

UNFOCUSED

By
Jean Koppen

UNFOCUSED

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CAST: 5 Women 3 Men

TASHA	Female, 30-40s, controlling focus group moderator
EVELYN	Female, 30s, smart but apathetic
WALTER	Male, 30-50s, obsessed about his severe peanut allergy
CAROL	Female, 30-40s, meek
FRANK	Male, 50-70s, cynical
JEN	Female, 20-30s, self-absorbed
ALEX	Male, 30-50s, egotistical
SVETLANA	Female, 20-30s, driven

Please note, all parts were written race neutral and the playwright strongly desires diverse casting. Actors of any race can play any part.

Outdated references may be changed with the playwright's consent.

A "slash" mark (/) means the character with the next line of dialogue begins his or her speech.

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SCENE 1

Projection appears on stage: “Democracy is a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder, and dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike.” - Plato.

An antiseptic focus group room furnished with a conference table, chairs and a large paper flip chart on an easel. There is a food table with sandwiches, bags of snacks and bottles of water -the kind with those annoying squeeze tops. TASHA is readying the room- placing notepads and pens at each place. The door opens and EVELYN enters, makes a beeline to the food table and grabs a sandwich, chips and water.

TASHA. *(In thick Southern accent.)* Welcome! I’m Tasha. Thank you so much for coming tonight. We look forward to hearing everything you- *(Evelyn grabs two more bags of chips and puts them in her purse. Tasha laughs nervously.)* You must really like snacks.

EVELYN. Between global warming and melting ice caps we’re one environmental disaster away from a massive food shortage. Where’s the cookies? Usually there’s cookies.

TASHA. Usually? *(Clears throat.)* You are aware that attending another group within the last six months would disqualify you from participation.

EVELYN. Oh it’s been over six months. Seven months, at least.

TASHA. We have rules.

EVELYN. *(Opens a bag of chips and eats while talking.)* Five minutes to start and I’m the only one here. You really want me to leave?

TASHA. I can’t sacrifice the integrity of my research.

EVELYN. Relax. I’ll enjoy my sandwich, answer your *engaging* questions, and happily leave with my hundred dollar check. As a bonus, I won’t even make fun of that phony accent of yours. *(Evelyn crunches her chips as they size each other up.)*

TASHA. Well, aren’t you clever! *(Accent dropped.)* You certainly fit the

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“typical” American we need for tonight. All that matters is gettin’ paid. Right?

EVELYN. We all got our part to play.

TASHA. You need to be honest. If that’s even possible.

EVELYN. If I’m being honest, I could really use a cookie.

TASHA. You’re my special challenge tonight, aren’t you?

EVELYN. Only if my blood sugar drops. (*Dramatically in Southern accent.*) I fear I might faint!

TASHA. (*Heading towards the door.*) Let me see about your precious cookies.

EVELYN. Don’t drop the accent on my account. We need more fun.

TASHA. (*In Southern accent.*) Bless your heart.

EVELYN. There’s that Southern hospitality! (*Tasha exits. Evelyn piles more food in her bag, sits and eats. WALTER enters and nervously inspects the sandwiches using a plastic knife. He picks up a snack bag and carefully reads the ingredients. Sighs dramatically. He replaces the bag, picks another and repeats his inspection, making annoyed sounds as he does so.*)

WALTER. Absolutely unacceptable! No list of ingredients. Are we supposed to gamble with our lives?! Excuse me, ma’am, do you know if the sandwiches are dressed?

EVELYN. (*Food in mouth.*) What?

WALTER. Is there dressing on your sandwich? A sauce or spread? An aoli, perhaps? I have a severe allergy. If even a trace of peanut is ingested, I’ll go into immediate anaphylactic shock. And sure, it’s not like there’s a common bowl of peanut-laden trail mix hanging around, but nobody ever thinks about peanut oil in the dressing. Is dressing even necessary?

EVELYN. Condiments make the sandwich.

WALTER. Condiments are silent killers. (*Walter takes a bottle of water and sits.*)

EVELYN. So, if I wanted to kill you, all I have to do is slip a peanut into your food when you’re not looking?

WALTER. Should you perpetrate such an egregious attack I’d immediately use my EPI pen. I’m prepared for emergencies. It’s a mine field out there.

EVELYN. What about non-food exposure? Like, if I sprinkled peanut

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powder inside your clothes?

WALTER. How would you get peanut powder / into my-

EVELYN. Or I sneak drops of peanut oil into your drink. You're at a bar, you look away-

WALTER. I'm not one to / frequent bars.

EVELYN. I got it! We're at a baseball game, the ground is covered in peanut shells, I trip you and smother you in peanut bits!

WALTER. Why are you contemplating ways to assassinate me?

EVELYN. Harmless amusement. I promise I won't spike your water. I'm Evelyn.

WALTER. Walter. How's the sandwich?

EVELYN. Dry as hell. But free is free. *(Walter struggles to drink from the squirt top. Evelyn grabs his bottle, screws off the cap, places it on the table.)*

WALTER. Thank you. Have you ever done this before?

EVELYN. Open a water bottle?

WALTER. Participate in a focus group.

EVELYN. This gig pays better than Tuesday night tips at the diner. Also, there's fewer idiots. Usually. *(CAROL enters. Walter and Evelyn look at her.)*

CAROL. Did I interrupt? Sorry! *(Carol moves as if apologizing for existing. She takes a sandwich and sits, trying not to be noticed.)*

WALTER. What should I expect from tonight's experience?

