

MUSE

A play in two acts
by Frank Tangredi

MUSE

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MUSE

To Pam

MUSE

Muse was originally produced at the Tank in New York City by the Greenhouse Ensemble in April 2003, under the direction of Hazen Cuyler, featuring the following cast:

Mathias Wessler.....Matt O'Shea
Sheila Day.....Rachel Greenwood
Bernadette 'Bernie' Day.....Reanna Armellino
Austin Day.....Jeffrey Grover
Walter Wessler.....Robert Hickey
Louise Wessler.....Anne Fizzard

CAST: 3 women, 3 men

MATHIAS WESSLER	20s, a dancer
SHEILA DAY	20s, a painter
BERNADETTE 'BERNIE' DAY	30s, an assistant professor of art history
AUSTIN DAY	60s, a business executive
WALTER WESSLER	50s, co-owner of a bakery
LOUISE WESSLER	50s, co-owner of a bakery

TIME: The Present

PLACE: The main playing area is the living room of Bernie's apartment in Manhattan. A neutral area with minimal set pieces represents Mathias and Sheila's apartment and various other settings.

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ACT I

In the neutral area, MATHIAS dances to Falla's Ritual Fire Dance. His concentration is intense, his moves athletic and sensual. SHEILA enters and watches him intently. When the music ends, he turns to her—grinning, sweating, and breathing hard.

SHEILA. I could watch you dance forever.

MATHIAS. I could watch you watching me dance forever. I was dancing for you.

SHEILA. You were not.

MATHIAS. Was too.

SHEILA. You were in the zone long before I got here.

MATHIAS. Doesn't matter. You're always the person I dance for. Every lift, every leap. You're the power that lets me push through the pain. You're my muse. My Terpsichore.

SHEILA. Only you, Mathias. Only you could say something so extravagant and make it sound completely unironic.

MATHIAS. I don't do ironic.

SHEILA. Sometimes I wish you could. It would make life much more comfortable.

MATHIAS. I don't do comfortable. Comfortable is safe. Safe is boring. I don't think we're boring.

SHEILA. Living with you is anything but boring. And anything but safe. *(Mathias steps toward Sheila, but winces as he puts his foot down.)* Are you all right?

MATHIAS. I'm fine.

SHEILA. Is it your knee?

MATHIAS. I'm fine! I stepped wrong that's all.

SHEILA. Did you see the orthopedist?

MATHIAS. She said it was nothing.

SHEILA. Nothing?

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MATHIAS. Nothing! Nothing I need to worry about. Not for years and years.

SHEILA. I don't know about this.

MATHIAS. Well, I do! Now enough of this balderdash! Come over here, milady, and kiss me.

SHEILA. Maybe I don't want to kiss you. You smell like a hyena.

MATHIAS. Never bothered you before. *(Sheila and Mathias share a long kiss. He nuzzles her hair and her throat. She gently restrains him.)*

SHEILA. Mathias....

MATHIAS. I love you so much.

SHEILA. I love you, too. But right now I'm wound too tight.

MATHIAS. I can unwind you.

SHEILA. Not like that. Not right now. Besides, I have to start dinner.

MATHIAS. I already started dinner.

SHEILA. But Tuesday is my night to cook.

MATHIAS. I knew you'd be coming home stressed, so I decided to surprise you.

SHEILA. Mathias!

MATHIAS. Surprise! I've got a lobster mac-and-cheese ready to stick in the oven.

SHEILA. Since when do we have money to spare for lobster?

MATHIAS. It's a secret recipe of my own. No lobster.

SHEILA. In other words, plain mac-and-cheese.

MATHIAS. But with the soul of a lobster. I also whipped up some red velvet cupcakes for dessert.

SHEILA. Mathias, you're an angel ... and a devil.

MATHIAS. *(Simply, sweetly.)* I'm just a boy in love. In love with the sweetest, purest, most enchanting girl in the world. *(With absolutely no change in tone.)* God, I crave you so much right now. I want to take you down on the floor and strip you naked and devour your throat and your breasts and your thighs, I want to smell you and taste you and make you come and come and come....

SHEILA. Well. That all sounds very nice. But it'll have to wait. *(Mathias pouts comically.)* And don't make the fish face!

MATHIAS. Okay. I'll be a good little boy. But you would have made a

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succulent hors d'oeuvre.

SHEILA. You're an idiot! But thank you for making dinner. I am so not in the mood to cook. This exhibit is going to be a bitch. Drakely's a nice man, but as an artist, he's a pain in the ass.

MATHIAS. Screw him.

SHEILA. To be fair, I'd probably be just as big a diva if it was my work hanging there.

MATHIAS. Someday it will be.

SHEILA. I'm not so sure about that.

MATHIAS. I am.

SHEILA. Bernie told me—

MATHIAS. I don't care what your bitch sister says.

SHEILA. Don't!

MATHIAS. She doesn't believe in you. I do.

SHEILA. She's an assistant professor of art history. You're a dancer with a perpetual hard-on.

MATHIAS. (*His reaction is slightly—but only slightly—out of proportion.*) That's a mean thing to say!

SHEILA. It was a joke.

MATHIAS. You think I only believe in you because I bang you?

SHEILA. Of course not! It. Was. A. Joke. Now dial it down, Taz.

MATHIAS. Sorry. I hate it when you question my sincerity. It hurts my feelings.

SHEILA. Your sincerity is one thing I never question. But isn't it at least possible that your judgment may be influenced by your genitalia?

MATHIAS. No. My faith in you is hallowed and pure, even when I'm boning you the hardest.

SHEILA. Somebody needs to put that on a greeting card. All I meant was that Bernie is an expert.

MATHIAS. I know all about 'experts.' They get so balled up in how much they know, they forget how to feel. You have greatness in you, Sheila! All kinds of greatness! All you need is the right spark to light up the whole world!

SHEILA. It's odd, your saying that....

MATHIAS. What?

