kiss. But if it's over why do I feel I have to spend months watching someone who doesn't love me die?”

NINA

*There's* the anger I sensed you were hiding. Let it out.

BEN

“It's him!”

KAZ doesn't move.

BEN

You coming in?

KAZ

Do I, what?, knock and just walk on?

BEN

Don't worry about knocking. Remember: no door.

“Knock knock.”

KAZ

No—*said*—don’t worry about knocking.

BEN

I’m not knocking.

KAZ

*OR* pretending to knock while saying “knock knock.” Just enter.

BEN

Dude. How you gonna know to say “It’s him” if I don’t knock.

KAZ

I have an excellent sense of smell.

BEN

Don’t take it out on me. I’m just a guy you hired.

KAZ

You entering?

BEN

Entering, I’m entering. —Hi.

KAZ

But of course with much more gravitas. My wife and I are clearly upset.

BEN

Sure.

KAZ

Again.

BEN

So I ...

KAZ

He circles around the imaginary door and enters again.

enter again—gravely this time—and: “I admire the guts it takes to let me come over. That you allow me to continue to be in her life is courageous, dude.”

BEN

Gabe didn't call me dude. And get your hands out of your pockets. "You and I don't like each other, but I have to be decent, do what's best for her. She's in the kitchen."

NINA

"Gabe?"

KAZ

"Sabina, I can't believe this."

NINA

"Give me a hug. Don't be scared. I won't break. I don't feel different. Not even tired, not physically. It's my brain. It's overloaded with memories and I just want to sit here forever."

KAZ

"Can I kiss her? —Can I kiss you?"

He does. It lasts.

NINA

"I love you."

KAZ

Is Nina saying that to Kaz, or that guy's wife to her lover?

NINA

"Me."

KAZ

Which is...?

Hugging, kissing, laughing, NINA and KAZ, their identities scrambled, find the freedom to be newly delighted with one another. Whether it's inside or outside the play, they don't know, nor do they know in which world the other person exists at that moment. BEN and his jealousy watch.

NINA

love this

isn't it? KAZ

suddenly we're so NINA

I know KAZ

free NINA

whoever we want KAZ

anyone, everyone NINA

(to BEN, for laughs)  
Where's the bedroom in this place? KAZ

BEN  
Good time for a break, *Nina, Kaz*. Let's take ten.

He abruptly walks off stage. Use of their real names brings NINA and KAZ out of a dream.

Thank you ten! NINA

Now stiff and discomfited in one another's presence, NINA breaks away and sits alone in the living room.

Are you leaving me? NINA

I don't know what I'm doing. KAZ

Pause. Nothing to be said. KAZ carefully uses the non-existent doorway to go out and off stage. Several moments pass. KAZ reappears with a can of Red Bull in hand. He watches NINA from a distance, hesitates to approach, then again disappears.

**Week 1, scene 3: Our bed**

NINA

dee dee dee

KAZ shuffles in magically suspending a bed behind him. NINA's vocal warm up continues simultaneous with the others' dialogue.

NINA

dee dee dee

KAZ

Fuckin crazy.

[*lower:*] dee dee dee

BEN appears holding the back.

[*higher:*] dee dee dee

BEN

Not yet, don't—

[*hard G:*] gee gee gee

KAZ lets his end hit the floor.

[*lower:*] gee gee gee

KAZ

[*higher:*] gee gee gee.

No way that's five blocks, dude.

Must expLOde my pLOsives.

BEN

It doesn't go here, I want it upstage center.

The pretty kitty cat sat back

KAZ

while the rat with a hat in the flat

With people! [*To NINA*] We had to swerve around people on the sidewalk!

took a look at the book

BEN

but the hatted fat rat

Will ya? [*lift your end*]

could not read a word

KAZ

so the pretty kitty cat

Who were staring at us! An unmade bed waiting for the walk signal!

slipped off to sleep so sorry and sad.

BEN

Lift your end, let's get this in place.

Done!

KAZ

Gotta get my coat off first. Sweating like a.

KAZ shrugs off his coat.

KAZ

(throwing his coat down)

Had to have been nine, ten blocks.

BEN

Not in my house: your coat wouldn't be here.

KAZ

Where then?

BEN

Somewhere off.

He disappears to toss his coat off stage. BEN is looking at NINA.

BEN

Go ahead with your warmups.

NINA

No, I'm done.

A pause, uncomfortable for her, oblivious to him.

NINA

So your apartment is totally empty?

BEN

Just me and maybe a ghost.

Longer pause. KAZ returns with a can of Red Bull.

KAZ

Why you looking at her like that?

BEN

I'm not. What?

KAZ

He bothers you, just tell me. Ten blocks at least! And I don't know how many lights!

BEN

Ready?

KAZ

Fuckin embarrassing humping a bed on a green light across the busiest street in the city.

BEN

Lift!

KAZ

Gonna pull a muscle in this play.

BEN

Left, your left and ... little further and ... good, set it down. Now angled a little and.... [*To NINA*] There's our bed.

He lies down.

BEN

Try it out.

She lies next to him.

KAZ

Again: Not sure I like this aspect of the play.

BEN

We're married.

His arm around her.

NINA

Are we going to rake it so the audience can see me in that final scene?

BEN

I never like that look on stage. Unnatural.

KAZ

Dude, our whole life in theater is unnatural.

BEN

We'll prop you on pillows. That way the audience'll be able to see you.

KAZ regards the two in the bed.

KAZ

But, I mean....

BEN

Yes?

KAZ

Should you be in the bed? Cuz according to the script the last few months you're sleeping in one of the chairs.

They get out of the bed, NINA first.

BEN

Picking up where we left off yesterday, it's time we created the living room. Now, Kaz, now we get the chairs.

KAZ and BEN each drag a chair from the pile of props.

NINA

I can get the lamp.

BEN

One chair here and ... the other there. Slightly angled to each other and ... lamp between and ... desk here. Kaz?

KAZ

Jeez.

KAZ goes for the desk. NINA has brought one lamp to the "living room" but ...

NINA

Even though they're identical, it might make a difference to you which lamp goes in this room.

BEN

It does. Let me see.... Yeah, no, this one has the nicked edge and so it's always been in the bedroom.

While she's switching lamps, KAZ is huffing with the desk.

KAZ

Desk where?

BEN

To the right of that chair.

KAZ drops the desk where BEN indicates.

BEN

And photos.

He removes carefully wrapped framed photographs from the box and places them on the desk and lamp tables.

BEN

And my posters. No walls so....

He places posters anywhere he can prop them.

BEN

Pretty much our living room. The TV I gave to the single mom first floor of my building—incorporating my life into other lives. —Let me spike these.

NINA and KAZ sit as BEN works around them taping the placement of the living room.

KAZ

Should I come over tonight?

NINA

Good idea, you think?

KAZ

Not if you're angry with me....

NINA

You're so.... [*To BEN*] We ready to start?

BEN

Almost. Clothes. Her clothes were everywhere. She was generous with her presence.

He pulls clothes from the garbage bag and tosses them around the living room.

BEN

That'll do. Now: scene two. Sabina is in this chair....

NINA moves to the chair he indicates, which causes KAZ to stand.

BEN

I'm here.... [To KAZ] And you've just come in and are standing by the door. Looking stupid.

KAZ

Because there's no door.

NINA

At this point? both of you in the room?—I feel I should let loose with the anger. I mean I'm still. At this point I'm still. I've got strength still, but with you two hanging around every second, I'm like....

She mimes how trapped she feels.

KAZ

I hear ya.

NINA

I mean it's overwhelming, and you two acting all civil even though you hate each other. I can't take it: my rage erupts. What do you think?

BEN

Anger wasn't really her.

KAZ

Let her do what she wants.

NINA

Kaz? You'll go along with me?

BEN

Guys.

KAZ

Sure, babe. Try it.

NINA

“Thing is, most of all?!—not sad, not angry, *jealous!* That’s what I am! You two breathing in this heartbreaking blue world without me. And you’ll waste it. Eating and and ... pissing into urinals and and ... scratching yourselves and standing in breezes and claiming how much you miss me!”

BEN

Guys.