EVELYN. If I do my job right, an entertaining and lucrative evening. *(FRANK enters. To Walter.)* You're not gonna "out" me, are ya?

WALTER. I'll keep your confidence, if you keep threats to my demise at bay.

EVELYN. *(To Frank)* Hey there, you're not hiding any peanuts, are ya'?

FRANK. You got a warrant?

WALTER. I have an allergy.

FRANK. Everyone's got allergies, pal. Take a pill and move on.

WALTER. I'm touched by your concern. Perhaps this evening's discussion is about allergies.

CAROL. Oh dear, I don't have any allergies. Should I leave?

EVELYN. If you're in this room they wanna hear from you.

CAROL. Really?

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WALTER. Trust her. She's the boss.

CAROL. Oh! I'm so sorry. I didn't know.

EVELYN. It's not allergies. Based on the screening questions, I'd guess current affairs. Or politics.

CAROL. Oh dear. I don't know anything about those things either!

WALTER. Maybe they want to hear from people who don't know anything. (*JEN enters. She's wearing yoga pants, a T-shirt and rain boots. Everyone looks up.*)

JEN. (*Speaking without a break, checking her phone frequently.*) Am I late? I am, right? Dammit! I had to drop my dude off at the bar cause he's too cheap for an uber -like, pay the damn thirteen dollars already. But whatever- I grab a quick one to loosen up for this talk-fest and next thing I know he's all 'isn't your thing starting?' And crap he's, like, right for once in his goddam life - can't be on time for me but knows when I'm late? But I'm three beers and four diet cokes in and my bladder's a frickin' bent firehose, so I run to the ladies to power pee but there's these pictures on the door and I gotta take a damn quiz to get in and, what the hell, am I supposed to be the cow? Like, isn't that sexist?! Whatever. By the time I MENSA my way in and drop trou it's a rush situation, ladies you feel me, right? And next thing I know there's splashing and pee is everywhere- like, even in my Tom's and shit I love those shoes- and why the hell is the toilet lid is down?! Like, seriously who the hell leaves the goddamm toilet lid down in a bar bathroom?! So I'm sopping up like crazy with those paper seat cover thingys- I mean, is a thin sheet of paper gonna save me from hepatitis or something? But now I'm totes late so I bolt out and change in the parking lot, and you're welcome for the free show Mr. Aldi's homeless guy. And trust me, I do not approve of active wear for like, work-ish stuff, but all I had in the car was this gym bag from that Pilates place I never went to and shit I gotta cancel that. Whatevs. Goin' commando is not how I roll but no one wants me sitting in pee-soaked underwear for the next - how long is this thing anyway? Anyone know?

EVELYN. Uh - hour and a half?

JEN. Right. (*Notices the others are eating.*) Oooh-sandwiches?

EVELYN. Table.

JEN. Check. (*Jen heads to the food table.*)

CAROL. (*Whispering.*) I think she has allergies. (*Tasha enters.*)

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TASHA. Hello everyone! I'm Tasha. I'll be leading our group today. Before we begin I need to let you know that my colleagues are listening in, eager to hear what you have to say.

JEN. Like the CIA?

TASHA. No no no. Nothing like that.

FRANK. Big Brother is always watchin'.

TASHA. Don't be nervous, just be yourselves.

EVERLYN. How would you know?

TASHA. What do you mean?

EVERLYN. We could say anything.

JEN. Like the internet!

TASHA. Here's my one rule: be honest. That's your job. Okay? My job is to make sure our conversation stays on track so I can thank you at the end with your honorarium check. Understood? *(Looks at Evelyn.)*

EVERLYN. Message received.

TASHA. Peachy! Let's start with introductions. Please share your name, your occupation, and something you like to do in your free time.

WALTER. Point of clarification- by "free time"- do you mean leisure time?

TASHA. Thank you so much for that question. Yes, share your favorite leisure time activities. I'll start. I'm Tasha and for my job I talk to interesting folks, like yourselves, on all sorts of topics. In my free time I enjoy good Southern cooking. Okay? *(Smiles.)* Who's next?

EVERLYN. I'm Evelyn. Part-time grad student. Full-time waitress.

WALTER. Don't forget "condiment connoisseur. "

EVERLYN. I'm also adept at spotting a good cookie, but *(Looks around.)* I don't see any.

TASHA. Yes, thank you, Evelyn. I promise to find us cookies before the evening's over. Walter, why don't you go next?

WALTER. As stated, my name is Walter. I'm employed as a corporate accountant. I know, you're all shocked.

JEN. Not really, dude.

EVERLYN. He was being sarcastic.

JEN. Ohhhhhhhh, I get it.

WALTER. My favorite pastimes include listening to classical music, completing the New York Times Sunday crossword puzzle, reading

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historical fiction and . . . belly dancing. *(Evelyn laughs.)*

JEN. Really?

WALTER. No.

TASHA. Thank you, Walter. Jen?

JEN. Yeah?

TASHA. Would you introduce yourself?

JEN. Yeah, so, I'm Jen. My TikTok is "JenStylesSeventySeven." I'm a hairdresser-slash-stylist-slash-social-media-influencer. Umm, what else?

TASHA. Free time?

