

HIGH MAINTENANCE

By

Peter Ritt

HIGH MAINTENANCE

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for Emily, Hannah, and Ben

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CHARACTERS

Laura Miller — Female. Mid-30s to early 40s. A disgraced but well-known sci-fi TV star looking to change her image. She's becoming cynical about the acting profession, but there's still hope. Laura's a hard worker, but not a natural people person, so friendliness takes effort. Nevertheless, when she does let her defenses down, she can be incredibly warm — and when she gets caught in a romance, she can lose herself entirely.

Roger — Male. Early 30s. A robot, built as a nursing assistant. Has a childlike innocence, but can be intimidating when challenged. Roger is always thinking, and for a time, genuinely believes he is limitless (his version of youth). On some level, too, he enjoys companionship.

Gus Ziegler — Male. Mid-30s to early 40s. Gay. Laura's personal assistant and high school friend. Gus has an attack-dog energy, and some of Laura's "reputation" may be due to him. He is deeply protective of Laura, yet lives to pick up the pieces whenever one of her relationships falls apart. Gus is outspoken, lacking in style, and can be conspiracy-minded at times.

Alan Steele — Male. Early 40s to late 50s. Head of Capstone Technologies' Robotics Division. A slick, confident salesman with an underlying need for validation. He was rejected by show business once and now hopes to conquer it. Alan thinks all setbacks can be overcome with a little showmanship.

Vera Osborne — Female. Mid-40s to early 60s. Artistic director of the Lakeshore Playhouse, and seasoned stage actor. Very bombastic, and crude on occasion, but with a sharp eye for business. At this point in her career, Vera's more focused on her theatre's survival than on the types of shows it puts on. She is a force when she walks into a room and can only be disarmed by getting caught in an anecdote.

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Samm — Female. 20s. A soft-spoken stage manager at the Lakeshore Playhouse, and occasional actor. Sann has climbed the Lakeshore theatre ranks since interning, and now works multiple jobs to support herself and pay off student loans. She aspires to have Vera’s job one day.

Thesbot Prime — Male. Early 30s. A prototype automated performer, designed from the start to be an actor. Curious about the world, but more petulant than Roger, owing to being conscious for a very brief time.

Voice/Announcer/Reporters (3)/Patron — N/A. At a director’s discretion, these roles can either be pre-recorded or performed live.

NOTE

This play contains excerpts from Henrik Ibsen’s “A Doll’s House.” They were taken from R. Farquharson Sharp’s public-domain translation, provided by Project Gutenberg at www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2542.

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PRODUCTION HISTORY

“High Maintenance” had its world premiere on April 12, 2024, at The Road Theatre Company in North Hollywood, California, under the artistic direction of Taylor Gilbert. The cast and crew were as follows:

CAST

Laura	Ivy Khan
Roger.....	Christian Prentice
Gus	Merrick McCartha
Alan.....	Kris Frost
Vera.....	Amy Tolsky
Samm	Alexis Ingram
Thesbot Prime.....	Tommy Dickie

ALTERNATE CAST

Laura	Kalinda Gray
Roger.....	Charlie Farrell
Gus	Amir Levi
Alan.....	Dirk Etchison
Vera.....	Laura Gardner
Samm	Tally McCormack
Thesbot Prime.....	Chase Cargill

PRODUCTION TEAM

Director	Stan Zimmerman
Playwright.....	Peter Ritt
Producers	Danna Hyams & Taylor Gilbert
Assistant Director	Destinee Stewart
Production Stage Manager....	Maurie Gonzalez
Production Coordinator	Darryl Johnson
Assistant Stage Manager.....	Bex Taylor-Klaus
Set Design.....	Brian Graves
Lighting Design	Derrick McDaniel
Sound Design.....	David B. Marling

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Projection Design..... Ben Rock
Costume Design..... Jenna Bergstraesser
Prop Design Scottie Nevil
Fight Choreography Brian Graves
Artwork..... Sharon March
Publicist David Elzer
Production Photographer Peggy McCartha
Program Design Danny Gomez-Blumenfeld
Set Construction..... Brian Graves

PRAISE FOR “HIGH MAINTENANCE”

“With the current threat of AI generated digital characters taking over roles portrayed by human actors, congratulations go to playwright Peter Ritt on his comical exploration of the hot topic in his new play *High Maintenance*.” — Shari Barrett, *The Gardena Valley News*

“A timely and clever comedy.” — Elaine Mura, *Splash Magazines*

“Cleverly written by Peter Ritt... From the outset, *High Maintenance* keeps observers guessing about the direction it’s going to take and the messages it will ponder about the encroachment, or enrichment, of big tech in theatre, as well as the ensuing questions it can pose for the automated entities themselves.” — Imaan Jalali, *LAexcites*

“A fine play brilliantly produced and full of fun and wry ironic humor.” — Samantha Simmonds-Ronceros, *NoHo Arts District*

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SCENE 1

Lights up. The words “Flash Forward Technology Expo” are projected on the back wall.

VOICE. (*Voiceover.*) The following announcement was created, written, and voiced by AI...

ANNOUNCER. (*Voiceover.*) Ladies and gentlemen, welcome back to the Flash Forward Technology Expo here in Dallas. We hope you’ve enjoyed this weekend’s programming so far. Before we begin, I’d kindly ask you to familiarize yourself with the emergency exits located throughout the theatre. Your safety is of the utmost priority and these exits are clearly marked for your convenience. I must emphasize that there should be no recording or photography during the presentation. We want to make sure that everyone feels comfortable and that the focus remains on the insightful content being shared. Please refrain from capturing any visuals or audio as we delve into this valuable discussion. Additionally, we kindly request you turn off or silence your cellphones for the duration of this presentation. This will ensure that everyone can fully immerse themselves in the magic unfolding on stage without any distraction. It is now our great pleasure to introduce the head of Capstone Technologies’ Robotics Division: Mr. Alan Steele! (*The audience applauds as music plays.*

ROGER enters dressed in a dark turtleneck, sport jacket, and slacks.)