KAZ

I love that you’re playing her that way. Maybe even take it up a little. Little more intense. Blow us fuckers over with that rage.

BEN

Guys.

NINA

This? [*Takes a moment to gather herself*] “And most of all I’m *jealous!* You two idiots get to *live?! Why not me?! What did I do?! I love life as much as you two!*”

BEN

Guys, listen, I hate ta—

NINA

(to KAZ)

Which do you think?

KAZ

Maybe that. The second one. You don’t need the urinals and breezes. I get what you were doing, but it was just confusing. And the emphasis on how unfair it all is was strong. That last line again....

NINA

(to experiment she plays it differently, perhaps this time with exhaustion overwhelming the rage)

“I love life just as much as you two.”

KAZ

“I hear ya, Sabina, this world is fucked and it’s terrible and it’s fucked and I’d take your place if I could.”

BEN

Stop, both of you just stop.

KAZ

Dude, where's your head at? You keep dropping into now-Ben. We need you in the moment: the apartment, that first day I came over.

BEN

Thing is, you're not supposed to be improvising here.

KAZ

.... [*An "uh-oh" facial expression.*]

NINA

Oh ... right.

BEN gets a wine bottle and glasses from the box.

BEN

We're on script the whole scene. Starts with me saying: "Want wine? You always wanted wine when you came over. Got to act normal, right?"

NINA and KAZ have to glance at their scripts, which lay open somewhere on the set.

KAZ

"Sure, normal. I'll take a glass."

NINA

"Not for me."

KAZ

"If she's not, then me neither."

BEN

"Just me then." Ben pours wine.... [*he speaks this*]. "Am I the only one willing to act normal?"

KAZ

(can't help but improvise)

If being an ass is normal for you.

BEN

(reaching his limit with KAZ)

Good line. No, that was good. Not in the script, but why not? Do what you fucking want in my play ...

KAZ

Back off.

BEN

(in KAZ's face)

*dude!*

KAZ

I swear.

BEN

Just read the lines! What is your problem?!

KAZ

This play is my problem!

BEN

Oh yeah!

KAZ

Yeah!

NINA

This is not impressing me.

Tempted to punch BEN, KAZ forces himself to twist away and go to the bed to cool off. He sits on the bed.

BEN

Slink off!

KAZ

I'm not the guy stole your wife! Stop taking it out on me!

NINA

Let's get back on script. It's still your line after "act normal." A long pause and then:

BEN

“We have to work out sleeping arrangements.”

NINA

Kaz, your line....

KAZ is absorbed in smoothing his hand over the bed, and seems moved.

KAZ

This really the same bed she died in?

BEN

I told you that.

KAZ

I’ve never seen anyone *die* before. [To NINA] Have you?

NINA

Not yet.

KAZ

Was your wife in a coma? I hear that most people who die in bed go into a coma first.

BEN

At the end she was breathing but not responding. I guess a coma.

KAZ

I wonder if people in comas hear what’s going on around them. I wonder if they know what we’re saying.

BEN

(to NINA)

Where’s he going with this?

NINA

That obsession he never told me about till we started your play.

KAZ

Dying freaks me out, it does.

BEN

How do you know? You haven’t done it yet.

KAZ

Last movie we went to see had this very realistic death scene, remember?

NINA

Sort of.

KAZ

Guy in a hospital bed and a closeup on his frantic fear as his last seconds grew enormous like a balloon about to pop.

NINA

*That's* why you shot out to the lobby.

BEN

Popcorn helps?

KAZ

I do, though, I think it's important to know if people in a coma and near death can hear us.

BEN

*Why?*

KAZ

So we know ahead of time what to expect and can work out signals.

BEN

Now you're freaking us all out.

KAZ

I know I know, I'm an idiot, I am.

This admission releases KAZ from his gloom and he manifests the instantaneous transformation manic depressives and actors are capable of.

KAZ

(big crazed grin)

But we all die, who cares?!

He bounces on the bed.

KAZ

Sabina, come join me!

NINA

Oh, Gabe, I thought you'd never ask!

NINA races to the bed and jumps in.

NINA

Come on, dear husband! I can handle both of you!

BEN stays in the living room.

NINA

Don't be sad! We're only dying!

KAZ

Sorry, dude, didn't mean to get all. But when you jumped in my grill and were like, "I'm gonna break your face," I wasn't sure you were acting. But if that's how you're gonna play it, I'll go with it, but you gotta warn me.

BEN

I told you, there's no improvising in this scene.

NINA

The audience would love a good fight.

BEN

You two seem to be in love again.

NINA

Are we?

KAZ

Don't know. Are we?

NINA

Depends on if we're Kaz and Nina or Gabe and Sabina.

KAZ

Or Nina and Gabe.

NINA

Or Kaz and Sabina. For instance, Sabina would grab your hand and put it there....

KAZ

The question before us....

BEN

All right, you two, out of bed. Let's get through the whole play at least once today.

They join BEN in the living room.

NINA

It's intimidating being your wife with you watching. If you want Sabina to be calm and accepting and rational the way you say, then, sure, I can play that. But I think it's best if I try to break free of your memory of her so she can live. You know?

BEN

It's okay. Play her how you think best. I just need this show to get me back to that final scene. There's something I wasn't able to say to her the first time.

**inter-scene transition**

The actors complete the set, filling in the bathroom and bedroom during the transition to the next scene. This is true improv, as the actors coordinate their actions in low voices while arranging the folding chair, stool, and trash can for the bathroom, and the wardrobe dummy, chest of drawers, and small nightstand to go with the bed for the bedroom. NINA lays the clothes on hangers over a corner of the bed, and BEN stores the clothes remaining in the garbage bag in the drawers, with some items tossed around randomly. All props brought in during the first scene are in place. NINA and KAZ exit while BEN removes the remaining framed photographs from the box downstage and places these around the bedroom. The box is now empty and he carts it off stage.

**Week 2, scene 1: Spotlight**

While KAZ lounges in one of the living room chairs, BEN sets up a spotlight at floor height downstage center and angled to face KAZ. If possible, BEN should be off the stage.

I told you what I think: It's stupid.	KAZ
Cuz you're scared.	BEN
Nope.	KAZ
Cuz you're afraid it works.	BEN
Cuz I don't wanna look stupid.	KAZ
You'll thank me opening night when you're digging deep for a true emotion to show the audience.	BEN
How this for true emotion?	KAZ
	The finger, playfully. NINA arrives.
You really like that coat.	KAZ
It's a coat, it's winter, it's need based.	NINA
Better not toss it in his house. He'll go ape shit.	KAZ
But it belongs here. It's hers.	NINA
Yeah, throw the coat anywhere: living room, kitchen. She wasn't tidy.	BEN

BEN jumps on stage to hand NINA and KAZ money.

BEN

Week two: hundred each.

KAZ

Another week of Top Ramen. Life continues.

BEN

I'm happy with where are. Most of the blocking's in, and we're basically off script.

KAZ

Why you even needed a script in the first place....

BEN

This play isn't life verbatim, isn't dictation from God. I did my best remembering what we said, but of course I changed things, made some of it up.

NINA

What's with the spot?

BEN

As I was telling Kaz, this is when I like to pause rehearsal to engage in self-inspection. Before every show it's beneficial to explore our individual fears. Kay?

NINA

Kay.

BEN trots to the booth to bring down the lights on stage.

NINA

What did I just "kay" too?

KAZ

He says it pulls gut-wrenching truths out of actors so we bring that painful rawness to the show. I'm like: ookay.

BEN trots back down the aisle and gets behind the spotlight.

BEN

This exercise doesn't work if you aren't nakedly honest. A person's first impulse is to say something blah and acceptable. And I warn you I won't allow you to simply state the fear we all have in common. Kay?

KAZ

Kay.

NINA

Ummm.

BEN

Kaz, you go first so she feels better about it. Stay there in the chair. Nina, you come down here with me on this side of the light.

BEN switches on the spotlight, whose beam blinds KAZ.

KAZ

Dude.

BEN

This exercise is where you admit your greatest fear. You'll be surprised at the difference it makes for the rest of rehearsals.