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SHEILA. Nothing.

MATHIAS. What's going on?

SHEILA. There's nothing going on.

MATHIAS. There's something on your mind. Don't deny it, I know you too well.

SHEILA. I had a rough day.

MATHIAS. It didn't start today. I noticed it last night, when we were making love. You were looking down at me in the strangest way.

SHEILA. I do look at you in bed once in a while. You're right there.

MATHIAS. Not like that. You weren't looking at me. You were looking inside me.

SHEILA. I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable.

MATHIAS. It turned me on even more. It was like a laser beam shot from your eyes to mine, straight down my spine to my balls. But it's been nagging at me ever since. Something's changed. I don't know what, but it scared me. Please, please tell me you're not thinking of leaving me. Because that would destroy me.

SHEILA. You know, I really believe it would.

MATHIAS. Without you, there would be nothing left of me.

SHEILA. I'm not going to leave you. I need you.

MATHIAS. Say it again.

SHEILA. I need you.

MATHIAS. Then what is it? Tell me.

SHEILA. All right. There was something. Something Bernie said at lunch.

MATHIAS. I knew it! I knew it! Why does she hate me so much?

SHEILA. She doesn't hate you. And it wasn't about you, it was about me. I asked her what was wrong with my work.

MATHIAS. There's nothing wrong with your work.

SHEILA. Mathias. You mean well and I love you. But zip it. She tried to avoid the subject, as usual, but I finally got an answer out of her. She told my technique was fine. Composition, color, blah blah blah. "You've assembled all the makings of a fine dinner party. Except one. You forgot to set a place for Sheila Day. Who wants to go to a party where the host doesn't bother to show up?"

MATHIAS. I'm sorry, but that's just plain nasty.

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SHEILA. And just plain true. She said I'll never find myself unless I find my own vision. Something that I can't *not* paint. And just now, you told me the exact same thing. Which I guess I knew, but....

MATHIAS. I don't understand.

SHEILA. Neither did I. Until I looked at you in bed last night.

MATHIAS. Sheila. What did you see?

SHEILA. The same thing I see when you dance. Ecstasy. God, that sounds like—like something *you* would say. But I can't describe it any better. Not in words. I saw a vision of ecstasy.... Mathias, how would you feel about sitting for me?

MATHIAS. You mean that?

SHEILA. I do. I think I do. Yes, I do.

MATHIAS. I've begged you to paint me a million times. You always refused.

SHEILA. I know. I wanted to keep you to myself. Or maybe I was scared to expose that part of me.

MATHIAS. But you're not scared now.

SHEILA. I'm petrified. But I'm ready. I need to show her ... show the world ... what I see when I look at you. What you are to me and what you've done for me. It's time to invite Sheila Day to the party.

MATHIAS. You want to paint me. You want to paint me!

SHEILA. You have to understand one thing. If we do this, I'm in charge. I'm the artist. You're my subject. It is not an equal partnership. No matter what I ask you to do, you have to do it. Even if it makes no sense to you, even if it's embarrassing—

MATHIAS. I never get embarrassed.

SHEILA. —you do what I say, or we don't do this at all.

MATHIAS. Anything! I don't care what it is! You're going to paint me!
(Mathias joyously lifts Sheila aloft.)

SHEILA. Mathias! What are you doing?

MATHIAS. You're going to paint me! You're going to make me live forever! *(Mathias spins Sheila around and around. BERNIE enters the main playing area, making sure things are in order.)*

SHEILA. Put me down!

MATHIAS. I'm going live forever!

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SHEILA. You're making me dizzy!

MATHIAS. I'm going to live forever!

SHEILA. Don't let go of me!

MATHIAS. I'll never let you go! I'm going to live forever! We're going to live forever! Sheila and Mathias! Together forever! I'll never let you go!

BERNIE. (*Overcome by a sudden crying jag.*) Sheila.

MATHIAS. Never, never, never!

BERNIE. Sheila, Sheila....

MATHIAS. I'll never let you go! (*He carries Sheila off, still spinning.*)

BERNIE. Fuck! (*Takes some tissues out of a drawer in an end table and wipes her eyes. Calls offstage.*) They'll be here any minute. Are you almost ready?

AUSTIN. (*Off.*) No, I'm not 'ready.' I'll never be 'ready.' Not for this. Whatever this is.

BERNIE. We discussed this, Dad.

AUSTIN. (*Off.*) I know, but it's outrageous.

BERNIE. Please. Don't make me do this alone.

AUSTIN. (*Off, after a brief hesitation.*) I'll be right there.

BERNIE. Jesus. (*Bernie downs a quick drink. AUSTIN enters, dressed in a conservative suit.*) What the hell are you wearing?

AUSTIN. This is how I dress.

BERNIE. For a board meeting, maybe.

AUSTIN. This is not a social occasion.

BERNIE. You're going to make them even more uncomfortable, if that's possible.

AUSTIN. It isn't my job to make them comfortable.

BERNIE. Oh, what the hell. It's not like comfortable was ever on the table anyway. Nice suit, Dad. (*Starts to light cigarette, then notices the distaste on Austin's face.*)

BERNIE. Sorry.

AUSTIN. It's your apartment.

BERNIE. As long as you're my guest—

AUSTIN. Would you prefer I went to a hotel?

BERNIE. Of course not!

AUSTIN. I don't want to inconvenience you.

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BERNIE. You're not inconveniencing me.

AUSTIN. If you want to smoke those filthy things in your own home, that's your right.

BERNIE. Jesus.

AUSTIN. I still don't understand why we have to do this.

BERNIE. I don't understand, either. But you promised me you'd hear them out. Politely.

AUSTIN. I have every intention of being polite. But these ... they aren't part of our lives anymore. Why can't they move on?

BERNIE. Like we have?

AUSTIN. There's nothing to gain by picking at the scab. I don't know if I can do this, Bernadette.

BERNIE. I know. I'm hurting, too.