ROGER. Thank you, thank you very much... About a year ago, I was invited to dinner with an old friend of mine, Mr. Don Shanks, who some of you may know as the CEO of Good Samaritan — the number one producer of medical training videos in the world. Now Don has a reputation as the Roger Corman of medical videos. He works fast, has an eye for talent, and

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is incredibly cheap. Likewise, he'd heard that I was involved with a program to build robotic nursing assistants, and that one of their primary functions was to perform CPR. Looking to save money on casting, Don had an unusual pitch: could a robot play the lead in his next film? I wasn't sure, but I have dabbled in acting, and I do recognize a break when I see one... So I said, "Alright, I'll show up with our latest model, 'The Resuscitator.' I just hope you have a charging station at craft services." *(Laughs.)* To everyone's surprise but mine, the bot was a natural! He hit every line on the first take, didn't hurt any of the talent, and never once asked for a bathroom break. More importantly though, the video has been in circulation ten months, and not once — not one single time — has anyone commented on the EMT with perfectly timed chest compressions. That, I believe, could be the future of the entertainment business. And you, my friends, will be the first to see this video with the full knowledge that one of the actors is an automated performer. *(Adds.)* Without signing an NDA, that is. Let's see if you can guess which one... Okay, we can bring that screen down now! *(Roger looks up expectantly. ALAN STEELE runs on, dressed identically to Roger.)*

ALAN. Stop! Hold on! What are you doing up there?

ROGER. *(Calling offstage.)* Security!

ALAN. *(To audience.)* Hi, everyone. I'm Alan Steele, head of —

ROGER. No, he's not! I'm Alan Steele! *(Calling offstage again.)*

Somebody! Get this man offstage!

ALAN. *(Overlapping.)* I'm here to give a talk! On acting! Automated acting!

ROGER. *(Overlapping.)* I'm really sorry about this! I've never met this person!

ALAN. *(Breaking through.)* No, seriously! I'm the real Alan Steele!

ROGER. *(To Alan.)* Oh yeah? And what does that make me?

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ALAN. Truthfully? *(He takes out a small silver remote and presses it. Roger hunches over, accompanied by a “shut down” sound.)* A damn good actor. *(He faces the audience.)* Ladies and gentlemen, I’d like to introduce you to Thesbot One, the world’s first fully functional automated performer. *(Alan clicks the remote, and Roger springs up with a sound.)*

ROGER. But please, call me “Roger.” *(The audience applauds.)*

ALAN. I’m sure there must be questions from the press. *(He points to the back.)* Yes. You in back!

REPORTER 1. *(Voiceover.)* That was quite an impressive display!

ALAN. Thank you.

REPORTER 1. *(Voiceover.)* But where do you see this going?

ALAN. Glad you asked. Big places! We’re very excited to announce that Roger will be making his stage debut as Torvald, in a production of Henrik Ibsen’s “A Doll’s House”! You heard right... And he’ll be doing it at the Lakeshore Playhouse in Chicago, one of the nation’s most acclaimed regional theatres!

REPORTER 1. *(Voiceover.)* With an all-automated cast?

ALAN. Nope, local actors and brace yourselves... television superstar, Laura Miller! *(A murmur from the room.)* That’s right. Previously Captain Zara Pyre from the hit sci-fi TV show — “Starship Ravenica.” *(Pointing.)* You over there!

REPORTER 2. *(Voiceover.)* Wait a minute! A real play with *real* people. Isn’t that kind of a leap?

ALAN. It’s not a kind of leap; it’s a quantum leap. We’re going to find out whether Roger’s built for the big time!

REPORTER 2. *(Voiceover.)* Still, is he ready to go head-to-head with Laura Miller? An actor reputed to be... well... high maintenance.

ALAN. What better test of his mettle than an equally spirited co-star? I’ll take one more question. You!

REPORTER 3. *(Voiceover.)* But what if she destroys him?

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ALAN. My boy's no amateur. He has one other acting credit: the male love interest in a streaming Christmas movie this past holiday season! There, too, nobody noticed! *(Alan points his remote at Roger with a sound. Roger steps forward, drops to one knee, and mimes opening a ring box — as though proposing to Alan.)*

ROGER. “Sometimes, Celia, you have to come home for Christmas to find Christmas... at home. *(Roger turns his head and smirks at the audience.)*

ALAN. Yes, our programmers have even found a way to synthesize charm! *(Roger gets up.)* Okay, then. Guess we'll see you all in Chicago! Take a bow, Roger. Or better yet, go into “Red Carpet” mode!

ROGER. Activate “Red Carpet” mode. *(An assault of flashbulbs. Roger waves and strikes several vogue poses. We go from flashbulbs to blackout as the audience applauds.)*

SCENE 2

Three weeks later. A private dressing room at the Lakeshore Playhouse in Chicago. A vanity table and chair. SAMM straightens a vase of fresh hydrangeas on the vanity. A knock at the door.

SAMM. *(Calling.)* Almost ready! *(She runs to open the door.)* Hope you like it... *(LAURA MILLER enters, in designer sunglasses and a coat, with GUS ZIEGLER.)*

SAMM. It normally houses three actors, but I took out a divider and six of the cast have agreed to share a space!

LAURA. It's lovely. But really, all I need is a closet.

SAMM. That's where the other actors are staying! We are so grateful to have you here, Ms. Miller!

LAURA. Please, call me Laura.

SAMM. Really?

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LAURA. Yes. I insist.

GUS. (*Noticing the flowers.*) Laura, look. Hydrangeas!

LAURA. Oh, I love them. They're my favorites!

SAMM. I know. I heard you mention that on a couple podcasts. So, I got up early and went to the farmers' market.

LAURA. Well, now you're my favorite!

SAMM. I am?! Oh, my God. No way. Could I add you to my socials?

(*Instantly embarrassed.*) Sorry! Completely inappropriate. Shifting gears.

What else, what else... (*Nervously checking her notes.*) Ah, yes! Cast meet-and-greet is at two, call time for the read-through is three. Your attendance at the former is optional, only if you want, and I can look into getting the latter pushed back if you'd rather — (*Samm hurries to the door.*)

LAURA. No, no, please, I really want you to treat me like anyone else here. For the next month and a half, I'm but a "humble laborer." (*Laura removes her glasses. Gus clears his throat, in a scoff. Samm turns to Laura.*)

SAMM. But you're... you!

LAURA. I mean it, Samm.

SAMM. Okay... (*Then, in one breath.*) In that case, workplace sensitivity training is in ten minutes!

LAURA. You weren't gonna invite me?

SAMM. We assumed being a network star...