NINA

You should have told us this ahead of time so we could think about it.

BEN

Nope. You know what your fear is, it's a matter of being honest.

KAZ

You guys mind if we start? That light's blinding me.

BEN

(formulaic)

Kaz: tell us what you fear most of all.

KAZ

Peas.

BEN

Peas.

KAZ

Yep, peas.

NINA

Baby, do this right.

KAZ

He already said people's first answer in the spotlight is never honest. They're acting. I'm not wasting something good on an answer he won't believe. Peas.

BEN

All right, peas. Let's dig deeper. What is it about peas that terrifies you?

KAZ

They like intentionally wanna get away from you? Like you're not a nice person with a fork? —It's getting hot up here.

BEN

Squirm.

KAZ

Well, okay, not peas. I guess the first thing came to mind was being on fire. But because it *was* the first thing, I thought I wasn't being honest with myself because you said the first thing is never honest. So, let me think.... Something good....

BEN

You're on stage all alone. You command your space and your desire and your fears. Don't think about us out here in the audience. Let the blinding light protect you.

KAZ

Nina with another man.

BEN

Pretty standard fear.

KAZ

Mine's more nuanced than most.

BEN

Go on.

KAZ

That, like, she'll make me have sex with her and another man, like I'm behind and he's in her mouth and maybe I'm okay with that, but the fact that she's getting off on it is what I can't handle.

NINA

I told you that Kaz and I are taking a time out, right?

BEN

Have you? —Has she asked for a threesome?

KAZ

But I'm afraid she going to, and that it's what she wants most of all but never really knew that until you made me bring my fear to the surface, and now she can't help but think about the idea and crave it.

BEN

Don't think of a white elephant.

KAZ

Exactly. Thanks a lot, dude! Am I done? Feeling kinda stupid up here now.

BEN

I think we got the truth from you. Nina's turn.

NINA

You go next.

BEN

I'm not going up there.

NINA

You're an actor too. This is for actors.

BEN

The thing I feared most already happened, so it's a pointless exercise for me.

NINA

Doesn't seem fair.

NINA switches places with KAZ.

BEN

Don't fight the light trying to look at us. With your sight obliterated by the light, you're all alone up there. You're safe. You can reveal yourself.

NINA

This is stupid.

KAZ

That's what I said.

BEN

(formulaic)

Nina: tell us what you fear most of all.

NINA

How does this help?

BEN

I need to find out if my actors are faking it.

KAZ

We're actors, dude. Of course we're faking it.

BEN

Greatest fear, Nina.

NINA

Hmmm.... Wait, what is it we're we not allowed to say?

BEN

That which we all fear the most but have become so used to as an absurd fact that we rarely ever think about it though we should every minute of every day.

NINA

Right....

Pause.

NINA

No, sorry, I still don't get it. Dense I guess. What is it we all fear?

KAZ

Death. I wouldn't have got it either if he hadn't told me while we were waiting for you.

BEN

Not death in general. We really don't give a shit when someone down the street dies—hey, death's natural, right?—but your own death. That's not natural.

KAZ

Yeah, that's freaky.

NINA

I don't know why you never told me you obsess about it.

KAZ  
Good would it do?

BEN  
This is about you, Nina.

NINA  
Hmmm.... Can we say an illness that *leads* to death? Like, couldn't I say meningitis is what I'm most afraid of rather than death. —Kaz, remember we knew that girl in school who died of it? I think it was meningitis. It caused damage to her brain and then she went into a coma and was like that for months and then she died? [To BEN] Is meningitis acceptable?

KAZ  
O jeez, coma.

BEN  
No death, no illness.

NINA  
This is hard. My greatest fear....

KAZ  
You can't steal mine and simply reverse it to a threesome with another woman.

NINA  
I'm not sure I'd be opposed to that.

KAZ  
You wouldn't?

NINA  
My greatest fear....

BEN  
Consider it carefully. Go deep.

KAZ  
First thing you say is always a lie, so waste one.

NINA  
Then I'll say Kaz with another woman.

*That's* your throwaway? KAZ

I'm not saying I wouldn't be hurt, but I don't fear it. NINA

I don't know how to interpret that. KAZ

It's time to reveal. BEN

I understand. NINA

Acting out that false fear gave your subconscious time to locate your true fear. Now just turn that little switch inside that lets you bravely reveal it. BEN

I get that. NINA

Let the spotlight hide you. For all you know we're not even here. BEN

Okay. NINA

We're just voices in your head. Greatest fear. Honest and from the heart. Go. BEN

[*Beat.*] This play opens in two weeks. NINA

**Week 2, scene 2: Our bathroom**

NINA

Do we really need a bathroom?

BEN

It completes our apartment.

NINA

These aren't even moderately plausible props.

KAZ

Hey, I'm not needed, right?

BEN

Before we open I'll haul in my toilet and sink. Kenny, the lighting guy's showing me how to do that without flooding my apartment.

NINA

You trust a lighting guy to know plumbing?

The lights wink in reply.

NINA

Even so, you can't live long in a place with no toilet.

BEN

Then I'll live here.

KAZ

Hey, am I...?

BEN

For now the folding chair is the toilet, the stool the sink, and this plastic trash can holds everything in our medicine cabinet: toothpaste, deodorant, whatever this is, etcetera.

KAZ

I'm not in this scene, so can I take off?

BEN

Sure, take off.

KAZ

Kay then, I'm outa here. Mañana.

See you after rehearsal?  
NINA

Well I.  
KAZ

We said we'd go somewhere, talk.  
NINA

I.  
KAZ

Go on, I don't care.  
NINA

It's not a woman. Well, it is a woman, but it's not anything. Well, it is something, but not really. We're not lovers anyway.  
KAZ

Just go.  
NINA

We'll talk tomorrow, I promise.  
KAZ

He goes.

Is this gonna be a problem?  
BEN

No.  
NINA

Do you want to talk about it?  
BEN

No.  
NINA

The issues between you two aren't gonna ruin my show?  
BEN

No.  
NINA

BEN

Then let's do the scene.

NINA

It's just that he's being *too* honest now. I wish he'd lie about being with other women and I'd catch him in the lie and could yell at him and break it off and be okay with it, but he says we aren't an *official* couple yet and he knows I can't argue that because we sleep together but never have, like, *lived* together—my decision—but that's because I *want* to live together but only if we're, like, actually a *couple* couple, which the marriage supposedly was about, but we aren't, not really, and so he makes me admit that, and I *hate* admitting that because then he goes off all smiling and giggling with with some other woman who's [*air quotes*] not a woman—and this bathroom we're standing in is the most stupid meager meaningless place I've ever cried in.

BEN

If you need to talk about it—

NINA

No!

Pause as he lets her recover.

NINA

I'm all right. They're not tears. Well, they are tears but. —Now I'm hiding behind Kaz logic.

BEN

If you need a break....

NINA

Nope. I'm good.

BEN

If you're sure.

NINA

So he's terrified of dying! Like he's special! I think it's marriage he's scared of cuz that's life-consuming. Total passion, then kids, then old, then die. It's safer being an actor all your life in other people's plays.

BEN

We can pick this up tomorrow.

NINA  
No. I'm good.

BEN  
Remember, no words this scene, just business.

NINA  
Right.

BEN  
Our first night together since the wild weekend of the double surprise: your lover  
and your illness.

NINA  
Got it.

BEN  
Well, the lover wasn't a surprise to you.

NINA  
No.

BEN  
Grunts and groans acceptable, but no words. And the end comes when you go into  
the bedroom. Alone. Ready?

Awkward don't-want-to-touch-you  
maneuvering in and out of the bathroom—fake  
brushing of teeth, fake washing of hands,  
sitting on the fake toilet while fake peeing—  
before the awkward moment where she goes  
into the bedroom and gets into bed alone while  
he wriggles into the recliner and cracks it back,  
feet up facing the audience. Silence. Then:

BEN  
Okay, Kenny, lights.

Stage goes dark.

**Week 3, scene 1: Practicing the interviews**

A dry toilet and vanity have replaced the placeholder props in the bathroom. NINA is in bed. KAZ stands next to the bed. BEN sits in the living room. He rises from the chair.