AUSTIN. Are you?

BERNIE. Really, Dad? Really?

AUSTIN. Sorry, that was uncalled for.

BERNIE. It certainly was.

AUSTIN. I said I was sorry! Sometimes ... lately ... I get—

BERNIE. Tell you what. Let's try something new. Forget how you get, and how I get, and try to get each other through this. Deal? *(Austin nods. Doorbell rings. Bernie exits. Murmur of voices, off. Austin crosses to end table, takes a tissue out of drawer, and blows his nose. Off.)* My father is inside. *(Austin hastily stuffs tissue in his pocket. He is standing expressionless when Bernie enters with WALTER and LOUISE. Uncomfortable pause.)*

WALTER. Austin.

AUSTIN. Wessler. Mrs. Wessler.

LOUISE. Hello. Austin. Mr. Austin. Mr. Day. Hello. *(An even more uncomfortable pause, then Bernie and Walter speak at once.)*

BERNIE. Please, can I—

WALTER. Thank you for —

BERNIE. Sorry. Go on.

WALTER. No, that's all right.

BERNIE. I was just going to ask if I could get you something. I know you don't drink—

WALTER. Nothing for me, thank you.

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BERNIE. Louise?

LOUISE. Please ... if you wouldn't mind ... could I have a little club soda? If it's not too much trouble.

BERNIE. It's no trouble at all. Dad, would you pour Louise some club soda?

AUSTIN. I can do that. *(Austin pours a glass of club soda.)*

LOUISE. Thank you. Thank you, Miss Day—

BERNIE. Bernie. I'm still Bernie. Please, won't you sit down?

WALTER. Thank you.

LOUISE. Thank you, Bernie. Thank you, that's very kind of you. *(Walter, Louise, and Bernie sit. Austin gives Louise a glass and remains standing.)*
Thank you.

BERNIE. Dad, aren't you going to sit?

AUSTIN. I prefer standing, thank you.

WALTER. We appreciate your agreeing to see us.

LOUISE. Yes. Yes, it was very kind of you.

WALTER. We would have understood completely if you'd refused.

BERNIE. There was no reason to refuse.

LOUISE. We weren't sure. Ever since that awful, awful day—

WALTER. Louise.

LOUISE. I'm sorry.

BERNIE. Listen. I think this will be easier—or at least a bit less grim—if we get one thing out in the open right away. We don't blame you for what happened.

LOUISE. Thank you. Thank you, that's very kind of you.

BERNIE. Isn't that right, Dad?

AUSTIN. *(After the briefest noticeable hesitation.)* We don't blame you.

WALTER. I honestly don't know if I could be that generous in your position.

AUSTIN. Generosity has nothing to do with it. But as long as we're getting things out in the open....

BERNIE. Dad.

AUSTIN. I have no idea why you asked for this meeting. It's obviously important to you, so I'll listen to what you have to say. But if you came

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here to ask me to forgive your son, you wasted a trip.

WALTER. I understand how you feel.

AUSTIN. No. You don't. You can't. When you lose the one person in the world who means the most to you.... *(Bernie reacts to this but says nothing.)*

LOUISE. But we did lose— *(Walter gently quiets Louise.)*

BERNIE. I think they know how that feels, Dad.

AUSTIN. It's not the same! Not the same at all.

WALTER. No. It isn't. *(Mathias enters the neutral area.)*

MATHIAS. Mr. Day.

AUSTIN. I have not forgiven and never will forgive your son.
Understood?

MATHIAS. Mr. Day.

BERNIE. Dad, please. Do we have to put everybody through this?

WALTER. It's all right, Bernie.

AUSTIN. If it was him standing in front of me right now instead of you—
(He transitions into the neutral area.)

MATHIAS. Mr. Day, I know you're not happy about Sheila moving in with me.

AUSTIN. Sheila's an adult. I've had to accept that. But I have serious reservations about this whole setup.

MATHIAS. I wish you'd tell me what they are, sir.

AUSTIN. I intend to tell you what they are.

MATHIAS. I figured you did.

AUSTIN. Be honest with me. Are you sure you're not using my daughter to prove something?

MATHIAS. Prove what?

AUSTIN. Do I need to spell it out?

MATHIAS. No. You think, since I'm a dancer, I must be gay.

AUSTIN. Not necessarily, but it's a reasonable question.

MATHIAS. Very reasonable. Plenty of kids in school used to say the same thing. Though not to my face and never more than once. When the captain of the lacrosse team gets a beatdown from the kid in the leotard, word gets around.

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AUSTIN. Hm. I can respect that.

MATHIAS. I figured you could. But take my word for it. If I was gay, I wouldn't feel any need to hide it. I don't hide anything.

AUSTIN. Don't get me wrong, I personally have no issue with it. I don't care if a man has a yen for women, men, or cocker spaniels. It's no business of mine.

MATHIAS. That's very broad-minded of you.

AUSTIN. But I will not allow Sheila to be hurt.

MATHIAS. I would never do anything to hurt her. Not in that way, not in any way.

AUSTIN. That better be true. That little girl is all I have.

MATHIAS. And Bernie.

AUSTIN. Of course. Bernadette. But she's older. And much more independent. She never needed me the way Sheila did. Especially after the accident. I assume she's told you all about the accident?

MATHIAS. Of course. I know her mother was killed. And there was some doubt Sheila would walk again.

AUSTIN. There's a lot about that night she has no memory of it. How I carried her out of that car. Held her in my arms like a helpless newborn. I was bleeding myself, but that was nothing to me. All I knew was my baby needed me.

MATHIAS. I know. Sheila said you've told her about it so many times it's almost like she does remember it.

AUSTIN. It was all up to me. That night, and even more when she came home. Bernadette was at school. She wanted to take a leave of absence, but I wouldn't permit it. Sheila was my responsibility. There were aides who came in, of course, but I was the one who was there when it mattered. I took her on drives, I cooked her dinner. When she woke up crying in the middle of the night, I was there to dry her tears. I passed up a sure vice presidency so I could devote more time to her. That's how much that little girl means to me and you damn well better understand it.

