

The French Play

(Fragment)

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ACT ONE

A living-room. Very old and very French, like Versailles exploded and scattered fleurs de lis and toisons d'or all over the place: Heavy wallpaper on the upstage wall, a chandelier, drapes, mirrors, chaise lounges, dressed chairs, fat cherubs and painted vases, flower arrangements. Less is not more. More is not enough. Go crazy.

Also, a large portrait covered by a thick black veil hangs over the fake fireplace and dominates the room.

The living-room set is flanked by two curtains (the wings).

Music: "Four Season" by Vivaldi, or something like that. Overused.

Lights slowly up on two maids dusting the room. They speak with heavy French accents. Lucianne can't really pull it off. Her actual French is even worse.

HORTENSE

I felt him!

LUCIANNE

Oh, Hortense--

HORTENSE

I did, Lucianne! It was late last night... I was putting out the fire, and I felt him... A presence. Lurking. Behind me.

LUCIANNE

You are imagining things. Luhrg... *Luhrgking*. Who taught you such worghs?

HORTENSE

Oh... There is something wrong with this house... Ever since/ the master

LUCIANNE

Don't say it!

HORTENSE

Left us.

LUCIANNE

(Oh, such bad French!)

Silence, Hortense! Pas plus des mots!

HORTENSE

Écoute-moi, Lucianne!

Yes. Our dear master...

She looks around. Then, a whisper:

Died... Under such mysterious circumstances...

Lucianne gasps and crosses herself.

Hortense keeps cleaning the room and proceeds with the blatant exposition.

Exactly one year ago today...

But sometimes it feels like he took this household with him...

Or... Never left!

LUCIANNE

Zont zay zat!

Beat. Huh?

HORTENSE

Last night... I heard his voice--

LUCIANNE

No.

HORTENSE

A rustling behind me... Steps. The sound of his cane against the hardwood floor.

Lucianne swoons.

LUCIANNE

You must 'ave imaginz it!

HORTENSE

I know what I felt... But... *Peut-être* you're right...

The sound of the Varsouviana Polka from "A Streetcar Named Desire": Only Hortense seems to hear it.

She is lost in the music for a moment. She might also develop a slight facial tic -or crazy eyes- to overemphasize the moment's drama.

HORTENSE (CONT'D)

The human mind is prone to such digressions...
It is frail, and feeds itself with hope.

The Varsouviana fades.

I know what/ I felt.

LUCIANNE

(Again with the French:)

Non Hortense... Est impossible!

Pause.

They keep cleaning the room.

HORTENSE

Henri arrives today/ He will--

LUCIANNE

Henri?/ You call him--?

HORTENSE

Monsieur DesChamps.

LUCIANNE

You speak/ his name with such--

HORTENSE

Monsieur... Arrives today. He has only been away for two months, but the house feels different without him... Unprotected. What a strange coincidence, Lucianne... As you well know, he was bound to arrive three days ago, but the summer storm kept him at bay... Maybe his late father didn't want him here until... The anniversary.

They turn to look at the covered portrait.

Dramatic music. Lights shift.

Yes. I may have imagined certain things... But then, certain others are beyond the imagination...

Pause.

Dramatic music fades. Lights restore.

The maids jump into action.

LUCIANNE

We need more flowers!

HORTENSE

Yes. Madame Louise wants to bathe the room in flowers...

LUCIANNE

Do you think, Hortense...? Do you think madame will tell her son about Jerome?

HORTENSE

Oh, je ne sais pas...

LUCIANNE

He's almost *living* here.

HORTENSE

Madame's young lover--

LUCIANNE

She should still be in mourning/ for monsieur DesChamps--

HORTENSE

They are careless! They must hide their dirty love--

LUCIANNE

No, don't say that... Madame is a paragon of virtue!

The doorbell rings.

HORTENSE

Is that?

LUCIANNE

Monsieur Henri DesChamps!

HORTENSE

Call Madame, call Madame!

They try to organize and clean the room in a hurry, they place vases with flowers and dust everything.

Monsieur DesChamps is here! Monsieur DesChamps--!!

Henri makes an entrance. His accent is British.

HENRI

Call me Henri, Hortense.

Lights shift. Grand entrance music.