JEN. Right! I heart my babies Kourtney and Khloe- don't believe what they say about pit bulls 'cause they're total snuggle bunnies. They're a ton of work but I love the crap outta them. Love my dude, too. He's also a ton of work. I need to dump his ass. Yeah? Who's next? *(Tasha smiles at Carol.)*

CAROL. Me? Oh! Sorry! I'm a mom, I guess. Is that okay? Six kids is kinda like a full time job. Is that enough? Sorry. I've never done this before.

TASHA. You're doing fine. Your name?

CAROL. Oh God! I'm sorry. It's Carol. I'm Carol.

TASHA. Any hobbies or things you like to do.

CAROL. Cleaning and shopping is pretty much all I do. Can't say they're hobbies since hobbies are things you're supposed to like. Aren't they? Sorry.

TASHA. That's fine, Carol. And last but not least-

FRANK. Frank. *(Beat.)* Retired cop. I like . . . *(Pause.)* Judge Judy.

TASHA. Okay. Anything else?

FRANK. Let me think . . . *(Awkward pause as Frank thinks and Tasha tries to decide when/if to prod.)*

FRANK. I like pie.

TASHA. Okay! Now that we know each other a little bit better, let's get started. While it may seem as though we're all very different, everyone here has something in common.

CAROL. Is it allergies? I don't have allergies. I'm sorry.

TASHA. It's not allergies. Everyone here . . . did not vote in the last Presidential election. *(Evelyn laughs.)*

CAROL. Is that bad?

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FRANK. I consider it a badge of honor.

WALTER. Point of clarification- I certainly would've voted, but I developed a serious sinus infection and unexpectedly spent the entire election day in the emergency room and was unable to make it to the polls in time. I must state for the record that I take my civic responsibility very seriously.

TASHA. It's okay, Walter. You're in good company. Roughly half of eligible voters do not participate in American elections on average. In fact, in some recent Presidential elections there were more total non-voters than voters for either candidate.

JEN. Whoa. So, like, the nobody we didn't vote for would've actually won, except there wasn't that nobody?

TASHA. Sort of. Today I want to find out why all of you don't vote.

WALTER. To be clear, under normal circumstances I certainly would have voted.

TASHA. I have noted that, Walter. I want to understand your reasons for not voting, including health issues and time constraints. Now, I know it may be hard, but I don't want us to talk about specific candidates, Presidents or even parties. We chose all of you because none of you have extreme political views. I want to hear the reasons you don't feel engaged in the voting process, whatever they may be. Everyone's opinion matters.

EVERLYN. A true democracy.

JEN. Ya' know, I think I'd vote if it was more entertaining.

FRANK. It's already a circus.

JEN. More like T.V.

EVERLYN. Like The Voice?

JEN. Yeah. With celebrity judges and huge-ass buttons.

TASHA. Okay, that's interesting. Do you prefer candidates who are celebrities?

EVERLYN. Like the bozo?

FRANK. You need to be more specific.

TASHA. No names, please. We don't want to get sidetracked.

EVERLYN. The orange-colored embarrassment.

TASHA. Evelyn-

EVERLYN. I didn't use a name.

WALTER. Don't forget, Reagan was a movie actor.

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EVELYN. The country is more into reality stars these days.

JEN. Like the Kardashians!

CAROL. Doesn't the President have to be an American?

WALTER. A President should be serious.

JEN. Someone from Survivor?

CAROL. I'm afraid I don't watch a lot of T.V.

TASHA. Does having a celebrity as a candidate make you more interested in voting?

FRANK. Judge Judy's a celebrity.

JEN. People love Below Deck.

WALTER. A Presidential candidate should have qualifications- elected office, knowledge of foreign affairs, a law degree.

FRANK. Judge Judy's a lawyer.

EVELYN. What about Zelensky?

WALTER. Touché.

CAROL. Was I wrong about the American citizen thing?

JEN. Does it have to be someone from TV? I mean, TikTok is way bigger.

WALTER. I propose someone with actual governing experience.

TASHA. Everyone! Let's focus, please. It sounds like perhaps some of you don't vote because you find typical politicians uninteresting.

CAROL. I kinda liked that clean-cut guy who ran for President awhile back. He seemed real business-y.

JEN. They're all business-y.

CAROL. He was tall.

WALTER. Historically, Presidents have been considerably taller than average humans.

FRANK. What was his name?

CAROL. Oh dear, I can't remember. Sorry! He was the one who didn't win.

EVELYN. I know who you're thinking of. That dippy Mormon.

WALTER. Wasn't Dippy Mormon a vaudeville comedian?

FRANK. Sounds like a sandwich- The Dippy Mormon.

EVELYN. What's on it?

TASHA. If we could please get back / to Carol's comment-

FRANK. Pastrami, pickles, Russian dressing.

EVELYN. Excellent choice of condiments.

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WALTER. If you have a death-wish.

JEN. I thought Mormons don't eat pastrami.

FRANK. You're thinking about Jews and pork.

TASHA. *(Clapping to get people's attention.)* Woo hoo, everyone, we're getting way off track here and we have limited time. Let's try writing some things down. What turns you off from voting? *(Tasha writes "dislikes" on the flip chart.)*

EVELYN. It's all about money. *(Tasha writes "about money" on the chart.)*

WALTER. Not entirely.

EVELYN. Elections are decided by how much money is spent. Plain and simple.

CAROL. I think the dippy Mormon had money.

JEN. So do the Kardashians.