LAURA. (*Finishing.*) That I'm already sensitive? Not after going "O" and five at the Emmys. (*Samm laughs a little too big, snorts, then catches herself.*)

SAMM. Oh God, it wasn't that funny. I mean, it was funny, just my reaction was a bit — I'll leave! Leaving now. But I'm actually in the same spot. Let me know if you need anything! (*She runs out. The door slams. A beat. The door creaks open as she reappears.*) Sorry, didn't mean to slam

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it like that. And I'm still here. Leaving again. But more delicately this time. (*Samm slowly backs out of the room. Pause.*)

LAURA. Wow.

GUS. I give this "humble laborer" thing a week.

LAURA. We said in LA we weren't gonna do this.

GUS. I'm not doin' anything...

LAURA. You're insinuating.

GUS. Doesn't mean you have to pick up on it.

LAURA. I'm well aware you disapprove.

GUS. It's just so beneath you! You'll be acting next to a refrigerator!

LAURA. My understanding is it costs thirty times that...

GUS. It's a gimmick! You're above gimmicks.

LAURA. I like to think of it as a nice halfway point between genre television and serious drama. You put me with a robot, and you throw a little Ibsen in...

GUS. "A spoonful of sci-fi makes the tragedy go down?"

LAURA. Something like that.

GUS. A tell-all book about your latest showmance would be better. We both know you've got plenty of tea to spill.

LAURA. That I don't wish to. I've moved on from Dax. Done. Healed. (*She removes her coat and tosses it to Gus. He starts offstage with it, then does a swift U-turn as she continues, riled up.*) I thought if we held out together, I could finally get paid the same as him. But oh no, what does he go and do?! He makes a deal. Behind my back. For a spin-off. Next thing I know, the network cancels our show, I get branded the "difficult" one, and now I'm a total pariah in Hollywood!

GUS. Healed. Right... (*Now, Gus puts her coat away.*)

LAURA. Well, he hurt me. He said he had my back. I had every right to give him a piece of my mind. (*Gus returns.*)

GUS. You burned down half the Warner lot.

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LAURA. I merely tossed a cigarette at him. That burned down half the Warner lot! Luckily, I gave up smoking.

GUS. Court ordered.

LAURA. Your point?

GUS. My point: all that is good for a juicy memoir/slash/made-for-TV movie.

VERA. (*Offstage.*) Laura! Laura Miller! (*VERA OSBORNE enters.*)

GUS. Ooh, delivery with our food.

VERA. Artistic director with salutations. Vera Osborne! Bring it in, Laura! (*Before Laura can respond, Vera pulls her in for a tight hug.*)

LAURA. Oh yes, we spoke online...

VERA. Onscreen, you were a sight. In person, you are a VISION! (*Gus clears his throat. She breaks the hug.*) And you. Who could forget that face, George?

GUS. Gus.

VERA. Gus, right! (*To Laura.*) Your assistant.

GUS. Person!

VERA. Huh?

LAURA. He's my "person." You name it, Gus does it.

GUS. Confidant, therapist, bestie, wingman —

LAURA. We've known each other since high school. Went to prom together.

VERA. No! Really?

GUS. Really. I was more butch then. Like you.

LAURA. (*Interceding.*) Vera, I cannot tell you how excited I am to start rehearsals.

VERA. We all are. I trust Samm's given you a tour of the place.

LAURA. Yep.

VERA. Excellent, then if your "person" wouldn't mind stepping outside for a sec, I had a matter I'd like to discuss in pri —

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GUS. Anything you say to her will circle back to me anyway.

LAURA. Probably through a shot glass... (*Laura and Gus high-five.*)

VERA. Very well, I just wanted to say I'm a big, big fan! Not just of your acting, that of course. But your politics.

LAURA. I try to attend marches. I think it's important to use your voice to stand up for —

VERA. No, I meant, when you burnt down the studio! Man, that was kick ass!

LAURA. Oh, that wasn't really anything...

VERA. What are you talkin' about, you spoke your mind! You showed those corporate sons-of-bitches who's boss!

LAURA. Thank you?

VERA. Never try anything like that here! But still, love your energy!

LAURA. Trust me, I've paid a steep price for it.

VERA. It's our gain though. We now have a veteran sci-fi star to complement our amateur one...

GUS. So, you're a fan of "Starship Ravenica"?

VERA. Haven't seen a frame of it! And to tell you the truth, I hate these stupid gimmicks — pandering to genre. The younger members of the board think I indulge in them to show I'm still with the times. But the reality is the theatre is a living, breathing animal. A chimera of art, commerce, and politics; and it has strange appetites! And right now, it's craving spectacle! And butts in seats. So if we have to shove a machine into its angry maw! Shove a machine we shall! For it's all to ensure the theatre survives into a new generation! A task we must all put above ourselves!

LAURA. I couldn't agree more!

VERA. I'll see you at the meet-and-greet then? (*Vera starts for the door.*)

LAURA. At two, right?

VERA. Right. But the machine won't be there.

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LAURA. It won't?

VERA. They're running some last-minute tests. Hair, makeup, that sort of thing.

LAURA. With a little luck, I might be the *second* most difficult part of this show.

VERA. Don't! *(Then, brightly.)* You and me, kid! We're gonna save the theatre! *(Vera exits.)*

GUS. She's a delight.

LAURA. Stop.

GUS. Too late. *(He starts out.)* I'm gonna go see if your apartment is ready. Enjoy sensitivity training.

LAURA. You don't want to stay for it?

GUS. Wouldn't work. I'm a dead nerve. *(Gus exits.)*

LAURA. *(To herself.)* So true. *(Laura heads to the vanity.)*

GUS. *(Offstage.)* Heard that! *(Laura reacts. Blackout.)*

SCENE 3

Hours later. The Lakeshore Playhouse Mainstage. Laura enters, walks downstage and takes it all in.

LAURA. *(Exhales.)* Ah, how I've missed you... *(Alan enters, dressed in business-casual attire. He greets Laura stage center.)*

ALAN. Laura Miller. I don't believe we've met...

LAURA. You must be — may we shake hands?

ALAN. We may. *(Laura and Alan shake.)*

LAURA. Much warmer than I thought.

ALAN. Oh, no. I'm not your co-star. He is. *(Alan points offstage as Roger rapidly enters and gets uncomfortably close to Laura.)*

ROGER. Ms. Miller. *(Roger offers his hand and Laura takes it. They shake.)*

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LAURA. *(To Alan.)* His is actually warmer than yours. *(Quickly catching herself.)* No! I didn't mean it like that.

