

WHO'S YEHOODI?

CHARACTERS

JOSH Freedman, early 30s, white, Cleo's partner, writer for a faddish Jewish website, *gevalt dot com*.

CLEO Spellman, early 30s, Black, Josh's partner, fundraiser for a Jewish immigrant aid fund and a would-be day school educator.

JUDAH Wolfman, 35, white, an immigrant worker, formerly a physics student.

CLARA Wolfman, née Mendes, 26, Judah's immigrant Sephardic Jewish wife.

CYNTHIA Ostroff, 75, white, the leading Jewish writer of her time

Various off-stage voices

SETTINGS

A small apartment on the Lower East Side of New York, and a larger apartment on the Upper West Side. One short solo scene is in a New York subway car, which can be suggested by lighting.

TIME

The present, the past and, quite possibly, the future.

SYNOPSIS

What does it mean to be alive in America today, and Jewish to boot? Website writer Josh attempts to answer that question by snagging the last interview of the leading Jewish writer of her time, while his girlfriend Cleo, a Jew of color, tries to find a place that will accept her as herself. The specters of an immigrant couple who lived in their Lower East Side apartment 100 years ago haunt them, as does a mysterious baby caught between all of them.

NOTES

JOSH and CLEO are living in the present, JUDAH and CLARA live in the 1920s, but both couples occupy the same Lower East Side apartment simultaneously. THEY do not, and can not interact. Also, JUDAH and CLARA dress only in black and white – no colors at all.

The play is performed without an intermission.

JOSH addresses the audience in front of a darkened set.

JOSH

My father was born in a part of Brooklyn that was so Jewish the only Gentiles he knew were policemen and the school janitors. All four of my grandparents were also from neighborhoods so Jewish that life shut down on the holidays. My grandfather told me he once took a nap on Livonia Avenue on Yom Kippur and never worried about getting run over.

Both my grandfathers worked in the garment business in Manhattan, back when there was a garment business in Manhattan, surrounded by their fellow Jews from the labor union and the occasional Puerto Rican who thought he got lucky and had landed a relatively cushy indoor job.

My great-grandparents were Ashkenazi Jews, from that part of Eastern Europe that was Poland or Russia or Austria or Ukraine depending on who won last week's war. They also worked in the garment business, so I'm told, and days would go by where they neither spoke nor heard a word that wasn't in Yiddish.

Most of their friends were tailors like themselves, but back then anyone who could thread a needle called themselves a tailor. My grandmother told me she met a man who had studied physics in Poland, even though a Jew wasn't allowed to be a physicist. He liked physics because everything behaved the same every day.

One day, his town's Rabbi told him that God had created the world by accident, and it was our job to finish what He had forgotten.

But Rabbi, the would-be physicist said to him, the creation of the world, and even the creation of time, was pure physics, and there are no accidents in physics. If you dropped a ball on Tuesday, it fell, and if you dropped the same ball on erev Rosh Hashanah, it would fall the same way.

There may not be accidents in physics, the Rabbi answered, but in our lives and our world, there are accidents every day, and it is our job to make something good out of them, to make sure they're happy accidents.

In the 1920s, my mother's family hightailed it to the genteel, but certainly not Gentile, Grand Concourse in the Bronx the moment they could. But my father's people stayed down here, specifically 26 Rivington Street, fourth floor, across the street. They couldn't afford anything lower, and couldn't climb to anything higher.

(more)

JOSH (cont'd)

And like them, after four years on scholarship at a moderately expensive private college where I majored in Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution, with a minor in business just in case, I moved with my girlfriend to the same old neighborhood, now more lightly packed with Jews. Twenty-nine Rivington, by happy accident, across from twenty-six, and the same fourth floor. I can see into their apartment, if I crane my neck out past the fire escape. Five thousand a month for a one bedroom with an option to buy and, if we came into a little money – which we did – to break through to the apartment next door and make one big place for us and a kid or two eventually. A steal, the agent said. A *shonda*, I could hear my great-grandfather say.

They were all Jewish, twenty four-seven. They never questioned it. They lived among Jews, they worked among Jews, they ate in Jewish cafeterias and dairy restaurants, they were loved because they were Jews, they were hated because they were Jews, and they were buried in Jewish cemeteries. They didn't have to work at being Jewish or question it. They just *were*.