NINA

“Tell me our story again.”

KAZ

“A never to be repeated once in a lifetime story.”

NINA

“Start with how we met.”

BEN at the bedroom “door.”

BEN

“That’s enough time alone.”

NINA

“Benjy? Coming to say goodbye?”

KAZ

“I can never explain how grateful I am you letting me see her.”

BEN

“I made a promise. —Sabina, how’s the pain? Should I change your patch?”

He changes the morphine patch on her stomach.

KAZ

“How can you stand this?”

BEN

“I can’t.”

NINA

“No pain. No body awareness anymore. I feel like an astronaut circling the moon: weightless. —Gabe?”

KAZ

“I’m still here, Sabina, I’m with you.”

NINA

“Don’t hate anyone. Ben plays bird sounds for me. Human music is too complex. Bird songs are just right. Over and over. I’m not sad.”

KAZ

“Can we, can we—what can we do for you, Sabina?”

NINA

“Don’t be sad.”

BEN notices a change in his wife: a subtle shiver, irrevocable.

BEN

“Sabina no, not the end no, there’s too much we need to clear up.”

KAZ

“Brace yourself, Ben.”

NINA

“It’s late, Benjy and it’s here ... [*aside to something unseen*] hello ... [*to BEN*] oh you poor guy all alone now, don’t hate me, yes it’s here, it’s mine, and now....”

She dies.

KAZ

“Is she?”

BEN

(having trouble drawing breath)

“Not yet, Sa ... *Sabinhunh*.... Please don’—”

BEN holds up a hand and breaks character while he recovers.

BEN

One sec.... I think ...

KAZ

You gonna make it?

BEN

No, yeah, I think I'm good. —Let's take it back to you dying and then Kaz's line.

NINA

"It's late, Benjy—"

BEN

You don't have to do the whole thing again, just:

NINA

Die.

BEN

Right.

NINA

"... it's mine, and now...."

NINA dies.

KAZ

"Is she?"

BEN

"Not yet, Sabina. Please don't, not with him here."

KAZ

"I'm so sorry, Ben."

BEN

"I've got so much I got to say, so much to correct."

KAZ

"I'll leave you alone with her. Right outside if you need me. Get it off your chest, tell her whatever it is you need to tell her."

KAZ steps outside the bedroom.

BEN

"Sabina ... [*the big moment, but he deliberately breaks character*] bla bla bla."  
—Kay, good, great. No, really, I am, I'm amazed at how well this scene works.

NINA  
Aren't you supposed to talk to me?

BEN  
When in real life she. When I.

NINA  
Are you all right?

BEN  
The chest. But it's not anything. Thinking too much is all.

KAZ returns to the bedroom.

KAZ  
Dude: bla bla bla? You go all stupid there?

BEN  
When in real life it happened I. Here's the thing: when it happened I had so much to unload I just uttered the type of phrases you expect. It's good to know she can die again so this time I can tell her honestly what I want her to hear last of all.

KAZ  
So why didn't you?

BEN  
Don't worry, I will. —I loved watching you die.

NINA  
It was okay?

KAZ  
You were great.

NINA  
(ignoring KAZ)  
Did you like the bird song riff? I was remembering being sick when I was a kid and the sounds of the birds outside the window making being immobile in bed bearable.

BEN  
Sabina didn't know a cardinal from a blue jay, but that's okay. —Week three: another hundred each.

KAZ

Top Ramen's on me.

NINA

And the way I died?

BEN

It's like I'm there again, only not as tongue tied because. Well, because you're not my wife and you're alive. It helps to relive her death in controlled conditions. [*Beat.*] Great. Good. So, great, so we've worked out our process for the ending: [*to NINA*] you die, [*to KAZ*] you improvise your exit line and leave—

KAZ

“You need a few moments alone with her, Ben. I'm right outside.”

BEN

and leave, and then I deliver the final lines of the play to her.

NINA slumps back in the bed.

NINA

Just died again. Say all you want to say to me.

KAZ

Yeah, let's hear it this time.

BEN is silent.

KAZ

Are you waiting for me to leave again?

BEN

No, you're cool.

NINA

Talk to me.

KAZ

That you love her.

NINA

In spite of everything.

BEN

I'm. I'm not ready. It has to be true.

KAZ

Dude, we won't know the show's over until we hear your final words.

BEN

Opening night.

KAZ

You serious?!

BEN

Opening night's the anniversary. What I say's got to be spur of the moment. From the heart.

KAZ

Oh my fucking god....

BEN

No, it'll work. It's building up in me as we rehearse, the true flood of my feelings, what I couldn't say. I'll be ready. Then I'll signal the booth when I'm done. Like this.

KAZ

A goddamn disaster.

BEN

Then Kenny blacks us out. At that point you [NINA] rise from your death bed, you [KAZ] come back into the bedroom, we grasp hands walk forward and do our bows. Thinking just a simple, even line, no one in front, no one in back, doesn't matter who's in the middle....

As he speaks, they assemble for the bows.

BEN

No, well, maybe me in the middle....

They rearrange themselves.

BEN

Then one two three bow, turn to the right, one two three bow, left one two three bow, and then off.

KAZ

Are we done?

BEN

I do, I love how it's going. Love our energy.

KAZ

Yaaaaaaaah!

BEN

Too much.

KAZ

yaaaah...?

NINA

Going to be a good show, a great show, I'm excited and everything and.

KAZ

She means "but."

NINA

No, just.

BEN

Just what?

NINA

When I'm dying, do I really make up *all* her dialogue? It feels so, it feels too. I mean, I'm there on my own and dying and don't know if it's what really happened or if I'm dying based on other shows I've seen. You didn't write any of it down?

BEN

What she said, what I said doesn't help. Strictly recreating her final moments traps me in that missed opportunity forever. This is my escape.

KAZ

Babe, how you're playing her death is fantastic. [*Thumps his heart*] Right here.

NINA

It's not easy: you guys standing there.

KAZ

So real scares the fuck outa me.

BEN

You're doing great as her, don't worry.

NINA

Not exactly worried. No, not *worried*. Just *terrified*. Can't it be scripted? It's not easy to die with so little direction.

KAZ

That's a shot at you, dude.

BEN

Can't be prescriptive about the ending. Need it to be fresh, different each night even. That would make me happy—mix up my memories so the real seems made up. No I'm very, yes very very pleased with the work you're doing. Both of you.

KAZ

Meaning we can take off now?

BEN

You can. —Nina's going to pretend to interview me.

NINA

I thought you were kidding.

BEN

Not at all. This is important.

KAZ

Then I'll stay too.

NINA

Don't you have a date?

KAZ

I'm good.

BEN

I think he wants to keep an eye on us.

KAZ

Sure, cuz in the play you're married. I think marriage is so cool, I do, and it sucks that your wife died, but I hate seeing Nina married to someone who's not me. [*To NINA*] I miss you.

NINA

(with no idea how to respond, she ignores KAZ)

Remind me why we're doing this stupid interview thing?

BEN

I need practice not being boring. I was all monotone during this morning's interview. I have so much I want to tell people and yet don't want to come across manic and incoherent, which is how I sound in my own brain when I try to explain what those last months were like, how my heart shredded into rags of sickening colors, and yet who will feel my exact same pain and confusion because how do I know your green is my green? and the sky: do you have the same heartache looking at it? and so to avoid scary brain-dump rambling like I'm doing now I tend in interviews to rely on boring, *Yes, that's a very good question. Hmm, let me see...*—is why I need the practice.

NINA's touch—human contact—calms him.

NINA

Breathe.

KAZ

If I were you I'd err on the side of boring. Just to be safe.

BEN

Said you could go.

KAZ

I'll be quiet, lips glued, you won't regret me being here cuz I'll come up with some lit things you can say that'll blow the interviewer away, in fact if it's a radio interview I could easily pretend to be you....

BEN gives him a look.

KAZ

Maybe instead I'll shut up.

NINA

Where do you want me?

BEN

Let's pretend you came to my apartment and I let you in, like so—*Come in come in, so nice of you to drop by*—and then we go sit in the front room: *Why don't we sit in the front room?*

NINA

Thanks for inviting me to your place.