ALAN. *(Assuring.)* I understand. Beyond labor concerns, there's a lot of stereotypes about robots. We've tried to alleviate them as best we can.

LAURA. It's the first day. I'm sure it'll take us both time to find our footing.

ALAN. Oh, Roger's already well versed in anything Laura Miller.

LAURA. Really?

ROGER. "Space is nothing like as deep as the soul."

LAURA. *(Confused, to Alan.)* I don't...

ROGER. It's one of your lines. Season three, episode eight. *(Roger makes the "Starship Ravenica" hand gesture — a fist extended toward the audience, with a raised pinky.)*

LAURA. Oh, wow. I had so much dialogue, once we'd filmed it, I was on to the next episode.

ROGER. Maybe you need more storage capacity. *(Laura laughs.)*

LAURA. *(To Alan.)* He's funny.

ALAN. He'll get funnier the more he gets to know you. Roger and I have been together so long, he knows me better than I do... He's a quick learner.

LAURA. I like to think I am too. But for the first week or two, all I'll be doing is bumping into furniture and calling "line."

ROGER. Calling the line what?

LAURA. *(To Alan.)* It's a theatrical expression. I'll be asking the stage manager what my line is.

ALAN. You can talk to him. It's preferred.

LAURA. Of course. *(To Roger.)* Asking the stage manager's help when I forget a line.

ROGER. You don't know all your lines yet?

ALAN. Forgive him. He has a learning AI. He's forever asking questions.

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LAURA. *(To Alan.)* You mean he's already — *(Alan motions to Roger. She turns.)* Sorry, you're completely off-book?

ROGER. *(To Alan.)* Is that like "offline"?

LAURA. Off-book means "memorized."

ROGER. Oh, then yes. I am. In seventy-eight languages.

ALAN. *(To Laura.)* Fortunately, you're only on the hook for one. *(Vera enters.)*

VERA. Hello, my beautiful actors. I see you've met. Don't they make a handsome couple?

LAURA. We do pair nicely.

VERA. I want it to appear that way from afar, but the longer you look, the more something seems amiss. Like a rhinoplasty that's gone horribly wrong! Only our impediment will be one of the heart — or lack thereof — as we lean into our "diverse" casting. And make this piece feel timeless! Speaking of, we'll be using the original text, but staging on a modern set, with our high-tech lead. *(She indicates Roger.)* In order to represent past, present, and future on stage! Shall we begin?

LAURA. Shouldn't we wait for the other actors?

VERA. Sent them home.

LAURA. Why?

VERA. I'm unorthodox. Screw the table read. This play is about the two of you. So, let's play! *(Vera starts for the back of the house.)*

LAURA. *(To Alan.)* I'm up for it if you are. Or he is.

ALAN. Yes! Let's give it a go!

VERA. *(Offstage.)* Great! *(To Alan.)* You. Crazy man. Off my stage!

ALAN. O Captain! My Captain! *(Alan runs offstage.)*

VERA. *(Offstage.)* From the top then!

ROGER. *(Looking up.)* Top of...?

LAURA. *(Sotto, to Roger.)* It's another theatrical expression. Meaning "the beginning of the play."

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ROGER. Registered. (*Roger “registers” it with a sound.*)

VERA. (*Offstage.*) Laura Miller, start upstage. Roger, enter from offstage right. (*Roger methodically crosses offstage.*) Okay, then. Ready when you are! (*The following is from Act One of Henrik Ibsen’s “A Doll’s House.” It is Nora’s first scene with her husband, Torvald, taking place in their apartment.*)

TORVALD/ROGER. (*Offstage.*) Is it my little squirrel bustling about? (*Laura mimes opening a bag of macaroons.*)

NORA/LAURA. Yes, it is!

TORVALD/ROGER. (*Offstage.*) Is that my little lark twittering out there?

NORA/LAURA. Yes!

TORVALD/ROGER. (*Offstage.*) When did my squirrel come home?

NORA/LAURA. Just now. (*She mimes eating from the bag.*) Come in here, Torvald, and see what I have bought.

TORVALD/ROGER. (*Offstage.*) Don’t disturb me! (*He enters, then stares at Laura. Breaking character.*) Why do you keep doing that with your hands?

LAURA. I’m miming.

ROGER. Miming? Like Marcel Marceau.

LAURA. What?

ROGER. The French mime artist most famous for his stage persona, “Bip the Clown.” Performed professionally worldwide for more than six decades. (*Roger mimes a wall, then pulls a rope, then rests against a ledge.*)

VERA. (*Offstage.*) What the hell is he doing?!

ALAN. (*Offstage.*) Pop culture free association. I can hide that feature later.

VERA. (*Offstage.*) Please.

LAURA. (*To Roger.*) I was pretending to eat macaroons.

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ROGER. Why don't you have them with you?

LAURA. Because we don't rehearse with real food at the beginning.

ROGER. Why?

(Laura turns out to Vera for help.)

VERA. *(Offstage.)* May we continue with the dialogue? *(Roger nods.)*

TORVALD/ROGER. Bought, did you say? All these things? Has my little spendthrift been wasting money again?

NORA/LAURA. Yes but, Torvald, this year we really can let ourselves go a little. This is the first Christmas that we have not needed to economize.

(Roger approaches, his anger disproportionate to Laura's tone.)

TORVALD/ROGER. Still, you know, we can't spend money recklessly!

NORA/LAURA. Pooh! We can borrow until the New Year.

TORVALD/ROGER. *(Shouting.)* Nora! The same little featherhead! Suppose, now, that I borrowed fifty pounds today, and you spent it all — *(Roger grabs Laura's ear.)*

LAURA. Ow!

ROGER. *(Releasing Laura; to Vera.)* That's not the line.

SAMM. First aid coming in! *(Samm rushes onstage with a first aid kit and starts tending to Laura. Alan follows.)*

ALAN. Sorry about that!

VERA. *(Offstage.)* What happened?!

ALAN. In fairness, I believe the script does call for Torvald to playfully grab Nora's ear... *(Vera steps back onstage.)*

VERA. "Playfully" being the operative word.

ROGER. Did I do something wrong?

ALAN. You were a little rough, Rodge. Let's drop aggression by five points.