FRANK. You know who's richer than all of them? Judge Judy!

TASHA. I must insist that we stay on topic.

EVELYN. Why?

TASHA. Excuse me?

EVELYN. You're working for some high-paying politician or PAC who wants to get us to vote for their guy, right? Whoever it is will just make the rich richer and we'll still get screwed in the end. Who cares!

FRANK. The fix is in.

TASHA. Voting is a way for you to have a voice. I'm curious why you choose to not exercise that power.

FRANK. Like the five of us could make a difference.

WALTER. "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world."

CAROL. That's a really nice thought.

JEN. Kylie Jenner said that.

WALTER. It's a quote from the anthropologist Margaret Mead.

JEN. Oh, well, Kylie totally retweeted it.

TASHA. Do you feel your vote doesn't matter?

WALTER. As I stated previously-

EVELYN. Why should we tell you anything?

WALTER. -I regularly vote.

TASHA. I assure you I have only good intentions.

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EVELYN. We're supposed to believe you?

TASHA. Yes!

FRANK. C'mon, lady. You think we're a joke. Can't say I blame ya'.

TASHA. Who says not voting is a bad thing? If you have more important things to worry about, maybe voting isn't a high priority.

EVELYN. Riiiiiiiiiiiiight.

TASHA. All I want to know are your reasons for not voting. No judgement.

EVELYN. And what do you plan to do with this information?

TASHA. Just answer my questions. We are paying you.

CAROL. I'm so sorry! Really!

EVELYN. You have GOT to stop apologizing.

TASHA. Carol, what do you care about?

CAROL. Oh gosh, well, honesty, I think. *(On the flip chart Tasha writes "wants" and "honesty" underneath.)*

FRANK. No one gets elected by being honest.

JEN. What about Abe Lincoln?

TASHA. Carol, why do you think honesty is important?

CAROL. I don't know. I guess I think it's important for people to be, you know, honest.

TASHA. Because . . .

CAROL. Because, well, it doesn't feel good to be lied to, right? *(Frank and Evelyn laugh.)*

FRANK. Every politician lies. It's all about what you can get away with.

JEN. Screw honest. Make sure he's not crazy like that North Korea guy. *(Tasha writes "not crazy" on the flip chart.)*

JEN. I mean, who cut his hair like that?

EVELYN. I agree- no crazy North Korea dictator with bad hair for President.

WALTER. His name is Kim Jong-un. Am I the only one who reads the newspaper?

EVELYN. I thought print was dead.

JEN. I get news from YouTube.

FRANK. Hey, lady, Democrats or Republicans?

TASHA. We're interested in the perspective of all Americans.

FRANK. No, who hired you- Democrats or Republicans?

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TASHA. That's not important.

EVELYN. How much do they pay you to do these things anyway? We get a hundred bucks and you get what, a thousand? Ten thousand?

WALTER. I'd say that's a minimum for reliable qualitative research.

FRANK. Follow the money.

EVELYN. You want us to bear our souls so you can make a lot of money.

JEN. Yeah.

TASHA. Oh for God's sake.

CAROL. I think a hundred dollars is very generous for an hour of my time.

WALTER. I'm not sure I even belong in this group.

FRANK. Lady, I don't think you're gonna get anything useful from us.

JEN. Maybe we should loosen up. I do shots before karaoke.

TASHA. Everyone- please! Stick to voting, I mean, not voting!

CAROL. I'm soooooo sorry!

EVELYN. *(To Carol.)* Girl, you need to get in touch with your coochie power.

CAROL. My WHAT?!

TASHA. That's enough! *(Participants' dialogue overlaps.)*

CAROL. I'm really very sorry!

JEN. What about wine?

TASHA. Please, everyone-

WALTER. Can you access voting records?

FRANK. You're wasting your time.

EVELYN. Maybe if we got a percentage of your fee, or at least some damn cookies.

TASHA. WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT FOR YOU PEOPLE TO STAY FOCUSED! *(Silence.)*

WALTER. I would like the record to reflect that I do, in fact, vote regularly. If you check the publicly available voting records / you'd see-

TASHA. We know, Walter! *(Gathers her composure.)* Everyone, I apologize for raising my voice, but it's extremely important that before our time is done, I understand what prevents you from voting. If you're familiar with history, or contemporary political philosophy, you recognize the /signs of- *(There is a knocking noise.)* Ignore that sound. Probably someone in the office above knocking over a chair.

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EVELYN. It came from the two-way mirror.

TASHA. Thanks ever so much, Evelyn. Since you are so very smart, perhaps you can tell me why you don't vote.

EVELYN. Well, Tasha, it's not worth my time. Elections come and go. Hell, democracies come and go. A few hundred years from now, possibly less, we'll be extinct and none of this will matter.

TASHA. But today, now, the course of your country could be decided by people choosing to forgo voting. My client wishes to understand the perspective of this potentially powerful group.

JEN. I totally bet it's a Kardashian.

FRANK. This isn't a collection of the best and brightest. No offense.

EVELYN. Now why would we find that offensive?

JEN. Did he call us stupid?

FRANK. The whole country has gone soft. Can't find your own two feet without the GPS. Can't think without asking the Google first. My own grandkids- glued to their phones. The sky could fall and they wouldn't look up.

TASHA. Okay, then, Frank, what do you think makes America- I mean, what should Americans be focused on? *(Tasha prepares to write Frank's answer on the flip chart.)*

FRANK. I think Americans should stay in their lane and keep out of other people's business.