A little wine? BEN

If you are. NINA

BEN pours out two glasses.

Sit sit. BEN

She does.

I love your apartment. NINA

Your wine. BEN

Yes please. KAZ

Avoiding KAZ grasping for the glass, BEN gives it to NINA and sits.

Kind of questions do you want? NINA

The usual softballs. Before a show opens critics are easy on you: Where do you get your ideas? tell me a little bit more about yourself? what do you hope to accomplish with this play? kinda thing. BEN

Where do you get your ideas? NINA

Hold on. Taste the wine. BEN

Mmmm. NINA

Like it? BEN

Mm-hmm! NINA

We had this bottle ten years.  
Friend gave it to us.  
Supposed to be pretty great.  
The vintage or something.  
We were saving it. BEN

Uncomfortable pause.

Really, dude, I mean it. I'm an asshole and everything, but life sucks and you've had it way worse than me and I feel real bad for you. Serious. KAZ

You're not here, remember? If you can't be quiet, then maybe go see your woman. BEN

I've been *telling* you guys— KAZ

She's not a woman. NINA

Exactly. I mean she *is* a woman but not *my* woman, I mean we do hang out together but not like *hang* together. I've told you that so many times. KAZ

Please shut up. NINA

Should we take ten while you work this out? BEN

Sure. KAZ

KAZ stands.

NINA

Nothing to work out. —Where do you get your ideas?

BEN

For this show in particular, er?

NINA

This one in particular.

KAZ sits.

BEN

This one was easy. Unfortunately. All I had to do was base it on. Well, my life. I call this play an autotheatricality because it mimicks life last year when we discovered my wife was dying. And other things.

NINA

Isn't that a spoiler?

BEN

You know she's dying early in the play, so it's not a leaping secret at the climax, and anyway, and because, and so I glued my ass to my desk chair trying to get this thing, this tragedy, this shotgun blast to my gut on paper as a way to deal with it, heal from it, and then, and though, and um, because you still have to wake up each morning even though you know you can't face an entire day—looking at the weather site first thing to find out when it gets dark again—but you also want to stop the dream you're in cuz that's where she's still alive and the gauze in the dream is surprisingly difficult to claw through trying to wake up—

NINA

(kindly interrupting)

Maybe not so many words.

BEN

Thanks for stopping me. I need to practice that: to just ... stop.

NINA

Should we [keep going]...?

BEN nods.

NINA

Because you call this an autotheatricality, you must play yourself in the show.

BEN

I do. Stop.

Pause.

NINA

That must be difficult.

BEN

Not really. Stop.

Pause.

NINA

And um, so um ... tell us more about yourself. And feel free not to stop.

BEN

You really want to hear?

NINA

Let's assume my green is pretty close to your green.

BEN

Kay so here's the thing. The idea behind this show is simple: I want to keep her alive so I can talk to her again. I'm not saying the Frankenstein impulse is good or bad, it's just inevitable when someone close to you dies. I mean, are you married? I'm asking you as the pretend interviewer, not you as the actual you cuz I know you aren't married—I mean, that guy? [KAZ]—but she might be, or he might be, and so let's say she or he, meaning you, is married, and if you are then you've undergone what married people out there in your audience have undergone, that almost chemical change in a couple to where you begin to feel—no matter if the marriage is good or bad or in the vast middle—that a good chunk of your atomic structure has bonded chemically to the other person and one day you're surprised as shit by sheer terror because you realize something vital will be ripped out of you if you two, say, split up, even if for all good reasons like she cheats on you, or if instead one of you, say, dies.

NINA

That's a lot of words.

BEN

I'll do better.

NINA

Was your wife in theater, like you?

BEN

Yep. Stop.

Pause.

NINA

Care you elaborate?

BEN

Probably. Stop.

NINA

It's okay to expand a bit. We want to know more about her.

BEN

She failed as an actor. That's how we met. She was the most wholly integrated person I've ever known, standing on stage as out of place as if she suddenly appeared in a bikini in *The Crucible*, and it was agonizing but funny watching her read for a role because it was impossible for her to disappear even for a moment into another character. Sabina was ... how best to describe her? An incurable irritating optimist. Everything was great, everything was the best. Her legs weren't heavy with daily doubts that slow the rest of us to a shuffle. She should have been a dancer she was so light skipping over the world and not giving a *damn* about conventions. Though she gave up auditioning, thank god, she loved the world I lived in—the writers, the actors, people with a dangerous need for reassurance of their self worth, and her love for that world was expansive.

Pause.

NINA

Should we....

BEN

Give me a moment....

She does.

KAZ

Is he crying?

BEN

I'm all right.

NINA

Do we go on? Or should we just?

BEN

It's difficult. You two don't know what's coming.

NINA

Should we forget about this?

BEN

I need the practice.

Pause.

KAZ

I'm just going to say this, and it's gonna sound assholish, can't help it, but yes you sure do need practice. You're like a fly zigging all over the place and kinda pointless and we wanna swat you—and I'm not saying that to be mean.

NINA

In talking about your marriage, you sound angry and real sad. Is this play meant to be a catharsis?

BEN

Hope so. Stop.

Pause. NINA is stumped.

KAZ

(helping her)

What do you hope to accomplish with this play?

NINA

What do you hope to accomplish with this play?

KAZ is pleased with himself for helping.

BEN

Great question. It's this. I can no longer believe in love let alone ever again be in love as long as I'm still trying to determine if I loved or hated that woman, or both, or which, or why.

NINA

This play is meant to help you fall in love again?

KAZ

Told ya!

BEN

I need to come out the other end of this play able to look at people, well, women, and think: maybe?

KAZ

You thought it was just Kaz being paranoid, but he's after you! Nina, we probably won't die for a while but let's not be alone when we do! Let's just fuckin get married!

NINA

(to BEN)

Thank you for your time. You've made me, and I'm sure our audience, very curious to see your play. As a reminder to all of you out there, *Life Is My Disease* opens in one week.

**Week 3, scene 2: You play me**

NINA is in the bed. KAZ stands next to her.  
BEN sits in a chair in the living room.

KAZ

“He’s out there.”

NINA

“How much time do we have?”

KAZ

“A few minutes if he keeps his promise. But he only went as far as the living room. He can hear.”

NINA

“Doesn’t matter.”

KAZ

“I wish everything had been different.”

NINA

“Stop. I never wasted time on regrets. Stupid to start now.”

KAZ

“But what we could have had. You should have left him.”

NINA

“I wanted both of you.”

KAZ

“I feel so, feel so ... I don’t know—everything. Sad of course. Guilt too.”

NINA

“Don’t grind yourself down with pointless emotions people with futures obsess about. Guilt, sadness, jealousy: none of that is real. People make it up to hurt themselves. You’ll understand someday.”

KAZ

“I love you. Is that emotion acceptable, is it okay to tell you that?”

NINA

“That, yes. That I can stand to hear.”

BEN goes to the bedroom “door.”

“Ours is a beautiful story—”

KAZ

“That’s enough time alone.”

BEN

Dude, you’re early again!

KAZ

No.

BEN

He’s right.

NINA

I don’t think so.

BEN

You jumped several lines. I go: “I wish I could remember our beautiful story, but the meds scramble memory. Tell it to me again.”

NINA

And I go: “A never to be repeated once in a lifetime story.”

KAZ

And I’m: “Start with how we met.” *Then* you.

NINA

Got it.

BEN

But you don’t got it, you definitely do not got it, you have not got it once!

KAZ

This scene has to be hard for him.

NINA

Thank you.

BEN

NINA

But remember, Ben, this part is scripted. Have to stick to the words or we'll lose control of the play.

BEN

It felt too long. Let me cut some of Kaz's lines.

KAZ

Goddamnit, dude, we open in less than a week!

BEN

Fine fine, so sorry I messed us up. Let's go back, run the lines again.

KAZ

Fuck.

BEN

Problem?

KAZ

Why would there be a problem when I'd love to repeat this scene *forfuckingevery*.

NINA

From where?

BEN

From the three of us in the bedroom after I say "I made you both a promise" and go out to the living room and then you two.