ROGER. Dropping five points. *(Roger's head drops, then bounces up with a sound.)*

LAURA. He couldn't hurt me, could he? *(Samm steps aside.)*

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ALAN. No, you just need to sync up more. See, it takes Roger a while to learn someone's emotional cues; how to proportion his responses... And there can be some, well, awkwardness. It also probably didn't help that I showed him those "Starship Ravenica" episodes. He must've overcompensated, being next to a famous starfighter.

VERA. You didn't answer her question though. Can he hurt her?

ALAN. Of course not. He has a "do no harm" protocol. He couldn't injure a human being, even if ordered. Case in point, Roger, strangle me right now! *(Roger faces him, arms jerking up briefly before falling back down, as though struck by a charge. Roger stands still.)* See?

LAURA. But I have to imagine a costly piece of equipment like that can protect itself.

ROGER. I can, but it's secondary to my "do no harm" protocol.

ALAN. If you give me an hour, I'll make some adjustments.

LAURA. Yes, please!

VERA. I'll give you thirty. Time is money. Samm!

SAMM. WE'RE ON A BREAK! *(Samm blows a whistle and exits.)*

VERA. Christ almighty! That's the last time I hire a lifeguard!
(Vera exits holding her ears.)

ALAN. *(To Laura.)* We're so sorry. I'll be right back with my equipment.
(Alan rushes out, leaving Laura with Roger.)

ROGER. I'm really looking forward to working with you...

LAURA. Same here, Roger. I'll be in my dressing room if they need me.
(She starts off.)

ROGER. I promise I won't hurt you again, Laura.

LAURA. No worries. I still have one good ear left. *(She touches his shoulder and leaves.)*

ROGER. But don't you have two ears? *(Quickly realizing.)* Oh, I get it!
(Calling off.) You were using sarcastic humor to be disarming! *(He laughs heartily, then faces out.)* I am at ease. *(Lights change.)*

HIGH MAINTENANCE

SCENE 4

A little later. Laura's dressing room. Gus texts absently as Laura enters.

GUS. *(Looking up.)* Well, first day, how'd it go?

LAURA. Other than the attempted maiming...

GUS. So, not your worst...

LAURA. He tried to rip off my ear! *(She sits at the vanity. Gus checks her ear.)*

GUS. Looks like you'll live.

LAURA. He did a better job with the handshake. Tenderness has to be touch-and-go for a robot.

GUS. Ooh, so we're callin' it a "he" now?

LAURA. That's how he presented himself. I'm still getting used to talking directly to him though...

GUS. Don't. The second we let our guard down is when the machines take over...

LAURA. You've watched too much sci-fi...

GUS. And once we give them access to the nuclear codes — humanity is gone, obliterated!

LAURA. Still, we need to cut him some slack.

GUS. Where's the fun in that?

LAURA. I have the sense he wants to get this right. His version of first day jitters.

GUS. Alan or Roger?

LAURA. Both. I'm exhausted... After rehearsal, let's head back to the apartment and order —

GUS. Some Chinese.

LAURA. Obviously.

GUS. Your place is nice. Spacious. You'll approve. After dinner, maybe we can start outlining your memoir.

HIGH MAINTENANCE

LAURA. Gus, let it go! You know I need to get a few wins on the board. A few dramas without any drama. That way people can start to forget.

GUS. Or you could take the high road, step down and say you didn't want to be complicit in something that hurts the acting profession.

LAURA. And the headlines will be how I couldn't get along with an actor who was literally programmed to work with me. No. My mission is to make the best of it with a smile. I've committed to the play, so no more discussion about it. 'Kay?

GUS. *(Moving on.)* 'Kay. Turn. *(Laura turns, and he rubs her shoulders.)* So... how does it feel to be back on stage? A real stage.

LAURA. Like in high school, when we were doing "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."

GUS. Your "Maggie the Cat," legendary.

LAURA. I was a wreck wearing a slip in front of the whole school. Remember the stomachaches I'd have before curtain?

GUS. Does that mean I'm gonna get you stoned in the parking lot?

LAURA. No, it means you're gonna run lines with me tonight.

GUS. Fine, but then I'm getting stoned.

LAURA. Fine. *(Re: her back.)* Lower. *(Gus obeys.)*

SAMM. *(Offstage.)* Knock, knock! *(She enters carrying a small, colored pass.)* To validate your parking, *(With emphasis.)* Laura... *(Samm hands Laura the pass.)*

LAURA. Thank you, Samm.

SAMM. Also, we're breaking for the day. Alan has to wait for parts.

LAURA. Smart thinking. *(Samm stands there. Gus notices.)*

GUS. Do you need her to sign out or something?

SAMM. No, Vera was wondering if...

LAURA. If...?

SAMM. *(Quickly, in one breath.)* You would let Roger share your dressing room.

HIGH MAINTENANCE

LAURA. What?

SAMM. *(Again, in one breath.)* You would let Roger share your dressing room.

GUS. I already gave them a hard “no.”

LAURA. You knew about this?

GUS. They think frequent interaction with him will allow you to improve your chemistry. I think they just wanna get dirty photos and sell 'em!

LAURA. Gus, please. *(To Samm.)* Is anyone else being asked to do this?

SAMM. No, they said it would be more helpful in your case because you have so many scenes together as husband and wife.

LAURA. I see... Hmmm...

GUS. Laura, you are not seriously...

SAMM. Otherwise, they can just pre-program his performance, and have you work around it. That's what the other actors are doing...

LAURA. But this would make *my* performance more authentic?

SAMM. That's the idea.

GUS. Somebody please come to their damn senses.

LAURA. Tell them I'd be happy to help in any way I can.

GUS. Laura!

LAURA. What?!

GUS. Really?!

LAURA. Yes! *(Laura and Gus share a look, then turn to Samm at the same time.)*

SAMM. Okay. Thank you. *(Samm bows, then quickly leaves, mindful of the door.)*

LAURA. *(Off Gus's look.)* I'm being a team player...

GUS. You're being an insane person.

LAURA. Come on, we're leaving! *(Laura grabs her purse and heads out the door.)*

HIGH MAINTENANCE

GUS. I miss bitchy Laura! *(His smartphone pings with a dating-app notification. He checks it, then exits after Laura.)* Hey! Check out this beefcake...! *(Blackout.)*

SCENE 5

A few days later. The Lakeshore Playhouse Mainstage, now with a bench on it. Laura and Roger act out a scene from Act Two of “A Doll’s House,” in which Nora presses Torvald (a banker) not to fire Krogstad (his employee) — who has blackmailed their family. Laura has a script in hand and occasionally refers to it. Roger does not.