Henri faces the audience, strikes a pose and pauses for applause.

As long as it takes.

Then he turns to face Lucianne:

Lucianne, is it?

LUCIANNE

Yes, monsieur.

HENRI

Take my coat.

LUCIANNE

Oui, monsieur.

Lucianne takes the coat and cane. Henri should remove at least five or six articles of clothing and still look overdressed.

Hortense looks at him in silence.

Lucianne leaves.

HENRI

Is my mother up?

HORTENSE

I'll go fetch her, Monsieur--

He gestures for her to stay.

HENRI

No. Stay... I would so like to surprise her...

Henri and Hortense look at each other for a moment. Then they run into each other's arms and kiss passionately.

HORTENSE

Oh, Henri... Henri...

HENRI

Hortense... My love, my little flower...

*They kiss. He takes her hands and kisses the tips of her fingers.
They share a long look.*

HORTENSE

I've felt empty without you, Henri... You've been gone for/ so long...

HENRI

Shh... I hear someone.

HORTENSE

Lucianne is my friend/ she'll keep our secret.

HENRI

No... No... There is something I must tell you, Hortense... You must know.

HORTENSE

I have something to/ tell you as well.

HENRI

I'm married. I have a wife.

Shock!

Dramatic music.

Hortense backs away.

Lights out.

~ ~ ~

Transition music and lights:

Stagehands emerge dressed like french servants and move a few things around. A plate with finger food and chocolates is set. The furniture is shifted a bit. Nothing major. It should be obvious that the stage hands are looking for spike marks on the floor.

The stagehands leave.

The actors playing Henri, Pauline, Louise, Lucianne and Hortense enter and take their positions. They remain frozen mid grand gesture, waiting for the light cue.

~ ~ ~

Lights up on the living-room.

Henri and Pauline are sitting together. She fans herself constantly and smiles too much. Her laugh should get on our nerves pretty quickly.

Across from them sits Louise DesChamps, Henri's mother. She pops chocolates into her mouth. Pauline and Louise both have slight British accents.

Hortense and Lucianne are pouring wine. Dead face.

HENRI (CONT'D)

So I told them... I said... We are *not* talking about the poor, Monsieur LaChance... Such topics should be reserved for the senate! For the senate! ha ha ha!

LOUISE

Oh, the poor bore me. As do the *bourgeoisie* and the upper classes... Everyone bores me so.

She eats a chocolate.

Henri gets up and walks towards the fireplace.

HENRI

My dear mother, having been away for so long, I do believe I've been inexcusably neglectful in my duties as a son... Are you well?

Pauline springs up. She's also loud.

PAULINE

Yes, *belle-mère*, do tell!

Louise stares at Pauline with obvious distaste.

LOUISE

Oh... I've been.

She shares a look with Lucianne.

LOUISE (CONT'D)

Otherwise entertained

Lucianne blushes. Hortense scolds.

Henri reaches the fireplace and is about to turn when he discovers a small red object: What's a clown nose doing onstage? He picks up the nose and it honks loudly, so he quickly pockets it and turns to look at the covered portrait. He's back in character.

HENRI

My dear father... He had such life... Such passion!
I find it almost impossible to believe *
I find it ***
I find ***
A terrible shadow ****

Pauline laughs nervously

Henri restarts.

My dear father... It's so sad ***

LOUISE

Oh, darling... You must *hate* the veil that covers his portrait...

PAULINE

And miss him terribly? Maybe... Every day of your wretched life?

HENRI

Indeed! I *hate* it! The veil! My dear father had *a lot* of life... Uh, covering his memory seems like an insult.

PAULINE

Oh, Henri, you have such passion!

Hortense lowers her head.

HENRI

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PAULINE

Oh, the desperate musings of a grieving son... You're a true poet, Henri... A true poet!

Pauline laughs again.

HENRI

LOUISE

Oh... Well, my darling son, perhaps you should...

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Finish your wine...

Hortense runs to pour the wine that they skipped over.

PAULINE

Or not, my dear, husband... you really shouldn't drink, ha ha ha... Why don't we... Talk about our plans for the future...? Or the beauty of country life--

+ + +

LOUISE

UNVEIL THE PORTRAIT!

PAULINE

The... portrait? Now?