KAZ

"He's out there."

BEN

Give me a sec to get there. And hands out of your pockets. Actors should never resort to that to still their hands.

He carefully maneuvers through the "door" and sits in the living room.

BEN

Go.

KAZ

“He’s out there.”

NINA

“How much time do we have?”

KAZ

“A few minutes if he keeps his promise. But he only—” Fuck it, I’m taking a break. Did they restock that machine with Red Bull?

KAZ exits.

NINA

He’ll calm down.

BEN

Not if he keeps pounding Red Bull.

KAZ

(off)

I can hear you!

NINA

(quieter)

He loves your play, can do any scene playing all three characters. He’s just not used to your unique directing style.

BEN

And you two? Things better or worse?

NINA

Better I think: we talked. No, make that worse: what we talked about. He really does think you and me—

Returning Red Bull in fist, KAZ overhears this last.

KAZ

Maybe I have no *visual* evidence to suspect you two, and so I’m back there warning myself, “Kaz, don’t say what you’re about to say.” But do I listen to myself? No, I do not. I wonder why I’m like that.

BEN

We need to keep going if we're going to get through the whole show at least once.

KAZ

Nina, why am I like that?

NINA

You just are.

KAZ

So okay, so we agree: I'm like that. Deaf to my brain warning me not to say: "Are you two fucking?"

NINA

Ignore him.

KAZ

I acknowledge it may be only in your minds so far, but in this fake apartment we pretend surrounds us what's in our minds is basically the same as fact. When you think about it.

BEN

We aren't sleeping together.

KAZ

In your minds, I said. Your mind anyway. You wrote this to get a repeat of your wife—and you cast Nina in the role and kiss her all the time and I'm sick of it.

NINA

It's make believe.

KAZ

Is he make believe? I don't think so. Can we touch him?—yes. Can we *push* him?—oh, yes. Can we *punch* him?...

NINA

Leave him alone.

KAZ

I look at those lips saying "leave him alone" and yet, wait a minute, do those lips belong to Nina or this guy's *wife*? I don't want you to have sex with him, I don't want you to die with him bawling over your poor dead body, don't want you feeling

sorry for him from the grave, don't want you to be married to someone else—let's walk away from this play. It's turning us into crazy, different people.

KAZ clutches at NINA's wrist, trying to lead her off stage.

NINA

You sure are crazy and different.

BEN

Go ahead and leave. Destroy your careers in this town!

NINA

He's right, Kaz. Stay. For me. This is the first part in years that's meant anything. Maids and whores otherwise. I can't lose this break he's given us.

KAZ

But I ache for ya. I'm sorry about everything and I want us to be in love. Kaz and Nina can't play these characters and remain who we were.

NINA

(to BEN)

I'll take him outside to cool off.

BEN

Do that. Back in ten.

NINA

Thank you ten.

KAZ

Don't forget to put on your snuggly winter coat.

NINA

It's a coat.

KAZ

*Her coat.*

NINA

A prop.

KAZ

Put it on and see how he looks at you. [*To BEN*] She's not your wife!

BEN

Get him outta here!

NINA

Come outside.

KAZ

Don't wanna go outside!

NINA

Come on.

KAZ

*Not* going outside! Wanna talk to this sumbitch, need to let him know how pitiful he is. [*To BEN*] The great sobbing husband showing audiences every night how you hurt more than the rest of us: "Watch me love my wife so much and suffer more than you people out there in the audience."

BEN

You don't know what you're talking about.

NINA

Kaz, tell me something.

KAZ

Why'd you even write this play? To make everyone feel sorry for you? They won't. They'll think you're an embarrassment, couldn't keep your wife happy.

BEN

Your face makes me sick.

KAZ

Then let me give you a closer look.

BEN

I'll shatter that ugly nose.

KAZ

You?!

NINA

Stop it!

She gets between them, gets control.

NINA

Is this a playground?! Are you two children?! Tell me something, Kaz: what do you think of Ben?

KAZ

I'd like to move his mouth to his asshole!

BEN

I'm right here you wanna try!

NINA

Shut up! I'm trying to save your play! [*To KAZ*] Not him, Ben the role.

KAZ

Ben the role?

NINA

What do you think of it?

KAZ

Honestly?

NINA

Of course.

BEN

Be careful.

KAZ

It's a fantastic, heartbreaking, conflicted role.

BEN

Mean that?

KAZ

What a good actor—sorry, dude, being honest—could do with that role.

NINA

So the way Ben plays him is what?

KAZ

Safe. Defensive. Not taking chances. [*Mimics a dry delivery*] Sabina, my dear, let us sit in the kitchen a spell and talk about you dying.” [*Back to himself*] Never brings his desperation, his loneliness fully, believably alive.

BEN

It’s not easy being me.

KAZ

I mean the script’s right, the words, but the delivery’s dead. —You’re boring, dude.

BEN

It’s trying keep all this pain inside from *exploding*! I’ve got razors in my gut with no way ta get them out!

KAZ

Whoa, dude.

BEN

My life is shit!

KAZ

(to NINA)

Talk to the guy, he’s losing it.

NINA

Ben—

BEN

(near tears)

Don’t look at me!

NINA

This is good, though, this is healthy.

BEN

Hell it is!

NINA

Finally it’s in the open. We all know why rehearsals are off. You’re carrying too much grief and unable to let it out. You’re destroying your own play from the inside.

BEN

What can I do? Shut down my show? Keep living like this?!

NINA

Let somebody else play you.

KAZ

Nina, that's dumbest thing ever said out loud.

BEN

I'm Ben! The play's about *me*!

NINA

It's not working. That role's got to carry the show, but you're not doing that.

KAZ

Nina, remember who this guy is. Theater costa nostra. Knows everybody. Let's not piss him off.

BEN

Sometimes I have trouble breathing. I told you that. Maybe take something, maybe that will help.

NINA

Nasal spray won't make you a better actor. It's not that you wheeze every once in a while. A good actor makes that work. This extraordinary part you created needs someone extraordinary to play it.

BEN

Then we plow through, do our best.

NINA

No.

BEN

What do you mean, no?

NINA

We're walking out.

BEN

What?

KAZ

Who is?

NINA

Kaz and I are walking out right now if you aren't willing to make this change. The play has to be good and it's not good with you playing you.

KAZ

(to NINA)

Think about what you're saying....

BEN

Is it more money you're after?

KAZ

Or maybe that....

BEN

You're already getting the ticket money, and opening weekend is sold out thanks to the new and improved interviews.

NINA

Not more money. We want the show to be great, we want people to pack the theater, to talk about it, reviewers to praise it. —Right, Kaz? —We want your play to succeed. I *need* it to succeed. Otherwise my career ends with a dud, people leaving saying, "What the hell was that play about? Was it *supposed* to be terrible?"

BEN

But the whole point—

NINA

The point is for people to see your story, not you.

BEN

But I wrote it because of what I didn't say that night. I need to be there again.

NINA

Vicariously you will be, no matter who plays you.

BEN

They won't know what to say.

NINA

Then you have to write it.

KAZ

That's always made the most sense. Finish the script.

BEN

Say I did, say I agreed to step aside. Who am I gonna find last minute to learn the part in time?

NINA

Kaz.

KAZ

Shitting me?

NINA

Kaz could play you with the necessary fake realism because he's got nothing invested in keeping the character safe and making him look good. [*To KAZ*] If anyone can make the switch, it's you.

KAZ

Sure, I know the lines.

BEN

Who'd play the lover?

NINA

You.

KAZ

The point of this being?

NINA

So Ben doesn't stumble through his own life trying to portray it accurately. So that we'll be ready for opening night. So that we'll have a real show.

KAZ

But it's his autotheatريفuckacality.

BEN

Don't make me do this. Writing this play in an apartment where suddenly the only sounds are those I make was my way to get back to that moment she dies, to tell her .... [*His breathing becomes choked.*]

Dude, this again? KAZ

I need ta, I need ta— BEN

He's dying. (resigned, not shocked) KAZ

Maybe. NINA

I'm— BEN

KAZ looks closely at BEN and starts to believe the worst, to panic.