But today, here on Rivington Street, where ghosts of my ancestors prowl the corridors of old tenements, I live with everybody. Sure there are Jews, but they're not Jews like they used to be. Jews lite, they'd say. Diet Jews. Jews from Danville, Virginia, and Dayton, Ohio, of all places. There also are people like me but from every corner of the world, every shade, from the palest Norwegian downstairs in 3B to the blackest Cameroonian down the hall in 4D. Yes, to the woman who I live with and love. We like the same music, we eat the same *bahn mi* and *pho* and bubble tea for dinner. But they sure ain't Jewish. Not like my great-grandparents were at least.

Which makes me think, at two in the morning when Cleo is quietly gently snoring next to me, and I'm pondering my next writing assignment, is being Jewish today just like being Norwegian, or Greek, or Indian? Is it merely a passion for social justice and corned beef? Or is it how we look back to our ancestors for answers to today's problems? Do we have the same problems they had? Why do we live like time travelers, in the past, the present and the future? What does it mean to be alive today, right now? And more to the point, what does it mean to be American and Jewish today?

And then I fall asleep.

BLACKOUT.

Lights up on the main room of a small apartment in New York's Lower East Side, where JOSH and CLEO live. A small dining table, which doubles as a desk when needed, is on one side of the room, with a sofa and chair in the middle. The other rooms – bedroom, kitchen, bath – are offstage.

It is early morning, about 8 a.m.

CLEO is sitting on the sofa, reading a magazine and drinking coffee. An open laptop and a cell phone are on the table.

The phone sounds – a jaunty computerized version of the Hebrew melody “Heveinu Shalom Aleichem.” It’s JOSH’s, but he’s in the bedroom off stage.

CLEO

Josh – your phone.

But HE doesn’t answer. And the phone goes off again.

Your phone, baby.

Still nothing. It keeps ringing.

I’m not answering it.

JOSH (O.S.)

It’s probably Margot. Let it go. I’ll call her back. I hate talking to her anyway.

The phone sound segues into a traditional 1930s telephone bell ring, but muffled, and far off, as if it was in the hall – which it is.

The bell ring stops. Someone has answered it.

VOICE FROM HALL (O.S. - A NEIGHBOR)

(muffled)

Hello? Who? Okay, I’ll get him.

(yelled)

Mister Wolfman! Mister Wolfman! Telephone for you!

JUDAH Wolfman, a tall thin man runs in from the bedroom, caught in the middle of dressing, his shirt untucked and shoes untied. HE is dressed in black and white – white shirt, black pants, socks and shoes, nothing with any color at all.

HE runs through the apartment, from the bedroom through to the hall offstage, where HE answers the phone and has a short muffled conversation.

Meanwhile, JOSH's phone quiets as it answers the call with a voice mail.

JUDAH (O.S.)

(muffled)

Today? Six o'clock? Sure, of course. Thank you. Oh, thank you!

JUDAH re-enters the apartment, and speaks as he goes through it to the bedroom off stage.

JUDAH

(excited)

Clara, Max called. I got a double shift, so I won't be home for dinner tonight. I hate that son of a bitch, but at least he gives me extra work.

*And as JUDAH exits to the bedroom, JOSH enters. THEY pass each other, but do not notice or acknowledge each other – **since they are living in the same apartment, but about 100 years apart.***

We hear Josh's editor, Margot, over the phone's speaker as she leaves a message.

JOSH stands and listens.

PHONE (V.O.)

Josh, it's Margot. That's a great idea. And I like your new pitch on it. Charlie's still not all there, and I think you're ready. I'll give you his notes. And please, don't fuck it up this time. But there's a problem. Call me.

JOSH

(to audience)

At this point in the play, there's always a problem.

CLEO

That's a very annoying habit.

JOSH

What?

CLEO

Letting calls go to voice mail when you're right there.

JOSH

You do it too.

CLEO

I didn't say I didn't. I just said it was annoying.

JOSH

But did you hear that? That project I proposed. The interview with Cynthia Ostroff. And once I knew Charlie couldn't do it, I pitched her a new take.

CLEO

How is Charlie?

JOSH

Still recovering.

CLEO

Long Covid's a bitch. Julie at my office had it. She still can't think straight. So what's the problem? Your new take?