WALTER. It may surprise you to know that I agree with many philosophies of Libertarianism.

EVELYN. Liar.

WALTER. Excuse me?

TASHA. Can we-

EVELYN. You don't want people to keep out of your business, Walter. Not when it comes to peanuts.

WALTER. That's a health concern.

FRANK. For you.

TASHA. Let's not get personal.

JEN. I WISH I had a peanut allergy! Girl workin' the chair next to me brought peanut brittle into the salon. That stuff is nasty! *(To Walter.)* Dude, you're lucky you can't have it. *(The door opens and ALEX enters.)*

ALEX. *(In Western accent.)* Howdy, folks! I sincerely apologize for my

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tardiness. Damn traffic. *(To Tasha.)* Pardon the interruption, Ma'am. I'm Alex and I'm here for the group.

TASHA. Why are- you're not- but we've already started! Latecomers are not permitted. It's not protocol.

ALEX. The other lady said it was fine.

TASHA. The other-? She's not- It's- I'm sorry, but no one can enter a group once it's started.

ALEX. Aw, c'mon now. Don't you wanna hear what I have to say?

TASHA. Sir, I don't want to be rude-

ALEX. Glad to hear it! Let me saddle up and join the conversation.

TASHA. But that's not- It isn't- *(Tasha makes a noise of exasperation.)*

Everyone, if you could hold on for just a moment. I need to clear up this . . . confusion. Don't talk about anything while I'm gone. *(Tasha exits. A brief silence.)*

ALEX. What's the topic at hand?

FRANK. Minding your own business.

ALEX. A hearty "Amen" to that! We need to get back to leaving people alone. Government wants my paycheck. Do-gooders wanna tell me what I can say and how to say it. I don't even recognize this country anymore.

EVELYN. According to our moderator, this group is very important.

ALEX. For what?

EVELYN. For ignoring politics, I think.

ALEX. Well, I happen to agree. This country belongs to us, the common people. Forget politicians with their fancy double-talk. Makes regular folk feel stupid.

JEN. It totally does.

ALEX. Why can't our elected officials be the type you could sit down and have a beer with?

JEN. Yeah!

ALEX. Let business do what it's supposed to do. Make money.

WALTER. Trust capitalism?

ALEX. It's what built our great country.

WALTER. Technically, our country was formed by taking land from the Native Americans through deceit and power.

ALEX. Are you saying the great country of America is full of liars?

WALTER. Not "full."

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ALEX. Do the rest of you believe our country is full of liars?

FRANK. In every case on Judge Judy somebody's lying. She figures out who's the liar and nails 'em. Man, it's satisfying.

CAROL. I still think lying's a bad thing.

ALEX. Truth is a matter of perspective.

WALTER. No. Lying is bad. Especially by those in power. *(To Evelyn.)* Are you gonna say anything?

EVELYN. I kinda wanna see where this is going.

JEN. You know, reality shows pretend to be "real" but producers totally make crazy shit happen. It's kinda like lying, but when someone's ex shows up at their wedding it's great T.V. - like that episode of My Crazy Ex with the exotic dancer and the tattoo artist- anyone see it? *(No response.)* Trust me- it was totally awesome.

ALEX. Indeed, ma'am, it is awesome.

WALTER. You can't forgive lying as if it's no big deal.

FRANK. All politicians lie like cheap linoleum. They all get re-elected.

WALTER. We must hold them accountable! Demand our representatives conduct themselves with integrity and- and- *(Walter is distracted by Alex opening a package of peanuts. Walter backs away.)* Sir, you may not be aware but I have a severe peanut allergy and I kindly request that you take those peanuts out of this room immediately! *(Everyone looks at Alex.)*

ALEX. I sympathize with your predicament, but I happen to love peanuts.

EVELYN. *(To Alex.)* Umm, he ain't kidding.

WALTER. Indeed. I am utterly serious. *(Alex takes a peanut, puts it into his mouth, and chews.)*

JEN. *(Takes out her cell phone and starts recording.)* Ohhhhhhh, this is gonna be good.

WALTER. You are endangering the life of a fellow human being!

ALEX. You are endangering my right to enjoy the snack of my choice.

CAROL. We have other snacks if you're hungry. And sandwiches!

EVELYN. All free.

ALEX. Thank you kindly, but I will stick with my peanuts.

WALTER. *(Grabs the writing pad from the easel and uses it as a shield. To Frank.)* You're the police- or former police. Isn't this reckless endangerment?!

FRANK. There's no law against eating peanuts in the presence of another

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citizen, even if that citizen has an allergy. It does not make him a criminal. It does, however, make him an asshole.

CAROL. I think there are potato chips. *(To Alex.)* Would you like some of those? And animal crackers. *(Runs to the snack table.)* Let's all have animal crackers. *(Alex takes a step closer to Walter, backing him up against the wall. Alex eats another peanut.)*

WALTER. You are all witnesses! I am being threatened with allergy-challenged violence!

EVELYN. *(To Alex.)* Are the peanuts necessary?

ALEX. Freedom is necessary! It's a sad day in this country when I cannot eat a simple peanut. *(Alex moves towards Walter, blocking him from the door.)*

FRANK. Alright, that's far enough. Another step and you could be charged with acting in a threatening manner.

JEN. *(To Frank.)* Dude, you could totally be on Judge Judy.