Henri turns to look at the covered portrait and walks to it. Pauline walks behind him.

Louise signals Lucianne to approach her.

LOUISE

(A whisper:)

Lucianne... You must deliver this letter to my young lover, to Jerome--

LUCIANNE

(A whisper:)

But madame--

HENRI

I must uncover the portrait of my father!

Louise gives the letter to Lucianne.

PAULINE

Yes, my love!

LOUISE

Are you certain?

HENRI

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Yes! I am!

Henri unveils a portrait of Jean Luc DesChamps. Elegant and refined... But the eyes are bleeding!

Lightning and thunder. Go for it.

Louise and Pauline scream.

HENRI (CONT'D)

What is this?

LUCIANNE

(Aside, British accent:)

Your trust/ will be your ultimate
downfall, Louise DesChamps!

LOUISE

(Aside:)

No, Jean Luc,/ forgive me! Forgive my
sins!

HENRI

(Loud, over their speeches:)

My father's portrait! What does this mean?!

Hortense faints.

*They hold a dramatic pose as the curtain falls and music soars.
Lucianne also holds a dramatic pose, though she should have been
offstage by now.*

*[Actually, the curtain only falls for the Champs du Péché audience.
We can still see everyone onstage, but in a "curtain down" effect.]*

~ ~ ~

*Everyone holds for one more second, and then relax at the
same time. All accents are now neutral.*

*Stagehands walk in to do the changeover. They work
around the actors.*

JOHN (HENRI)

What the fuck?

ROSE (LUCIANNE)

What happened?

JOHN

I don't know... I blanked.

ABIGAIL (LOUISE)

I think I skipped like ten minutes.

PAULINE (JEN)

The whole "moving to the country" part... My monologue--

MARGE (HORTENSE)

The wine--

ABIGAIL
(To Rose:)

Well, at least I gave you the letter--

ROSE
I didn't have time to do my aside--

MARGE
Weren't you supposed to leave with the letter?

ROSE
I was trying to say my fucking line--

JEN
Rose... Language.

ABIGAIL
What a mess...

JOHN
Guys... I'm really sorry. I don't know what happened.

Billy (Jerome) walks in.

BILLY (JEROME)
First act's over? Already?

ABIGAIL
John forgot his lines.

JOHN
Shit!

*The Stage Manager's voice is heard through the
loudspeakers.*

RYAN'S VOICE
John?

JOHN
Ryan, I'm really sorry...

RYAN'S VOICE
Are you ready to go on for the Second Act? Is this something we need to worry
about?

JOHN
No... I'm fine. I just need to focus. I *know* the part.

RYAN'S VOICE

I trust that you can do it, John... but we/ need to know if--

JOHN

I'll do it. Trust me, Ryan. Everyone. I'll be fine.

ABIGAIL

(Sighs:)

I'll go change.

RYAN'S VOICE

Fifteen minutes, everyone.

ALL

Thank you, fifteen.

They start to leave.

BILLY

Who's John's understudy?

ROSE

Shh/ don't--

JOHN

Why are you asking that?

MARGE

I think it was that Clown.

BILLY

Oh. Right. Him.

JOHN

Hey! Hey!

BILLY (CONT'D)

Too bad Ryan fired him.

Marge looks at John: He had Ryan fire him.

Billy looks at Marge: Really?

ABIGAIL

Oh... No, we *really* don't want him back.

Marge, Abigail, Jen and Billy are gone.

JOHN

I don't need an understudy! You hear me?!

John. It's okay.

ROSE

I'm John Strone!

JOHN

They know that.

ROSE

John sits in a chair one of the stagehand was about to strike.

Honey...

She looks at the stagehand.

The stagehand backs away offstage.

I really don't know what happened... We've been doing this stupid play for so long--

JOHN

You just got/ distracted--

ROSE

I *never* forget my lines. I'm *proud* of my frigging memory. You know me. Everyone calls me--

JOHN

"Off-Book John".

ROSE

"Off-Book by the first rehearsal, John!"
I mean: *Long Day's Journey into Night*... That was really, really long!

JOHN

You're just tired.

ROSE

He sighs. Frustrated.

John.

He puts his hand in his pocket, searching for the Clown nose.

Where the hell's that nose?

JOHN

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