MATHIAS. I do. We're grateful for everything you did.

AUSTIN. I don't expect gratitude. Not from her, certainly not from you. I'm her father, it was my job.

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MATHIAS. And now it's my job.

AUSTIN. *(After a beat.)* Fair enough. But I'll make you a promise. If you do anything to hurt my little girl—anything at all—you're going to answer to me. Understood?

MATHIAS. Understood. And I'll make you a promise in return. Before I ever do anything to hurt Sheila, I would cut off my own feet.

AUSTIN. No need to overdo it, boy.

MATHIAS. It's a fact. I will dedicate my entire being to her happiness. I'll be everything to her that you ... were. And more. I will help her become the artist I know she can be. That, sir, is my promise to you. So you can hand your daughter over to me with an easy heart. Understood? *(Silence. Sheila enters.)*

SHEILA. Are you planning to monopolize Daddy all afternoon? Your mother is asking for you.

MATHIAS. Sorry. I was assuring him how much I love you. *(Mathias kisses Sheila—not long enough to be vulgar, but long enough to send Austin a message.)*

SHEILA. Mathias –

MATHIAS. Your father and I understand each other now. Isn't that right, Austin? *(All three register the liberty Mathias has just taken. He extends his hand to Austin, who has no choice but to shake it. Mathias then drapes his arm around Sheila's shoulder, smiling the smile of an alpha male who has established his dominance.)*

AUSTIN. My promise still stands.

MATHIAS. So does mine. I better go see what Mama wants. *(Mathias kisses Sheila again and exits. Beat.)*

SHEILA. He really does, you know.

AUSTIN. What?

SHEILA. Love me as much as he says he does.

AUSTIN. He'd better.

SHEILA. *(Imitating him.)* "If he knows what's good for him."

AUSTIN. This Mathias ... he makes you happy?

SHEILA. Very happy.

AUSTIN. Then I have nothing to say.

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SHEILA. You have plenty to say. Thank you for not saying it.

AUSTIN. I'm only thinking of you. There's something about that guy—

SHEILA. (*Putting a finger to Austin's lips.*) Daddy, there's no earthly reason for me to have to make a choice. (*Kisses Austin.*) Unless you force me to.

WALTER. We're not looking for forgiveness.

SHEILA. Understood?

BERNIE. Dad, please. Do we have to put everybody through this?

SHEILA. Understood? (*Austin returns to main area. Sheila exits.*)

WALTER. It's all right, Bernie.

AUSTIN. If it was him standing in front of me right now instead of you—

BERNIE. That's not why we're here.

AUSTIN. I have no idea why we're here. But I don't want any mistake about where I stand. Understood?

WALTER. Understood.

BERNIE. Good. Now we all understand.

WALTER. Maybe we shouldn't have come.

BERNIE. It's all right. This isn't easy for any of us. How have you been coping?

WALTER. The best we can.

BERNIE. Us, too.

LOUISE. There's the bakery, of course. It keeps my mind off ... off bad things. My mother always used to say it's hard to feel completely ... hopeless ... with the smell of fresh bread in the air.

BERNIE. I need to take up baking.

LOUISE. And our church has been a great comfort to us. A very great comfort.

BERNIE. It must be nice to have that.

LOUISE. You don't—?

BERNIE. I don't see much evidence of a benevolent deity. No offense. If it helps you—

LOUISE. It does! It does! This has been so difficult. Oh, not that it can compare to what you've had to go through. I don't mean that at all.

BERNIE. (*Glancing at Austin, who is fuming.*) I'm sure it's been hard for

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you. Maybe worse.

LOUISE. Thank you, that's very kind of you. It's been so hard. That day the police came—

WALTER. Louise, I don't think they need to hear that from us.

LOUISE. Not my son, I thought. Not my little Matty. It must be a mistake, a horrible mistake. Mathias was always the sweetest boy. And so talented! He danced like an angel, a happy little angel. When he was six, we took him to see *The Nutcracker*. It was love at first sight. (*In the neutral area, Mathias dances like a joyful, untrained child. The Trepak from The Nutcracker plays softly.*) He would just dance and dance and dance. All through the house. "Mama," he'd say. "Look!"

MATHIAS. Look, Mama! Look what I can do!

LOUISE. "Look what I can do!" How I loved watching him. And he was so affectionate and gentle. When he was nine, he found a stray kitten. He named it Baryshnikov. The way he took care of that sweet little kitty—

WALTER. They don't need to hear about Baryshnikov.

LOUISE. Oh! Oh, yes, I know. But I want them to understand how it was. Why it was such a shock. I thought, it must be a mistake, some horrible mistake. My little Matty—

AUSTIN. I can't listen to any more of this. (*Austin exits. Music stops abruptly. Mathias looks sadly toward Louise and exits.*)

LOUISE. I'm sorry. I said too much. I'm a very stupid woman.

BERNIE. No.

LOUISE. It's so hard and I don't know the right things to say.

WALTER. It's all right, Louise. It's all right.

LOUISE. You were right, I should have stayed home. How am I supposed to know what to say?

BERNIE. Can I get you something, Louise? A drink?

WALTER. Maybe a little brandy.... I blundered this. Maybe we should do this another time.

BERNIE. Don't mind about my father. Whatever it is you came to say, you can say to me.

WALTER. No. What I have to say is for his ears, too.

BERNIE. All right. He'll be back. As soon as he decompresses. Here.

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WALTER. Thank you. Drink this, Louise. It will do you good.

LOUISE. He does blame us. I know he does.

BERNIE. No, he doesn't. Not really. My father keeps an uncluttered mind. There's only room for one emotion at a time. And one daughter. All he can process right now is anger.

WALTER. Aren't you angry?

BERNIE. I'm seething. But not at you.