CAROL. *(Holds up bags.)* I have Animal Crackers! Four bags of Animal Crackers!

ALEX. I have been eating peanuts all my life and I am not gonna stop because some namby-pamby is afraid of an upset stomach.

WALTER. It's an ALLERGY!

EVELYN. If you people don't sit down they're gonna kick us all out without our hundred dollars!

CAROL. WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH ALL YOU PEOPLE! *(Everyone stares at Carol.)* You're children! All of you! Selfish, bratty children! Why won't you eat the goddamn Animal Crackers?! *(To Alex.)* Noooooooooooooo! You want your peanuts. *(To Evelyn.)* You want your hundred dollars. *(To Frank.)* You want to be left alone. News flash! You are not alone on this planet! *(To Walter.)* You want everyone to focus on your issues. *(To Jen.)* And you want- *(Jen looks up from her phone.)* -to drink yourself silly? *(Jen gives a "thumbs up.")* Oh! And leave bathrooms filled with pee! You know what it's like to clean a bathroom covered in pee? I do! I'm sick of all of you selfish, petty children!

JEN. I'm totally sending this to TMZ!

CAROL. Lady wants us to be honest? Well, it's MY turn now! You know it's really not that hard to be nice to people. I do it every damn day and guess what? I don't always feel like it! *(She paces.)* No one cares about

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human decency anymore. Your lives are sooooooo important you can't push your shopping cart an extra three feet into the corral? Oh! Oh! The red light running! Drivers risking our lives because they can't wait thirty seconds. No, it's me first. Me me me! I'm special! Everyone's sooooo special! Over the top kids' birthday parties with bouncy castles and gift bags. What happened to cake and a pinata? Presents for coming to a party?! Here's a trophy for doing absolutely nothing! Entitled, selfish children who turn into entitled, selfish adults. *(Screaming to the ceiling.)* You know what I want, moderator-lady?! I want people to give a crap about someone other than themselves. And I am NOT going to say I'm sorry for that!

EVELYN. Now that's coochie power. *(Carol grabs a bottle of water. Tries to drink but struggles with the squirt cap. Evelyn takes the bottle, twists off the cap, hands it back.)*

CAROL. Thank you.

EVELYN. Respect.

CAROL. *(Drinks, tosses water bottle aside and steps in front of Alex.)*

Give me the peanuts.

ALEX. No.

CAROL. Give. Me. The. Peanuts.

ALEX. Not. On. Your. Life! *(Carol stares at Alex. We hear western showdown music. They circle each other as if animals preparing for a fight. With a scream Carol lunges toward Alex and the scene snaps suddenly into slow-motion with everyone moving in exaggerated slow movements. Carol reaches for the bag of peanuts. Alex holds on to the bag. They struggle. Frank places a choke hold on Alex from behind. Jen stands on a chair filming the scene pumping her fist in the air. Walter slides along the wall, hoping to escape the fray. Evelyn opens a bag of chips and eats. Carol screams "Yaaaaaaaaah" and back pulls hard on Alex's grip. Alex screams "Aghhhhhh" and, as if arm wrestling, pulls both his and Carol's arms back. Carol finds sudden strength and pulls the arms back towards her. Alex roars and like a bear spreads his arms wide, releasing Carol's grip. Carol loses her balance and falls. Frank stumbles backwards as the bag of peanuts and its contents hurl slowly towards Walter. Walter ducks behind the large easel pad. Evelyn screams "Nooooooo," throws her chips to the side and dives in front of Walter to intercept the peanuts as if taking a bullet for a fellow soldier. The peanuts crash into Evelyn's chest and she*

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falls onto the conference table. The slow motion stops and Tasha enters the chaotic scene. Everyone looks at Tasha. Everyone looks at Carol.)

CAROL. NOT SORRY! *(There is a loud cracking sound. Everyone looks up. A large chunk of marble falls from the ceiling onto the floor. Blackout.)*

SCENE 2

Projection appears on stage: “Just because you do not take an interest in politics doesn’t mean politics won’t take an interest in you.” - Pericles.

The same focus group facility, the same night and time as the beginning of Act 1. We now see the client viewing room, and through the large two-way mirror we can see the focus group room (upstage). The focus group room looks exactly the same as the beginning of Act 1 except the walls have a faint pattern of roman columns. Through the two-way mirror we see Frank has just entered the focus group, joining Evelyn, Walter and Carol. We hear a few lines of dialogue (from Act 1) through the speaker system in the client room on low volume. (Note: the timing in Act 2 (shorter) will not exactly match Act 1. The scene behind the glass will need to move differently to match the cues.) The client room contains comfortable easy chairs, a table of catered food, including cookies, hot food in chaffing dishes, wine and multiple bowls of M&Ms. One chair is occupied by someone watching the group, but we cannot see who it is. Tasha enters the client room. She listens for a moment, then goes to a knob on the wall and turns the sound down.

TASHA. *(In Southern accent.)* We’re missing one. I’ll give it a few minutes. It’d be better with all five. *(The chair turns to face Tasha. It is Alex.)*

ALEX. *(In Russian.)* Zachem ty tak razgovarivayesh? *(Why are you talking like that?)*

TASHA. Now, now, darling. You said you wanted to work on your English.

ALEX. *(In Russian accent.)* I cannot tolerate that revolting accent.