JOSH

I gave her the idea that Charlie should write a profile of her, since he's known her for years. They're old family friends. But then when he got sick, I pitched that I wanted to use her to answer something that's been bugging me. I want to write something big. Enough with Top Ten lists and the best beer joints in Williamsburg.

CLEO

And what is this big question?

JOSH

I want to write about what it means to be American today.

CLEO

That's a big topic. Can you maybe, you know, focus it a bit?

JOSH

Specifically, what does it mean to be Jewish in America today.

CLEO

I'm impressed.

JOSH

You know what it means if I get it just right? I graduate from website writer to magazine writer. If I play it right. Maybe. But it's got to be perfect. *I've* got to be perfect. My great-grandfather sacrificed and pushed racks of dresses through the Garment District in the summer sun so I could get to this moment.

CLEO

Who is she anyway?

JOSH

She's Cynthia Ostroff! She wrote *The Adventures of Angie Marsh* – her first book, a feminist rebuke to Saul Bellow. She was the queen of American Jewish fiction, slashing and burning, sleeping with everyone all over the world and detailing it in print. Destroyed every professional relationship she had, but she was so good, so original, it didn't matter. Then she stopped publishing for five years. No one knows why.

CLEO

Ah – a good mystery makes for good copy.

JOSH

After a while she reinvented herself as the kvetch of West 72nd Street and started publishing silly humor pieces and giving wry talks at colleges. Total about-face from what she was. You read her early stuff in your Intro to Judaism class at the Tenement Museum.

CLEO

The class I didn't need to take?

JOSH

You *thought* you needed to take it.

CLEO

Joshie, there was so much reading in that class, I couldn't tell you the difference between the *Pirkei Avot* and *Portnoy's Complaint*. I did it for you and for the little bunch of cells that will grow in my belly. One day.

JOSH

One day.

CLEO

Remember what the Rabbi said to me in that class. "You want to be Jewish? Don't you have enough trouble being Black?"

JOSH

She wasn't wrong.

CLEO

Damn straight.

JOSH

And I love you for that, for your...your rebellious spirit.

CLEO

If people are going to hate me, I want it to be for reasons beyond my control.

JOSH

So I suggested to Margot we interview her about her new book. She's one of the leading authors of her time, she's getting up there, maybe it's her last. And we're trying to position *gevalt dot com* as the hot trendy arbiter of all things Jewish. Makes sense, right?

CLEO

And an interview with a 75 year old writer will do that?

JOSH

Thanks for the vote of confidence. Margot said the same thing, until I brought Charlie into it. She loves him, and I'm a waste of space, apparently.

CLEO

That's some name. *Gevalt dot com*.

JOSH

There used to be a hip trendy Jewish magazine called *Heeb*.

CLEO

There used to be rotary phones and 8-track tapes.

JOSH

But then Charlie got sick, and she turned to me. Reluctantly, I'll bet. But this new take, I've been thinking about it for a long time. When I sleep, when I dream. It's big, Cleo, really big. So big I don't know if I can wrap my arms around it.

CLEO

I know you're up to it, Joshua Freedman.

JOSH

I hope so. I mean, this could be a huge break. I could get out from under Margot. From desk editor at some website to maybe an occasional piece in the *Atlantic* or the *New Yorker*, and then if I'm lucky a staff job.

CLEO

Print's on its way out.

JOSH

It is? Then what are you reading?

CLEO

Baby magazine.

JOSH

I thought print was dead.

CLEO

I saw it at the bodega. It's like my own edition of National Geographic. Pictures of places I'll never visit.

JOSH

Don't think like that. We'll get it done.

CLEO

You make it sound like tiling the bathroom.

JOSH

Who ever thought trying would be so...trying.

CLEO

(holds up the magazine)

You can't tear the playpen ads out of an iPad and put them up on a wall.

JOSH

And until there aren't any trees left, print's my ticket. At least who I'm aiming for with this. The intellectual and cultural elite who remember reading Dick Tracy in the Daily News on Sunday morning.

CLEO

So this is good for you?

JOSH

Definitely.

CLEO

I can never tell. One day it's a critical analysis of Mordecai Richler, the next it's new trends in bar mitzvah *hors d'oeuvres*.

JOSH

I usually write what Margot wants me to. Or trusts me to.

CLEO

But you obsess over every last word.

JOSH

That's what a good writer does.