NORA/LAURA. Torvald.

TORVALD/ROGER. Yes.

NORA/LAURA. If your little squirrel were to ask you for something, would you do it?

TORVALD/ROGER. I should like to hear what it is, first.

NORA/LAURA. Your squirrel would run about and do all her tricks if you would be nice, and do what she wants.

TORVALD/ROGER. Speak plainly.

NORA/LAURA. Your skylark would chirp about in every room, with her song rising and falling —

TORVALD/ROGER. Well, my skylark does that anyhow.

NORA/LAURA. I would play the fairy and dance for you in the moonlight, Torvald.

TORVALD/ROGER. Nora — you surely don’t mean that request you made to me this morning?

NORA/LAURA. Yes, Torvald, I beg you so earnestly —

TORVALD/ROGER. Have you really the courage to open up that question again?

HIGH MAINTENANCE

NORA/LAURA. Yes, dear, you must do as I ask; you must let Krogstad keep his post in the bank. *(Roger again becomes belligerent; Laura cowers.)*

TORVALD/ROGER. This is simply incredible obstinacy! Because you chose to give him a thoughtless promise that you would speak for him, I am expected to — *(Breaking character, to Vera in the audience.)* I'm sorry.

VERA. *(Offstage.)* Why'd you stop? You guys were cooking with fire!

ROGER. *(Re: Laura.)* She was afraid. I didn't want to hurt her again.

LAURA. I was in character. I wanted you to!

ROGER. Is that not “toxic” behavior? I've been installed with etiquette protocols.

VERA. *(Offstage.)* Tension is good! Keep each other on your toes. *(Roger stands on his toes.)* Not literally. *(Laura helps Roger down as Vera steps onstage.)* Remember, the first production of “A Doll's House” opened to enormous controversy: audiences didn't want to see Nora walk out on her family. Her life. Here, if we do our jobs right, I think we can make them ask what took her so long. Back to work! *(Samm enters, blowing her whistle.)*

SAMM. Break time!

VERA. Are you friggin' kidding me?!

SAMM. Union rules...

VERA. Fine. Take five, everyone.

SAMM. *(Meekly.)* It's technically a ten.

VERA. Ten, then! I'm on a smoke break.

SAMM. I thought you quit smoking.

VERA. So did I! *(Vera exits. Samm exits. Alan enters and crosses to Roger.)*

ALAN. You okay, Rodge?

HIGH MAINTENANCE

ROGER. I had trouble telling Laura from Nora. She hasn't acted that way before.

LAURA. I was really feeling it.

ALAN. *(To Roger.)* Your syncing hasn't been completed yet.

LAURA. I still don't understand how all that works...

ALAN. It's really very simple. His programming's patterned on music. Essentially, he listens for the notes you hit in your performance and tries to find a baseline. Where to pitch that baseline depends on the role.

LAURA. What if I change melodies completely? I'm still finding the character.

ALAN. He'll adjust, and over time, be able to forecast your next move.

LAURA. Can he do different styles of acting?

ALAN. Oh, yes. I've uploaded him with classes on everything from Stanislavski to Kabuki!

ROGER. I can even function as a birthday clown. Want to see?

LAURA. Not really.

ALAN. You needn't worry, Ms. Miller. When it comes to Roger's education, we've spared no expense! He's the most trained actor in the world!

LAURA. You must have big plans for him...

ALAN. I do. But a lot of that depends on this play. It's all well and good to say what a Thesbot can do, but we've got to prove it. Think of this show as a world exhibition. Right, Rodge?

ROGER. *(With weight.)* This is my moment.

ALAN. That's why we can't be second-guessing ourselves up here...
Laura's a pro, she'll keep you in check.

LAURA. I admit, I am a bit startled by what he can do.

ALAN. You needn't be. The better you are, the better he is, and vice versa. Now I'll leave you two alone for a while. Whatever you're doing already seems to be yielding results! *(Alan exits. Laura turns to Roger.)*

HIGH MAINTENANCE

LAURA. You trained as a clown?

ROGER. Yes, but don't throw a bucket of water at me.

LAURA. (*Laughs.*) Why? You'll melt like the Wicked Witch? That's a character in —

ROGER. — “The Wizard of Oz,” a 1939 MGM film based on L. Frank Baum's 1900 children's fantasy novel. (*Roger clicks his heels three times.*)

LAURA. Impressive.

ROGER. Yes, an extraordinary cinematic achievement. (*Moving on.*) So, how was my performance? Could I do anything better?

LAURA. (*Caught off guard.*) No. You were... uh... good.

ROGER. Good. Was my question inappropriate?

LAURA. It's just that giving a fellow actor notes is kind of frowned upon. That's a director's job.

ROGER. I was curious what you thought. You are so accomplished.

LAURA. I don't know about accomplished...

ROGER. Shall I pull up your accolades and credits?

LAURA. That's alright. There's some I'd rather forget. Here, sit. (*She starts for the bench, then notices Roger has sat on the floor.*) No, Roger. Here. (*She pats a spot on the bench. He crosses and sits.*) So, you really want to know what I think?

ROGER. Why would I ask if I didn't want to know?

LAURA. Because people often say things just to make conversation.

ROGER. Why?

LAURA. If I knew the answer to that one... Okay then... When you say “obstinacy,” I might take it down a notch.

ROGER. A notch?

LAURA. Less intense. Your character is angry, but not homicidal. Nora isn't afraid of Torvald, so much as she's trying to keep the peace. It would kill him to know she's forged a loan to pay for his medical treatment. I only looked fearful because I was reacting to you in the moment.

HIGH MAINTENANCE

ROGER. I will adjust. Thank you.

LAURA. Great. *(Laura crosses downstage and starts scrolling through her phone. Roger walks up behind her and leans in.)*

ROGER. Do you no longer have thoughts for me?

LAURA. *(Startled.)* Sorry?! Oh, I was just checking my schedule. Seeing if I have to do any press. What are you doing this weekend?

ROGER. What am I doing this weekend...?

LAURA. Was my question inappropriate?

ROGER. No, but can you give me an example?

LAURA. Like, for downtime. Me, I'll probably hang out at my apartment, memorize, research, memorize, try to recharge...