TASHA. But sweetie pie, a sweet, Southern accent makes me seem less threatening. It comforts participants into sharing their feelings. *(Switching*

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to Russian accent.) You know I have to do it.

ALEX. It is repulsive.

TASHA. *(In Southern accent.)* My goodness! Is that any way to speak to your wife?

ALEX. Tonight is about business, Natasha.

TASHA. *(In Russian accent.)* After tonight, Alexi, you'll never have to hear it again.

ALEX. Not so fast. There is a lucrative opportunity to infiltrate America.

TASHA. I am returning to the University to finish my book.

ALEX. We play the cards right and we could have Russian power and American riches. Perfect combo!

TASHA. Tonight is the last group. We are completing the project and going home.

ALEX. I have shared our initial findings and our client is very pleased. We will become top American political consultants for all Russia. Then we can install allies and control from the inside. *(Alex pulls Tasha towards him.)* It is only the beginning.

TASHA. The report is not complete! We still have insight to gain on what I believe is the most efficient method to destabilize democracy. As long as Americans are voting-

ALEX. We have successful tactics for manipulating public opinion and controlling elections. Voting no longer matters. Cancel tonight's group!

TASHA. Our client would not be happy.

ALEX. The client is my problem. You listen to me, not to her.

(SVETLANA enters.)

TASHA. *(In Southern accent.)* Speak of the devil.

SVETLANA. *(In Russian accent.)* I am interrupted.

ALEX. Welcome Svetlana! We are always pleased when our client watches in person.

SVETLANA. Important investment requires supervision.

TASHA. How wonderful! We get to enjoy you and your extremely strong perfume up close.

SVETLANA. I see you have eaten much of the American food, Natasha.

TASHA. *(In Russian accent.)* Maybe you should not talk sometimes, Svetlana.

ALEX. It is time to start. *(Tasha looks into the focus group room and sees*

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Jen has arrived.)

TASHA. So it is.

ALEX. *(To Svetlana.)* We have recruited five participants to Natasha's specifications.

SVETLANA. I am much interested in your theory about no voting, Natasha. A new strategy to weaken America bringing interest to superiors and gain for me much approval. Important you find answer.

TASHA. I appreciate the pressure.

ALEX. You will not be disappointed.

SVETLANA. We see.

TASHA. *(In Southern accent.)* Alright, darlins', sit back and enjoy the show! *(Tasha turns the speaker knob up so we can hear the group. Jen is finishing her "pee" story. Tasha exits. Svetlana watches the group. Alex gets a drink. Through the "glass" we see Tasha enter the focus group. Alex turns the volume knob down, pulls Svetlana to him and kisses her. Svetlana pulls away.)*

ALEX. Do you think she knows?

SVETLANA. She is woman. Of course she knows.

ALEX. I can handle her.

SVETLANA. Women are smarter than you thinking, Alexi.

ALEX. I do not underestimate you, Svetlana. You had vision for the American solution. All of Russia will celebrate you.

SVETLANA. When I am in position of highest power I will take victory run.

ALEX. Zayka, I have been thinking about a different way for you to get what you want. For us to get what we want.

SVETLANA. Do not make steps, Alexi.

ALEX. What if instead of giving Russia all our knowledge about how to manipulate the Americans, we keep the secrets and become the puppet masters? Then we can make Russians and Americans fight for our intelligence with their money.

SVETLANA. That is not objective, Alexi. We help Mother Russia destroy America and impress highest levels for to me receive promotion of promise.

ALEX. You must think beyond your position.

SVETLANA. You forget you are person working to me.

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ALEX. Russia will come begging to us when we hold the strings. Better than promotion. Yes? *(Alex begins kissing her neck.)*

SVETLANA. *(Pushing him off.)* You jeopardize mission.

ALEX. You should listen to my superior strategy.

SVETLANA. You should learning from American men how understand women as equal. Even these idiots see women can be of power. Stupid men always thinking they know better than me. Ministry refuses me important roles because of childbearing. Brother always behind at Institute but now is superior position? “Look how high your brother has risen, Svetlana! He improves family name and helps you for marrying.” *(Screams in frustration.)* I showing Father. I show all of them. No more looking over.

ALEX. It’s okay, my little pancake. With the power I will have, I will give you whatever position you choose.

SVETLANA. You! *(Laughs.)* Natasha is weapon of secret. You lucky she saving your hiding.

ALEX. Natasha is good only because I have trained her.

SVETLANA. Natasha has study of political philosophies. She has best idea for to turn American apathy into sheep for herding. We see tonight her proof.

ALEX. I studied the playbook of the greats. I know these Americans best and how to use their fear against themselves. We don’t need this “Tasha.”

SVETLANA. Nyet! You and I no longer make as lovers. Project shall not be in the jeopardy.

ALEX. After tonight I will leave Natasha, you will forget government promotion, and together we will become masters of both countries!

SVETLANA. Enough! *(Svetlana turns up the volume and we hear the group. Evelyn: The country is more into reality stars these days. Jen: Like the Kardashians! Carol: Doesn’t the President have to be an American? Alex turns down the volume to get Svetlana’s attention. Stands between her and the knob.)*

ALEX. You see! They think their country is for entertainment. Our job is easy.

SVETLANA. Alexi, I must listen! *(Svetlana tries to turn the volume back up. Alex stops her.)*

ALEX. I show you how to make them do our bidding. I can make these

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simpletons follow me into bedlam.

SVETLANA. They not falling for simple tricking.