LOUISE. Thank you, that's very kind of you.

BERNIE. I'm not being kind. This wasn't your fault.

WALTER. I wish I could believe that.

BERNIE. It's not as if you knew he could be violent. *(Walter glances at Louise, who avoids his eyes. Mathias, fully adult again, stands on the outskirts of the neutral area.)*

LOUISE. No. Of course not.

MATHIAS. I don't know what you're worried about, Papa.

LOUISE. How could we know that?

MATHIAS. I don't know what you're worried about, Papa.

LOUISE. He got into fights sometimes. All boys do. But something like this?

MATHIAS. What are you so worried about, Papa? *(Walter joins Mathias.)*

LOUISE. We couldn't know. Could we, Walter?

WALTER. I'm not worried, really. I was just wondering if you ever told her about it.

MATHIAS. There's no reason to.

WALTER. You say that you and Sheila have no secrets.

MATHIAS. We don't. Just because you don't talk about something doesn't mean that you're keeping it a secret. It's never come up, that's all. She doesn't know that I flunked tenth grade geometry, either.

WALTER. It was a pretty traumatic event in your life.

MATHIAS. When I was nine. It's over and done with. I never think about it anymore.

WALTER. I find that hard to believe.

MATHIAS. It was nothing. A freak incident.

WALTER. It was hardly 'nothing.'

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MATHIAS. I was protecting Baryshnikov.

WALTER. You broke a dog's spine with a baseball bat.

MATHIAS. It had my kitten in its mouth!

WALTER. It had already turned tail. There was no need to chase it down.

MATHIAS. Baryshnikov was mine! I rescued him, I named him, I took care of him, and that mongrel bitch took him away from me!

WALTER. It was a dog, it did what dogs do.

MATHIAS. I understand that now, Papa. But I was a kid. It was—what did the therapist call it?—it was a 'moment of childish rage.' Nothing like that has happened since, has it? It's not like I run around clubbing stray dogs for kicks.

WALTER. Matty, I saw the look in your eyes.

MATHIAS. Well, what would you do if you walked in and found some thug off the street attacking Mama?

WALTER. I honestly don't know.

MATHIAS. Sure you do.

WALTER. I don't think anyone can really know until they're faced with it.

MATHIAS. I do. If anybody ever hurt Sheila, he'd be dead. Period. A man has to defend what belongs to him.

WALTER. She doesn't belong to you, son.

MATHIAS. We belong to each other. Sheila needs me. Ask her yourself, she'll tell you. She needs me and I need her.

WALTER. Let's be frank. We don't really talk about it, but I know you're not exactly ... inexperienced ... with women.

MATHIAS. That's how I know this is different. It's not just physical. No other woman has ever made me feel like this. The way I feel when I dance. Sheila is my muse. I don't expect you to understand.

WALTER. You think I don't understand love?

MATHIAS. Not this kind.

WALTER. I didn't come out of the womb fully formed as your father. I was young once. So was your mother.

MATHIAS. Papa, I'm not trying to offend you. You and Mama have the best marriage I ever saw. But you two are a placid lake. Sheila and I are

MUSE

the Pacific Ocean. Deep and romantic and turbulent—

WALTER. You can't build a stable foundation on the Pacific Ocean. Sooner or later, you have to make it onto that lake. Or sink.

MATHIAS. Not us.

WALTER. The lake's a good place to be, Matty. I pray you and Sheila can make it there in the end.

MATHIAS. And be like you and Mama?

WALTER. Doesn't seem very likely, does it? *(They both smile at this thought. Mathias puts an arm around Walter and kisses him.)*

MATHIAS. Everything is fine, Papa. Don't worry about me.

WALTER. I can't help it. I'd hate to see you get hurt.

MATHIAS. I'm not going to get hurt.

WALTER. If you and Sheila were to break up –

MATHIAS. *(Laughs and flashes a carefree smile.)* That's not going to happen.

BERNIE. It's not as if you knew he could be violent.

MATHIAS. I wouldn't let it happen.

LOUISE. No. Of course not. How could we know that?

MATHIAS. I wouldn't let it happen.

LOUISE. He got into fights sometimes. All boys do. But something like this? We couldn't know. Could we, Walter? Tell her we couldn't have known.

WALTER. *(Returning to the main playing area.)* Of course not, Louise. There's no way we could have known.

MATHIAS. I would NEVER let that happen. *(Mathias exits.)*

LOUISE. I didn't raise a monster! I didn't!

WALTER. Shhh. Shhh. We said we weren't going to do this. Not today. Not here.

LOUISE. I know. I'm sorry.

WALTER. Why don't you go wash your face? A little splash of cold water, and you'll feel better.

LOUISE. Yes. A little cold water, yes, I should do that. May I use your powder room?

BERNIE. Of course. You remember where it is?

MUSE

LOUISE. Yes, yes, thank you. (*Exits.*)

BERNIE. Lonely, isn't it?

WALTER. What?

BERNIE. Being the strong one.

WALTER. I suspect you know a thing or two about that.

BERNIE. I'm not so sure I am the strong one.

WALTER. You're the one who's still in the room, aren't you? Louise doesn't mean to be insensitive. She's been talking and bragging about that boy since the day he was born. Deep down, she still believes she's going to wake up one morning and Mathias will come into the room, laughing and dancing like nothing happened.

BERNIE. I have those moments. Last week, I saw the most pretentious art installation. My first instinct was to tell Sheila about it. I had my phone in hand before reality kicked in.

WALTER. I loved Sheila, you know. We both did.

BERNIE. She felt the same about you. She told me so many times.

WALTER. Thank you. That means a lot to me.

BERNIE. I wish to God your son had taken after you.

WALTER. You never liked Mathias, did you?

BERNIE. No.

WALTER. I appreciate your honesty. Matty always told us, "Sheila's sister hates me."