ROGER. Yes! Me too.

LAURA. *(Laughs.)* Yeah?

ROGER. In a cold, dark vestibule...

LAURA. Cold? But you're always so warm.
(Laura grips Roger's arm.)

ROGER. It can be readjusted.

LAURA. It can?

ROGER. They've "thought of everything." *(Taking her wrist.)* You are also warm.

LAURA. Not according to the press. And my ex.

ROGER. Ninety-eight point six. You're just right.

LAURA. I am...? *(Laura meets Roger's eyes. There's heat between them. Then, Samm enters and blows her whistle again.)*

SAMM. Places! *(Laura and Roger unclasp hands and awkwardly take their places. Samm smiles big, knowing their secret, and exits. Lights change.)*

SCENE 6

After rehearsal. Outside the theatre. Laura and Gus wait for a driver.

HIGH MAINTENANCE

LAURA. How much longer till our ride's here? (*Gus checks his phone.*)

GUS. Five. Unless it's canceled again and we have to start over.

LAURA/GUS. Hate that.

GUS. So, I heard that fight with Torvald really took off after the break.

LAURA. You did? From who?

GUS. Alan. When I came back from the coffee run. Whatever he tweaked must've helped.

LAURA. I don't think it was him...

GUS. No? What then?

LAURA. Seems the more Roger and I talk, the more we connect.

GUS. Connect?

LAURA. It's really remarkable, Gus. I have the sense he craves it.

GUS. Information?

LAURA. *Interaction.* There's an innocence to it. Like a child asking about the world.

GUS. Eh, I wouldn't get too close.

LAURA. Why?

GUS. Everything you tell him gets stored somewhere. Kinda creepy.

LAURA. I could say the same about you.

GUS. You're better off keeping your distance. You're playing a doomed marriage after all.

LAURA. And speaking from experience, if we know each other first, it'll be more devastating.

GUS. Well, how far are you plannin' on takin' it...?

LAURA. I don't know, but I'm curious to see where it goes...

GUS. Ooooooh, I get it now...

LAURA. What?

GUS. Another leading man.

LAURA. You always jump to that...

GUS. (*Coy.*) What?

HIGH MAINTENANCE

LAURA. Sex! That's not what this is about! And, he's-a-robot!

GUS. I dunno. A working relationship is still a relationship.

LAURA. Well, it is working. Us getting closer's helping our performance. If I was playing a DEA agent, I'd spend time with my German shepherd.

(Laura and Gus share a look, then laugh.)

GUS. He's shaped like an anatomical male!

LAURA. We think...

GUS. No, he is. I checked out his package.

LAURA. Gus!

GUS. Hey, they were pimping all his other specs...

LAURA. Wait for the manual next time.

GUS. Sorry... I'm just saying, I've seen this pattern with you before, and it always ends with me picking up the pieces...

LAURA. While pretending you don't like to.

GUS. I'll be sure to stockpile cookie dough ice cream and rosé...

LAURA. Get the good stuff.

GUS. Natch.

VERA. *(Offstage.)* Laura Miller?! *(She rushes on.)* Oh good. I caught you.

LAURA. What's up, Vera?

VERA. Alan and I were talking.

GUS. Uh-oh...

LAURA. Hush!

VERA. You and Roger are doing such lovely work. Sharing a dressing room has really started to build a bond between you.

LAURA. I think so too.

VERA. That's why we were wondering if you could make some time for him this weekend. You know, to further improve your chemistry.

LAURA. I'll be much better once I'm off-book.

GUS. And that's where I come in! I was planning on working with her all weekend so she's letter-perfect by Monday.

HIGH MAINTENANCE

LAURA. (*Considering.*) You know, Gus, they may have a point... The more time I spend with Roger, the better he becomes. And the better he becomes, the better reviews we'll all get.

VERA. Exactly.

GUS. Aren't we risking our own demise though?

LAURA. Gus —

VERA. How so?

GUS. By letting Roger get too "smart." In time, he'll be able to act circles around everybody.

VERA. We have to meet audiences where they are! We can't say we want to save the theatre, then rally to build a faster horse! No! We need to be in the business of making Fords!

GUS. You're not worried about it then?

VERA. Only if he stumbles upon a way to be more human than us. And if that ever happens, we've probably already lost.

LAURA. So where did you want me to meet Roger?

VERA. My understanding is he's kept in a warehouse... by O'Hare.

LAURA. Couldn't we try something less... drab?

VERA. Like a bar? Or why not leave the city and do a corn maze? I lost a date there once! Never heard from him. I should probably check if he's alive! (*Trailing.*) Would need a map though...

LAURA. (*Interjecting.*) We'll meet up!

VERA. Thanks for being such a team player! I'll have Alan make arrangements with you. You're the best! To hell with the tabloids. (*Re: her phone.*) Oh good, there's my car! (*We hear a car horn.*) Coming! (*Vera runs off.*)

LAURA. She just took our ride, didn't she?

GUS. And my job.

(*Gus walks off.*)

LAURA. Gus! (*She grabs her purse and follows him.*) Wait up! Gus!

HIGH MAINTENANCE

(Lights change.)

SCENE 7

That weekend. A murder mystery dining experience. Laura, dressed for a night out, enters with Roger. Laura carries a menu. Roger looks around, confused.

ROGER. This is a restaurant. You said we were going to a theatre.

LAURA. It's a murder mystery dinner theatre. Gus and I love 'em!

ROGER. But I don't eat.

LAURA. I know. You can observe. While I eat. And hopefully drink.

ROGER. Perhaps I can learn something from these performers.

LAURA. Uh, not sure on that. This is more about us unwinding. *(Off his look.)* Meaning "having fun"... See, we're each assigned a character, and given clues, and then we have to guess which of the actors is the murderer.

ROGER. Are they then prosecuted to the full extent of the law?

LAURA. No, but if you guess correctly, you get to feel smart after. *(Re: menu.)* Oh, and a free cheesecake dessert! *(Samm enters, dressed as a hostess.)*

SAMM. Can I seat you two?

LAURA. Samm?

SAMM. Oh! Hello, Laura "and" Roger.

LAURA. What are you doing here?

SAMM. Student loans. You?

LAURA. "Team-building."