ALEX. Do not overestimate them. *(Alex turns up the volume to prove his point, pours a glass of wine for himself and for Svetlana as she listens.*

Evelyn: Wait I know who you're thinking of. The dippy Mormon! Walter: Wasn't Dippy Mormon a vaudeville comedian? Frank: Sounds like a sandwich- The Dippy Mormon. Alex brings Svetlana the wine and turns the volume back down.)

SVETLANA. You have point.

ALEX. We must increase divisions to spread like virus.

SVETLANA. That is old Russia plan. I want new idea, like Natasha. I must do bigger to give father pride, Alexi. He forgetting clown of brother when seeing my smart way to destroying world power.

ALEX. Forget about your father, your brother, Russia! The world will be ours.

SVETLANA. You become like the Americans, Alexi. Only care about own person.

ALEX. I care about you, Svetlana.

SVETLANA. I want to achieve with intelligence. This research. Natasha's research. *(Svetlana turns the volume up as Tasha is losing her cool. Tasha: Everyone- please! Stick to voting, I mean, not voting!)*

ALEX. I know what you need, my little fish.

SVETLANA. Shhh! *(Evelyn: Girl, you need to get in touch with your coochie power. Carol: My WHAT?! Tasha: That's enough!)*

ALEX. This "Tasha" is no master. *(Alex rummages through the food and snacks, clearly looking for something.)*

SVETLANA. You snacking? Too much time in America. *(Alex finds a package of peanuts.)*

ALEX. You think small, my pet.

SVETLANA. Oh! Am I being woman?! Do I need to do housework? Check menstruation chart?! *(Alex knocks on the two-way mirror to bring Svetlana's attention to the focus group.)*

ALEX. You see what Natasha has done? She has no control. I will do what she cannot.

SVETLANA. Tasha bringing answers.

ALEX. *(In Western accent.)* Beg your pardon, ma'am, but I reckon' I'm

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needed to save the day.

SVETLANA. Why you sounding like cowboy?

ALEX. So long, crocodile! *(Alex darts out of the room before Svetlana has the chance to stop him. Svetlana paces, cursing to herself in Russian and nervously eating M&Ms. We see Alex enter the focus group room.)*

SVETLANA. Nyet! Yea ne budu sbroshena so schetov drugim chelovekom! (I will not be discounted by another man!) *(Svetlana takes a large handful of M&Ms into her mouth, jumbling her speech.)* Stupid men always barging like bulls into china store. You no Joe Wayne, Alexi! You hear me! *(Svetlana takes the bowl of M&Ms, finds another bowl, combines them and eats as she rants to herself.)* I should be favorite! Ignorant brother- has head of the cow! *(Svetlana sees Tasha exit the focus group room. She turns down the volume. Tasha enters.)*

TASHA. What is going on?!

SVETLANA. *(Spits out the M&Ms and puts the bowl down.)* Ya ne mogla yego ostanovit! (I could not stop him!)

TASHA. You said you wanted to learn.

SVETLANA. Argh! I no control him!

TASHA. I fear he will ruin everything!

SVETLANA. Not everything. Alexi out of room gives to us opportunity. *(Svetlana embraces and kisses Tasha passionately.)*

TASHA. Do you think he knows?

SVETLANA. He is man. Of course he does not know.

TASHA. I cannot put up with his bravado any longer.

SVETLANA. After tonight, all being over. You guide group to suck- suck- es- *(Makes noise in frustration.)* to win. I take care of Alexi. *(Tasha kisses Svetlana's hand. The two women touch each other lovingly as they talk.)*

TASHA. It is torture to know you are watching so close, yet I cannot touch you. We must get rid of him.

SVETLANA. We need goat to escape if project does not suck- suck-

TASHA. *(Relieving her struggle.)* Succeed.

SVETLANA. If failure, I report him to ministry for treason.

TASHA. If success, he will take all credit.

SVETLANA. No to worry, my milkshake. I have Kompromat. I not daughter of KGB officer for nothing. How is group? We have answers?

TASHA. You haven't listened?

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SVETLANA. Alexi made impossible.

TASHA. It could be better.

SVETLANA. I believe you can bring destruction to Americans elections most quickly. I convince Russia to back theory of evidence when research supporting.

TASHA. We are close. There is much disdain for their own government, declining support for rule of law. But I need the key to complete disenfranchisement. I want absolute certainty.

SVETLANA. You have eye for perfection. It is what I love about you. The world settles.

TASHA. I have not settled with you, my darling. *(Tasha and Svetlana embrace. Over Svetlana's shoulder Tasha sees the action heating up in the focus group room. She turns up the volume and we hear Carol mid-rant.)*

SVETLANA. It appears this one has found the power of the coochie.

TASHA. I've got to get back in there!

SVETLANA. I trust you. Go! *(Tasha rushes out. The fight ending Act 1 is playing out in the focus group at full speed.)*

SVETLANA. Must trust in plan. Trust in Natasha. It is fine. It is good. Yes? *(Svetlana reaches for the M&Ms and watches as Evelyn takes the peanut "bullet" and Tasha rushes in.)*

SVETLANA. It is . . . dyeremo (shit)! *(Svetlana holds the bowl over her head and dumps M&Ms directly into her mouth. Blackout. In the darkness we hear the same large cracking sound from Act 1, but this time it spreads as if expanding across a lake of ice.)*

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—
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