That man is suffocating! KAZ

Then we won't have to worry about this play. NINA

I'm— BEN

Stop thinking about breathing, clear your mind. NINA

His face is turning colors! Is that puce?! He is, he's dying! KAZ

Now KAZ is hyperventilating, wandering in panicked circles.

Ben, can you hear me? NINA

o shit o shit o shit KAZ

I'm—

BEN

o jeez o jeez o jeez

KAZ

NINA  
You don't need to watch her die again. Let it go. Let Kaz take that burden. He never knew her, didn't love her. It's just another role to him.

BEN's breaths come easier. KAZ too manages to calm himself.

Better?

NINA

I think so.

KAZ

I'm ... yes, I'm ... [*surprised*] okay.

BEN

KAZ  
Oh my god, your eyes bugging out, those strangling noises. Freaky flashforward of what it's in store. Not the faintest fucking idea what color puce is, just the first thing came to mind but it sounds right for how sick you looked: Puce.

NINA  
Giving up the role of Ben is the only way to save your play.

BEN  
That just now, when I can't draw in enough air? That's total loneliness.

NINA  
You need a break from obsessively thinking about what happened in this apartment a year ago.

Maybe....

BEN

NINA  
Kaz can do it. What do you say?

BEN

(could this work?)

In theory....

KAZ

Serious?!

BEN

I see how it might work.... You know all my lines?

KAZ

“Gabe, you and I don’t like each other, but I’m doing what’s best for her. Sabina’s in the kitchen.” —You?

BEN

“Ours is a never to be repeated once in a lifetime story.” —Let’s try it.

KAZ

If we do this, then I’m the one improvising the final lines of the play and I do those my way. No interference.

BEN

Better let me script something.

KAZ

Now he wants to write the ending.

BEN

You need to know what I want to say to her.

KAZ

Opening night. Got to play it by ear, feel it in here [*the heart*].

BEN

Goddamnit.

KAZ

Yeah, baby!

NINA

Let Kaz have this. What he comes up with will be dramatic and not complicated by real life.

BEN

At least let me help you with ideas.

KAZ

You're messing with the formula. From the heart!

BEN

You weren't married to her. Anything you say *from the heart* will be wrong. Trust me.

KAZ

Absolutely not. I'm Ben now, man in charge. "Thank you all for coming, Ls and Gs. This play is something I call an autotheatricality. It's got love and death and cheating and other weird shit and I hope you like it."

NINA

Kaz'll be great.

BEN

It sounds so wonderful. A vacation from myself. Plus I get to be Sabina's lover again. Like in the beginning. The love she didn't fake when she saw me come through that door....

He points to where the front door would be.

KAZ

No doors in your life here, no walls.

NINA

Freedom from being Ben.

KAZ

Wide open.

NINA

Objects surrounding you carry no history. *The chair, the table, the bed.*

BEN

I can be new here. Shed that desire to go back to tell her what I really feel. No more past. Life without heartache. The entire world once again my wife.

NINA

This is going to work.

**Opening night**

Opening night is rendered by special lighting we haven't seen before in the rehearsals.

NINA is on the bed: the death scene. BEN (as the lover throughout the scene) is with her.

KAZ (as BEN) sits anxiously in the living room, then rises from his chair.

BEN

A never to be repeated once in a lifetime story.

NINA

Start with how we met.

KAZ air knocks on the bedroom "door."

KAZ

That's enough time alone.

NINA

Come say goodbye, Benjy.

BEN

So grateful you letting me be here.

KAZ

I made a promise. —Sabina, darling, changing your patch now.

He does.

BEN

How can you stand this?

KAZ

I do it for her.

NINA

No pain. No body at all. Weightless like an astronaut watching the moon circle around you. —Gabe?

BEN

I'm here, Sabina.

NINA

Play those bird sounds for me?

KAZ

That's me, my love. I'm the one who sits with you and plays the recordings I make of birds in the park.

NINA

Human music is too complicated. Bird songs are what I want, over and over. I'm not sad.

KAZ

(to BEN)

Maybe give us a little space?

BEN

I'm cool right here, dude.

NINA

I don't want anyone to be

please promise me don't

be sad

KAZ

Leave us alone.

BEN

I think Sabina wants me to stay.

NINA

It's just it's just

it's late too late

and finally it's here

and any moment I'll be

and

and now

[Silence.]

BEN

I think she—

KAZ

Not the end. Not yet, oh please. No, my love, there's too much my heart needs to say to you.

BEN

I'm so sorry, Ben.

KAZ

Are you sure she's?

BEN

Best if we leave her, call who we need to call.

KAZ

She may be in a coma, she may still hear me.

BEN

No, Ben.

BEN (as lover) tries to draw KAZ (as BEN) out of the bedroom so as to forestall any speech he's planning.

KAZ

Let go of me.

BEN

Remember her how she was in life. Come out to the front room and we'll call her friends to let them know.

KAZ breaks free and returns to the bed.

KAZ

Sabina, I can't stand that you're leaving me here alone—

BEN

No, Ben, don't.

KAZ

Gabe, I kept my promise to let you two see each other one last time, but now get out of here. I want time alone with my wife.

BEN

It's over. There's nothing you can say to her now.

KAZ

(his big planned speech to SABINA)

I know she can hear me. —My darling, I accept that one of us had to be left behind to bear witness to the loss of what we love most, to bore others with stories of our love that no one else will ever really understand,

BEN

(overlapping)

You're ruining it.

KAZ

(continuing)

but I wish you were the one staying behind, you're much better at telling stories, our story, but I'll do my best to remind everyone everyday how much I love you. I forgive you everything because of what we had. Even him.

BEN

You don't get to talk to her.

KAZ

(not loud)

What'd you say? What the fuck did you say to me?

BEN

End it. She's dead!

BEN has been surreptitiously signaling to  
Kenny to black out the stage.

KAZ

Sure, Gabe, sure I'll end it. Right now. I'll end it as clearly as I can: "Get the fuck out of our lives, leave me with the woman I love!"

KAZ theater-punches BEN who, startled, falls over, though of course the punch did not land. KAZ signals. Kenny does a near blackout of the stage, then lights up full. The three do their bows—NINA and KAZ pumped, BEN scowling—and trot off stage.

**Talkback**

BEN strides out and calls up to the booth.

BEN

Kenny!—house lights, please?!

The house lights come up. BEN gives thumbs up, then addresses the audience.

BEN

So umm well that final scene that dialogue that ending with the wife and the lover and Ben was hmm what can I say.... Not how it should go....

BEN plucks up one of the kitchen chairs, takes it downstage, flips it around, and straddles it, arms on the headrest. Time for a heart-to-heart.

BEN

Glad so many of you stayed for the talkback because, ha, you need to know the truth. What we offered here, what we were trying to do—I was trying to do—was recreate ... to redo....

[Reset] As you see in the program notes, this play is an experiment in autobiography meant to return me to those final months of her life so I could finally resolve something ugly between us.

NINA straggles in engaged in business that suggests the transition from Sabina to Nina—brushing her hair, say, or wiping pancake powder from behind her ear.

BEN

Live theater always is an experiment, but some plays burn closer—

NINA kisses the top of his head

NINA

love ya

then bounces cross-legged into one of the comfortable chairs.

BEN

love ya too—closer to the fuse end to where any night the thing can blow up in your face. This is one of those plays, and tonight it did: BANG!

NINA playfully throws up her hands against the powerful blast and utters a gasp.

NINA

Bang good or bang bad?

BEN

Explosions are fun when you're at a distance, but nearby they hurt.

NINA

[*To audience*] It's a tricky play but I thought we pulled it off. Considering. [*To BEN*] Tell them how you were supposed to play yourself but we switched barely a week before tonight's opening.

BEN

During rehearsals we discovered how bad I am being myself.

NINA

Kaz and I were like: how can Ben not be convincing as Ben?

BEN

So a week ago when I was tempted ta—

KAZ enters drawing attention his way by playfully shaking his fingers as if having damaged them by fake-punching BEN. Then he ruffles NINA's hair teasingly before sitting in the chair next to her.

BEN

ah, there he is—tempted ta flush the script down the toilet—

NINA

Total panic.