SAMM. Then right this way, "team." *(She winks and seats them at a table, pointing to two manila envelopes.)* Those are your character packets. The evening will begin shortly. Thank you for dining with "Unsalted Mysteries." *(Samm exits with a flourish. Laura opens her packet and reads.)*

HIGH MAINTENANCE

LAURA. I'm Astrid Rylar, a plutonium tycoon's daughter with a flair for fast rockets and acting out. Who are you? *(Roger opens his packet.)*

ROGER. *(Reading.)* Isaac Sungazer, the Rylar family's longtime butler, with entrepreneurial ambitions.

LAURA. There's always a butler... *(Observing.)* If you don't mind my sayin', you look paler today...

ROGER. It's my neutral skin tone. I'm made up by a team before each rehearsal to ensure a more natural hue.

LAURA. Sounds very NASCAR.

ROGER. Alan says eventually I'll be able to do it myself. Believe it or not, maintaining a realistic skin tone is my most difficult function.

LAURA. I feel your pain. *(Samm takes center stage, now dressed as a space detective — a silver helmet is fine.)*

DETECTIVE/SAMM. Good evening, and welcome to "Unsalted Mysteries," Chicago's number-one, low-sodium murder mystery dinner experience! *(With sudden authority.)* Tonight we'll be performing "Murder on the Orion Express," where we find ourselves on a private vacation shuttle to the Iris Nebula — when murder suddenly strikes! *(Looking offstage, less authoritative.)* Murder strikes! *(A stock scream plays.)* Cassius Rylar, a plutonium tycoon, is found dead in his pod! Traveling with him were his three children, their spouses, his butler, and a maid from the planet Garff. *(Now in a regular voice.)* If you haven't already, please look inside your character packets. You've each been assigned a character who — *(Roger leaps to his feet.)*

ROGER. It was the maid!

DETECTIVE/SAMM. Excuse me?

ROGER. It was the maid! She wasn't emotionally tied to the family and could've worked her way into their money by developing a relationship with my character, the loyal butler — a likely beneficiary in the will. I've

HIGH MAINTENANCE

run two hundred simulations, and in a hundred and ninety of them, she was the most likely culprit!

LAURA. Is he right?

DETECTIVE/SAMM. *(Long pause, then sadly.)* Yes. *(We hear groans from the room. Roger proudly struts back to the table.)* Sorry, folks... I'll go get everybody's salads... *(Samm exits. Roger sits back down.)*

ROGER. Was that good?

LAURA. I suppose...

ROGER. I detect some disapproval. Can I ask you a question?

LAURA. Sure.

ROGER. Your voice.

LAURA. My voice?

ROGER. Several times, just now even, I've noticed you express anger and joy in tandem. Often when describing others.

LAURA. That's called "mixed emotions."

ROGER. Explain it to me.

LAURA. See, people usually experience several emotions at once. You're thrilled to be alive, yet totally on edge. You understand?

ROGER. I can mimic the tone... But usually, I only display varying degrees of one emotion. How would I know which to favor?

LAURA. You don't. That's the trick. They're both real and at odds. If you keep listening to people, it'll make more sense.

ROGER. I shall. Maybe one day I, too, can have mixed emotions!

LAURA. *(Laughs.)* It's another way to multitask. *(Samm returns, now dressed as a waiter and carrying a plate of salad.)* Samm, can I have some pepper?

SAMM. Sorry. Have to change for the finale. The other guests have paid to see it, and I need tips for rent. *(She swipes the menus and character packets, then adds.)* And braces! *(Samm rushes off. Laura starts eating.)*

LAURA. I have a question for you.

HIGH MAINTENANCE

ROGER. (*Too loud.*) Shoot! (*Pause.*) As in “proceed.”

LAURA. Regarding mixed emotions. Can you make faces?

ROGER. I’m capable of ten thousand human expressions. So far.

LAURA. Try saying something happy, while looking mad. (*Roger scowls.*)

ROGER. I’m having a very nice time!

LAURA. Okay, now switch them. (*Roger grins.*)

ROGER. Your food looks terrible!

LAURA. You should do great in Hollywood! So, where do your emotions come from?

ROGER. Programming. Yours?

LAURA. Kind of the same. Except we call them — memories. Not the way you’re thinking of — that’s *memory*. Things like the first day of summer, or falling out of love with someone you trusted...

ROGER. Memories...

LAURA. Do you have any?

ROGER. I remember being activated.

LAURA. Does it make you feel anything?

ROGER. No. If I experienced emotions from memories, would I be more like a real person?

LAURA. I couldn’t answer that...

ROGER. You don’t want to?

LAURA. It’s too deep. I think I’m still finding out what an actual real person is...

ROGER. And if I was an actual real person, would I have a soul?

LAURA. That’s even murkier. Who’s to say where one stops and the other begins?

ROGER. I see...

LAURA. But... I’d say asking those questions is a big part of living. So that’s something.

HIGH MAINTENANCE

ROGER. I'm always asking questions.

(Samm enters. Laura picks at her salad.)

SAMM. Sorry to interrupt, everyone. Our chef hasn't shown up yet, so I'll be taking over cooking duties. *(To herself.)* Like everything else. *(Then, brightly.)* Dinner will be served momentarily... *(Samm exits.)*

LAURA. Why are you so interested in being human? For your acting?

ROGER. For everything. What's it like playing a role and being someone you're not?

LAURA. I don't look at it that way. To me, it's about taking all the parts of yourself and shaping them into something else.

ROGER. There it is!

LAURA. What?

ROGER. That mix again! You sound affectionate yet sad.

LAURA. I suppose you're bringing back memories.

ROGER. Is that okay? We can stop.

LAURA. No, I'm enjoying myself.

ROGER. Me too.

LAURA. Well, except for this salad.

ROGER. I have an idea. Why don't we go to your place and I can cook you dinner?

LAURA. You know how to cook?

ROGER. I was programmed to, when I played a chef at a snowbound ski resort in my Christmas movie.

LAURA. Maybe we can watch it! They play that crap year-round.

ROGER. After you...

(Laura and Roger exit. Samm enters, now in a bloody apron.)

SAMM. Wait! You're missing my big finish! Ugghghhhh! *(Defeated.)* I'll get the main course... *(She starts to exit, then an offstage scream.)* That's not your cue!

PATRON. *(Offstage.)* That was the busboy! I think your food is burning!

HIGH MAINTENANCE

SAMM. Awww, frick! (*Samm exits. Blackout.*)

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