BERNIE. I didn't hate him. Not then. But I never trusted him. He disturbed me. Let's leave it at that. (*Bernie meets Sheila in the neutral area.*) Don't get me wrong. I wouldn't kick him out of bed.

SHEILA. Oh, Bernie!

BERNIE. I mean it. That is a very pretty boy. If it was just a below-the-waist thing, I'd say, "Damn the torpedoes!"

SHEILA. It's more than that.

BERNIE. And that's what concerns me. You got too invested in one another, way too fast. I feel in my gut there's something unstable about him.

SHEILA. A doctorate in art history does not qualify you as a psychologist.

BERNIE. No, but I'm a woman.

MUSE

SHEILA. And I'm not? Bernie, I've been on your end of this exact conversation. I know the red flags. But I don't see them here.

BERNIE. You can't see them. You're too close.

SHEILA. I've said that to other women, too.

BERNIE. I hope they were better listeners than you. Listen, I'm not saying he's dangerous. I'm saying he's volatile. Which under the wrong conditions could become dangerous. I don't trust him.

SHEILA. You've been talking to Daddy.

BERNIE. Honey, Dad and I haven't had a serious conversation on any topic since 9/11—which, apparently, was my fault. I don't need anyone else to tell me there's something off about your boyfriend. He's too intense. He's too needy.

SHEILA. No. Rob Weinstock was too needy.

BERNIE. Rob Weinstock was harmless and thank you for throwing him in my face again.

SHEILA. What are sisters for?

BERNIE. You'll be fine as long as you're under the spell of his boyish charm and whatever pheromones he's giving off. But when you finally realize he's cutting off your air—

SHEILA. He's not. We're not one of those couples who text or call each other every five minutes. And this fall, we'll be apart for nearly two months. His troupe is booked for a college tour.

BERNIE. Well, that is a healthy sign. Some time apart could be the best thing for you. For him, too.

SHEILA. Yes, I'm sure you're very concerned about what's best for him.

BERNIE. Listen. I wish him a long and happy life. May he win every award they give for dancing eye candy. But once he's out of your life, he's out of mine. And when that day comes, he won't go quietly. At best, he'll be like a wad of gum on the bottom of your shoe. At worst—

SHEILA. He'll boil a bunny on my stove? Mathias is not violent.

Temperamental, yes. Well, so am I. Unpredictable, but that's exciting. I never know whether I'm going to get the sweet little boy or the wild beast. Or both at once.

BERNIE. Jesus.

MUSE

SHEILA. Yes, I know what I sound like.

BERNIE. You sound like a tween girl squeeing over cute werewolves. The sex can't be that good.

SHEILA. It's not just about the sex—though, as a matter of fact, the sex really is that good. He has a killer body and an inexhaustible supply of energy. But even the sex is not just about the sex. No man has ever made me feel like our bed is holy ground and my body is sacred to him. The way he treats my leg—

BERNIE. You're too self-conscious about your leg.

SHEILA. Only when people make me self-conscious. You can tell a lot about a guy by how he reacts to the scars. Some guys are repelled by them. Some guys are too afraid of hurting me. And one boy back home was way too turned on by them.

BERNIE. Really? Who?

SHEILA. Bernie!

BERNIE. Sorry.

SHEILA. Mathias accepts my scars as part of who I am. Do you know how liberating that is? But he's just as wonderful out of bed. Remember how he nursed me through that viral infection last year? A mother couldn't have been more tender.

BERNIE. I appreciated that. I told him so. Though he clearly didn't want help from anyone else.

SHEILA. He's always surprising me with silly gifts and little notes. Every month, on our anniversary—

BERNIE. Jesus.

SHEILA. —he bakes me a cake. He knows without being told if I'm discouraged, or tense, or just feel like being a bitch. And he listens. He actually listens to everything I say ... and remembers it.

BERNIE. I don't know whether to order one for myself or vomit. So if Mathias is such a paragon, why don't you marry him? Jesus, I sound like Aunt Kathie!

SHEILA. Maybe someday I will. He'd marry me tomorrow if he thought it was what I wanted.

BERNIE. But something's holding you back. A little voice telling you that

MUSE

it would be a bad idea.

SHEILA. I don't need a little voice, I have you. No, it's just hard to imagine saddling Mathias with a mundane label like 'husband.' There's nothing mundane about him—except maybe his parents.

BERNIE. Louise and Walter are lovely people.

SHEILA. You don't have to tell me that. I adore them. But they're so conventional, so ... so suburban. Their whole lives are home, bakery, church, home, bakery, church. How did two such placid people ever spawn a whirlwind like Mathias?

BERNIE. How did Dad ever spawn us? He knows nothing about art and cares less. He wouldn't know *Nude Descending a Staircase* from *Dogs Playing Poker*.

SHEILA. Maybe we're all changelings. You, me, Mathias. All of us swapped in the cradle with the children our parents could have understood.

BERNIE. It would certainly explain a lot.

SHEILA. But you know the most precious thing about Mathias? He cares about my work. Truly cares. He wants me to succeed as a painter. Almost as much as he wants to succeed as a dancer. Maybe more. He believes in me and wants to do everything he can to help me.

BERNIE. I've told you before. My own standing isn't that established. I'm in no position—

SHEILA. I know. I know you're right. But that doesn't get me through the bad days. When you feel like a hack who's never going to get anywhere, you need someone to tell you you can do it. Even if you know it's a lie. Because to Mathias, it's not a lie. He gives me the guts to try to be as good as he thinks I already am. And I do the same for him. He'd never say so, but he knows he may never have the career he always dreamed of. Deep down, he's terrified.

BERNIE. Of what?

SHEILA. Of every male dancer in New York under the age of 22. He's almost thirty. For a dancer, that's practically middle aged. And his arthritis is coming on fast. He denies it, of course. But some nights, as he's falling asleep in my arms, I can almost feel his heart breaking. Maybe we're both broken. Doomed to obscurity. But we don't feel that way when we're

MUSE

together.