BEN

Nina saved the play—*we thought*—with her brilliant idea of having Kaz here—say hi, Kaz ...

KAZ

How's it hoppin, yo.

NINA

*Thought?*

BEN

have Kaz take the part of Ben, while I assumed the role of my wife's lover. Which, gotta admit, was a thrill after fifteen years of marriage. Weird maybe, perverse even—

NINA

Not as perverse as you not telling us how the play was supposed to end.

KAZ

In-it [*for "isn't it" to indicate agreement*].

NINA

He was going to improvise Ben's final lines to his wife without letting us know what he would say.

KAZ

Whacky way to handle it.

NINA

As you can probably guess the three of us, we had lots of, well, discussions—

KAZ

Arguments. I'm just saying.

NINA

a more honest way of putting it—about how to get this play ready for opening night.

KAZ

Especially this guy [*indicating BEN*]: freak-in out!

NINA

We reminded him the lover's easier and has fewer lines.

BEN

Kaz being me created a problem, though. Great actor and everything, but that seems to be the extent of his life experience, acting, so of course his final words to my dying wife were sentimental and false.

KAZ

(to audience, playfully)

He's still mad at me for punching him. —Sorry, dude.

NINA

I *told* you the play needed a fight.

KAZ

That punch wasn't rehearsed, but as Ben I feel always on edge. My wife and everything. Snap easily if you push my buttons. To me, these two suffered a terrible strain but just in time they remember the love and that it was a good marriage.

BEN

She had a lover, Kaz!

KAZ

That's sick and complicated and I don't know how you do that [*lower register to NINA*] and Nina I never, that woman—

NINA

(to audience, explaining)

Kaz and I...

KAZ

(back to speaking generally)

but I know Ben loved his wife to the end. In his heart. That's how I played it anyway.

BEN

Cuz you're an actor and want audiences to adore you. But ya fucked up my play.

KAZ

That's your opinion.

BEN

Not opinion, my *life*! The ending should be full of hate and revenge to burst that pain in your heart: "I'm *ecstatic* you're dying! You ruined my life and I'll never ever forgive you!"

KAZ

I mean I'm not you.

BEN

You're *supposed* to be me. Ben can't, you can't droop over her dying body and tell her like it's some new revelation that you love her! Of course you loved her at one point! Desperately! Or you wouldn't be in horrible pain now!

KAZ

He's paying us so I guess he gets to criticize.

NINA

At least Kaz gave us an ending.

KAZ

Thank you.

BEN

But the *right* ending is what I need, a correction. Not what happened a few minutes ago, not what happened in our apartment a year ago, but what *should* have happened.

NINA

Maybe take a few questions?

KAZ

Ya mean like a *talkback*? Instead of him criticizing me for saving his butt?

BEN

(to audience)

This isn't your traditional talkback in that I'll do all the talking. My play was an invitation. Your ticket invited you to my home. Yes this stage is my home—

He reaches under the bed and drags out items such as beer, granola, peanut butter, bread.

BEN

(to NINA and KAZ)

Where do you think I've been living this whole time?

KAZ

(standing)

Nina, maybe we take off now?

BEN

Sit down, we're not done. And get your hands out of your pockets. You look like an actor. [*To audience*] Everything you see is from the apartment she and I haunted.

*Our tables, our chairs, our bathroom. One year ago tonight she died in our bed.*  
[*Raising his hand*] How many of you heard my interviews this week?...

KAZ

Nina?

NINA

We'd never get parts again....

Scanning the audience, BEN sees no hands raised, except for a possible few jokers in the crowd or those who playfully believe the earlier practice interview counts.

BEN

Well, okay, maybe not the biggest radio stations, but if you *had* heard the interviews, you'd know this play was my chance to recover from tragedy. You think you know what the tragedy is. The actors thought they knew, and you're saying to yourself that you saw it. Right here on stage. She dies.

Pause to take in the crowd.

The tragedy is not that she died. People die. Poor Sabina, everybody was saying. But she's *dead!* Tragedy is to be alive wearing your past like a hard husk, forever trapped as Ben while clawed from inside by shame and embarrassment. You were invited to see if I could challenge and change my past, but we gave you the wrong play. So we'll do it over for you.

NINA and KAZ don't comprehend.

BEN

The play: let's do it again.

KAZ

(to NINA)

If it'll stop his bitching.

NINA

This time you as you?

BEN

Me as me. [*To audience*] You guys mind? At this point we're only halfway through a Shakespeare play. [*To NINA and KAZ*] Gabe, you're off. Sabina, you and I are

entering our apartment, the look on your face alerting the audience to the sickening news.

KAZ

Dude, how 'bout just the ending?

BEN

umm....

KAZ

That's what you've been complaining about.

BEN

Sure. The ending's all I really need. That means a few months have passed and we're in the bedroom. [*To audience*] Bear with us, folks. You may secretly think this part is scripted too. Nope. Mere life, with its unpredictable messy endings like this one you're witnessing. [*To actors*] Gabe is standing off to one side ... good. Sabina's in bed ... [*encouraging her:*] into bed, please. And Ben, me, is bending over her saying goodbye. —Ready, Gabe?

KAZ

(Of course)

All I do is stand here.

BEN

Sabina? You're supposed to be in bed.

NINA

I don't think so.

BEN

No, yeah, we're at the end, you're dying. My chance to speak to her again. The truth this time.

NINA

Life has no do-overs.

BEN

Just lie there and be dying. It's not that hard. And no words. None of that bullshit about birdsongs and don't be sad. Great as drama but we're doing real life now.

KAZ

Real life?!

NINA

You don't need actors for real life. We only complicate that. —Let's go, Kaz.

KAZ

I'll stick it out if you're worried about your career.

NINA

Someone who sleeps on the set probably doesn't have as much pull in the industry as we thought.

NINA exits, KAZ follows.

BEN

We still got twenty shows to go!

Rasp of the door.

BEN

Don't be so eager to leave this theater! It's safer here! You have no idea what's in store for you out there. Especially if you get married!

The door closes.

BEN

Well, hell....

Pause. BEN may peek backstage.

BEN

I don't think my actors are coming back.... [*Beat.*] Which makes opening night closing night. If you had friends who already bought tickets, have them come by the theater—I'll be here—and I'll take care of refunds personally. But before you go, grant me one more minute: I owe you an ending.

BEN plays to invisible Sabina dying in the bed.

BEN

She's lying there. In too much pain to offer poetry. Eyes glued shut. A strangled gurgle in the throat, a stinking gasp or two. But no more words. She's reached the end of the human hope of being understood. This is the honest ugliness of her dying, not what we gave you earlier. This is what I confronted when I wanted to be cruel

and tell her before she left me all alone how I hated her. But a year ago tonight I did, I blubbered like Kaz blubbered—Yes, Kaz nailed it—

[*to Sabina*] that I love you in spite of what you did.

And just before she died, one eye: forced open a crack, a glimmer of an eyeball.

She can hear us.

[*To Sabina*] Before these witnesses let me admit the more complicated truth: I hate you, I miss you, I love you. You thrilled me, and you broke my heart.

[*Slight pause as you watch her dying.*] And then she dies....

He stands away from the bed.

BEN

And for me another thirty, forty years of being Ben, grudgingly re-enacting myself over and over until that event we all fear releases me.

A modest bow.

BEN

Thanks for coming. —Kenny! Sorry we're shutting down the run earlier than planned, but I appreciate all you've done!

Winking lights.

BEN

Leave these folks the house lights so they can exit safely—bye everyone—but black me out up here on my signal.

He sits.

BEN

My chair....

[*Take the final pause as long as you want.*] My home....

Signal. Blackout on stage, with house lights already up.

**End of play....** *At this point, two options. One: leave Ben where he is, don't bring out the other actors for bows. Let the audience file out somewhat bemused because they haven't been dismissed in the normal way—but by this time they should no longer expect normal. Two: acknowledge tradition and have the other actors come out, laughing with the actor playing Ben as he mock-struggles to leave his chair to join them for bows. After which they wave and disappear, not backstage but into the audience, exiting with the crowd.*