BERNIE. Listen, Sheila, I may be wrong ... I want to be wrong....

SHEILA. Do you know what my dream is? That all the people who love me would let the other people who love me, love me. I spent too many years coddled and protected. Let me enjoy this adventure. Let me savor this astonishing man who's dropped into my life.

BERNIE. All right. I've said my piece. Cassandra has left the building.

SHEILA. I promise. If I ever see the slightest warning sign that Mathias is going off the rails—

BERNIE. You'll call me?

SHEILA. I'll call you.

BERNIE. No false pride?

SHEILA. I won't even flinch when you say, "I told you so." Satisfied?

BERNIE. Do I have a choice?

SHEILA. No.

BERNIE. Then I'm satisfied.

SHEILA. But you're never going to get that call. *(Austin enters the main playing area. As Bernie returns to the main playing area, Sheila exits.)*

AUSTIN. Let's do this thing.

BERNIE. Shouldn't we wait for Louise?

WALTER. Louise knows what we're here for. Let me start by saying ... you know how much we always admired Sheila's work. She was a very fine artist.

AUSTIN. I know that.

BERNIE. She was a solid technician.

AUSTIN. Damn it, can't you switch off the critic for two seconds?

BERNIE. Sorry. Occupational hazard. Don't mind us, Walter. Go on. *(Louise enters and hovers in the background.)*

WALTER. The day before ... before it happened ... Mathias came to me and asked if he could borrow the key to our storage locker.

BERNIE. *(Alert; this clearly means something to her.)* Key?

WALTER. We rent a storage locker in Paramus. We keep Louise's mother's things there. I asked him why he wanted it. He said Sheila might want to use some of the things there in her paintings.

MUSE

LOUISE. My mother owned some beautiful things. An antique chifforobe, a silver service.... I'm sorry.

WALTER. I didn't think much about it. Seemed like the kind of thing an artist might do. Well, after the ... after what happened ... the whole thing went straight out of my head. Anyway, a few days ago, we started going through Matty's things. We'd been putting it off for weeks.

BERNIE. I know. We still haven't been able to go through Sheila's.

AUSTIN. Bernadette. Let the man get to the point. *(Bernie glares at Austin.)*

WALTER. We were sorting through his clothes—

LOUISE. There's a bin at our church. We thought we'd donate anything that was in good condition.

BERNIE. That sounds like a very good idea. *(Austin glares at Bernie.)*

WALTER. And in the pocket of a pair of sweat pants, there was the key. It got me wondering what he'd really wanted it for. By then, I was questioning anything he'd ever said to me. So we drove up there. Inside the locker we found five paintings.

BERNIE. Sheila's paintings?

WALTER. Yes. Of course, we knew you had to be told right away, they belong to you, but—

AUSTIN. Well, I appreciate that. Did you bring them with you?

WALTER. I thought it would be better to leave them there for now. But I took some pictures.

AUSTIN. Let me see.

BERNIE. Wait, Dad. I think there's more.

WALTER. It would be better if Bernie looked at them first.

AUSTIN. Why?

WALTER. Trust me on this.

BERNIE. Dad, please. They risked a lot of embarrassment and pain to bring us this gift. We should do what he asks.

AUSTIN. Fine! I'm damned if I understand! But fine!

WALTER. They're not the best photos. It's an old phone and the lighting in the locker isn't very strong. But it's enough for you to see. *(Walter hands the phone to Bernie. As Bernie scrolls, Sheila enters the neutral*

MUSE

area with a sketch pad. She sits and sketches something just offstage.)

BERNIE. Dear God.

AUSTIN. What?

BERNIE. Sheila.

AUSTIN. What? What? Let me see!

BERNIE. No! Not yet. You're not ready for this. I'm not ready for this.

AUSTIN. Look, I've been pretty patient up to now, but this is getting ridiculous.

BERNIE. There's something you should know first. These paintings ... they're all nudes—

AUSTIN. Is that supposed to shock me? I know enough about art —

BERNIE. —and they're all of Mathias.

MATHIAS. (*Off.*) How long do I have to stay in this position?

SHEILA. As long as I tell you.

AUSTIN. You mean —

BERNIE. Yes.

AUSTIN. Christ Jesus!

MATHIAS. (*Off.*) I have to scratch my balls.

SHEILA. Touch those balls and you won't have any balls. (*Longer beat as Sheila sketches.*) All right! Scratch away! And put on that robe! (*We hear a contented sigh from offstage. Sheila continues sketching. Mathias enters, belting a robe.*)

MATHIAS. I don't see why I have to wear this.

SHEILA. Because I said so.

MATHIAS. Can't I take my break naked?

SHEILA. I don't want to be distracted.

MATHIAS. Distracted? I've been standing for an hour with my junk dangling ten feet in front of your face!

SHEILA. While you're posing, I can maintain a professional relationship with your junk.

MATHIAS. But—

SHEILA. Mathias, before we started, you promised you would do whatever I told you whether it made sense to you or not. Do you remember that? (*Mathias nods.*) So do as you're told.

MUSE

MATHIAS. As you command, milady. My entire anatomy is at your disposal. My follicles stand at the ready, my butt is in your hands, my gnarly toes— *(He playfully extends one leg in the air.)*

SHEILA. Mathias, I'm working.

MATHIAS. Oh. Sorry.... Sorry.

SHEILA. If you want to make yourself useful, get me a glass of water.

MATHIAS. As you ... sure. *(Mathias exits. After a beat, he re-enters and hands glass silently to Sheila.)*

SHEILA. Thanks. I'm sorry. I know I'm being bitchy.

MATHIAS. Ya think?

SHEILA. You really have been very good through all this. And I appreciate it.

MATHIAS. *(Smiling like a grateful puppy who's just gotten a scratch between the ears.)* I want to make sure you have anything you need.

SHEILA. I know. But sometimes what I need most is silence.

MATHIAS. Sure. Of course, I understand. I understand.

SHEILA. Thank you.

MATHIAS. *(After a brief silence.)* I understand. *(Sheila controls her irritation. Mathias shifts around on his feet—a bundle of energy with no outlet.)* Can I take a little peek?

SHEILA. No!

MATHIAS. Sorry.

SHEILA. I've told you that before!

MATHIAS. Sorry.

SHEILA. When I'm done with the paintings—all the paintings—I will let you look at them. But until then, don't even try.

MATHIAS. All right.

SHEILA. I mean it! Don't let me catch you peeking and don't ever bring it up again.

MATHIAS. All right.

SHEILA. Okay, I'm done with you.

MATHIAS. What?

SHEILA. For the day! I'm done with you for the day! Jesus!

MATHIAS. Don't scare me like that!

MUSE

SHEILA. You can get dressed and go back to the apartment.

MATHIAS. You're not coming with me?

SHEILA. I have to work out some color ideas.

MATHIAS. I can stay and help.

SHEILA. No, you can't. Go home. Take your ice bath. Make dinner. I don't need you right now. *(Mathias stands forlornly for a beat, then exits.)* Let me get this right. Dear God, if I accomplish nothing else in my life, let me get this one thing right. *(As the action shifts back to the main playing area, Sheila exits with sketch pad.)*

AUSTIN. Hand me the phone.

BERNIE. Are you sure you want to do this, Dad?

AUSTIN. I'm sure.

BERNIE. I wish you'd spare yourself that.

AUSTIN. Bernadette, give me that phone.

BERNIE. All right. You've been warned. *(Austin takes phone.)*

WALTER. We don't know anything about art. We make donuts and birthday cakes. But we think they're good.

LOUISE. Very good. We think they're very good.

BERNIE. Good? They're astonishing.

LOUISE. Of course, it was kind of shocking ... seeing my boy like that. I don't mean without his clothes on. I've seen that, of course. Not since he was little, of course, but ... well, you know what I mean. But seeing him that way ... looking so ... so ... I was kind of shocked.

BERNIE. I can imagine.

LOUISE. And that one picture.

BERNIE. I think I know the one you mean.

LOUISE. It was so strange. His legs. I don't understand why she did that to his legs. It upsets me.

BERNIE. I understand. I understand a lot of things now.

LOUISE. But he looks so—so alive. *(Mathias enters neutral area. He wears a different robe and his hair is wet. He sits, places a glass and a couple of bottles on table, and props up his phone.)*

BERNIE. Half the people walking around on two legs aren't as alive as that. I never dreamed she had this in her. It's everything I always hoped to

MUSE

see in her work and never did. All the passion, all the boldness. There was always something timid in her painting. She was always holding something back. There's no timidity in that work. And nothing derivative. It's original. It's her soul on canvas. Intimate, disturbing, and beautiful as hell. It's my sister. It's Sheila.

MATHIAS. *(To phone.)* My name ... is Mathias. Mathias Wessler.

BERNIE. And it's him, too. God damn it. It's all there. Everything she told me she loved about him. Everything I warned her about. All the reasons she should have run like hell and all the reasons she couldn't. The little boy and the wild beast. His grace and even his fears. She captured it all in flame and sinew and blood. I understand now, Sheila.

MATHIAS. If you're watching this ... if you're the one watching it ... you must be with the police. I hope to God you're the police. If my parents get hold of this ... Papa, Mama ... if you're watching this, turn it off. Now. Please, if you love me ... no, I didn't mean that, I know you love me ... it's because I love you, I want you to stop watching before.... I'm begging you, please turn it off.... *(Suddenly begins shaking violently.)*

BERNIE. I understand what you were trying to tell me. And I know why you're gone.

MATHIAS. *(Slowly regaining control of himself.)* Okay. Okay. My name is Mathias Wessler. This is my confession ... and my goodbye. The woman in the other room ... in our bed ... is Sheila Day. My soulmate. Please treat her with respect. I don't care how you treat me, I'm a monster, do what you want with me, but give her dignity. I tried to make her look as ... as she was before. As much as I could. The reason I left her there like that ... this is important, I need you to understand ... I laid her on the bed naked because that's when she was always most beautiful to me. I bathed her ... so gently ... I bathed her. To put clothes on her after ... after what I ... putting clothes on her would have been obscene. A desecration. She looks ... she looks so peaceful now. She deserves it. I owed her that. Peace. She deserves that. I don't. I've never known it. I don't deserve it. I deserve nothing but ... but what's going to happen to me.... I loved her. Such a strange thing to say about somebody I ... did that to. But that was the reason. I couldn't bear to let her go. She was my muse. I couldn't dance

MUSE

without her, I was nothing without her. I tried to show her every moment how much I loved her. Why wasn't that enough? Why couldn't she need me as much as I needed her? I went crazy. That's not an excuse, that's I'm talking too much. I'm talking because I'm afraid of ... the next part. It scares me. But living scares me more. Tell my parents I'm sorry and I love them. Please make them understand ... there's nothing left. Their son is already gone. And tell Bernie ... tell Mr. Day ... I don't expect them to forgive me. But I want them to know that my last moments were spent in agony. I chose pain to show how sorry I am. Maybe then they might not hate me as much. If I could, I'd tear this body to pieces. This body I worked so hard to perfect. I wish I could mutilate it, castrate myself with my bare hands. But this way is better. *(Fills glass two thirds with orange juice.)* I read that the pain doesn't start right away. I hope they're right. God, give me just five seconds of courage. *(Tops off the glass with drain cleaner.)* So this is it. The end. Sheila. Sheila, my life, my love. This is for you. *(Quickly downs the contents of the glass.)*

BERNIE. Sheila found her muse. And her muse killed her. Now what the hell do we do with that? *(Mathias drops glass and doubles over in excruciating pain. He opens his mouth, but mercifully there is a blackout before we can hear or see what comes out of it.)*

END OF ACT I

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