CLEO

But you're extreme. When you're on deadline, it's like you're not even here with me. All you can think of is where to get the most radical yarmulkes, or the 10 best bagel shops in Bushwick. Now it's What is Life, or something like that.

JOSH

It's a tough field. I'm competing with writers five or ten years younger than me just out of Harvard who are willing to get paid next to nothing.

CLEO

All for *5 Knishes That Will Make You Plotz*?

JOSH

Yes. I have to find just the right word, the right simile, the right headline. I have to be perfect.

CLEO

Why?

JOSH

Why do I have to be perfect? My father busted his ass to send me to college. I was the first in my family to go to a private school. Everybody else was in the pipeline to Brooklyn College.

CLEO

Nothing wrong with a public school education.

JOSH

But they always told me I had more.

CLEO

More what?

JOSH

More potential I guess. They borrowed, mortgaged their house, just to send me to Oberlin. I have to succeed for them. I have to be perfect. And I have to convince fucking Margot of my worth every day. It's exhausting. I need to move up and out.

CLEO

Josh, I'm sorry, but I have problems of my own.

JOSH

Jack still bugging you about your quota?

CLEO

I told him people didn't want to contribute to much of anything during the lockdowns, and it may take some time to get back to where we were before.

JOSH

Even to immigrant aid?

CLEO

Especially to immigrant aid. It's all going to hospitals and nurses. There might be cut backs.

JOSH

Really?

CLEO

Jack said if we don't get the contributions up soon, it's possible. We have a Zoom at 10.

JOSH

Let me know how it goes.

CLEO

I wish I could get back to teaching. I've had five rejections from Jewish day schools in the city for directors jobs.

JOSH

I still can't believe that with your credentials...

CLEO

A master's in education, another master's in Jewish education and four years heading a day school down south. I do great on the phone, but they take one look at me and that's that. I'm the wrong kind of Jew for them.

JOSH

Is it too far for them to stretch?

CLEO

What do you mean?

JOSH

A female Jew of color with an odd history.

CLEO

It's who I am!

(to audience)

It's complicated. I'll explain in a minute.

CLEO is back in the scene.

JOSH

That's different.

CLEO

You stretched!

JOSH

People want to associate with people like themselves.

CLEO

(anguished)

But there's nobody out there like me!

Pause.

JOSH

Maybe you need to, you know, not lean in. Maybe lean back for a bit.

CLEO

No. What I need is a place. A place to be me. Without explanations.

JOSH

I thought we made that place for you together.

CLEO

Joshie, I want what you have. Your security. People accept you for who you are. I never told you what happened at your niece's bat mitzvah. I was too angry and ashamed. I was getting this feeling from everybody like I didn't belong. At the reception, someone gave me their empty wine glass with a lipstick mark on top and said "Thank you."

JOSH

You never told me that.

CLEO

I wanted to throw that glass back in that bitch's face. It hurt too much.

JOSH

You were quiet all the way home. I thought you were mad at me.

CLEO

I could never be mad at you.

THEY embrace.

I just got an idea. You know that job I applied for, the head of the eclectic Jewish day school on Ludlow Street? It's perfect for me – pluralistic, lots of community outreach, K through 12. I could fit in there. A place for me, where I wouldn't have to account for and account for the most minute details of my very existence every minute of every day.

JOSH

Sounds perfect.

CLEO

But they need references. So who do we know who would persuade these highly intellectual Ashke-normative Jewish school board members who are looking to express the multiethnic, multiracial tapestry that is Judaism in America today, *i.e.*, me?

Pause.

JOSH

"Ashke-normative"?

CLEO

Cool way to put it, ain't it?

Pause.

JOSH

No.

CLEO

Why not?

JOSH

I haven't even met her yet.

CLEO

But you will. And I could get that job with a reference from the number-one Upper West Side Jew Cynthia Ostroff to these people who follow the New York Times best seller list like my uncle Jessie followed the racing form.

JOSH

I can't. I shouldn't mix your business with mine.

CLEO

It's our business. I thought we were a team.

JOSH

But Cynthia Ostroff?

CLEO

It's just asking a simple question. I could even write it for her. All she'd have to do is sign it.

JOSH

Cleo, this isn't just any Upper West Side old lady. This woman wrote the greatest Jewish American novel of the 20th century and may have slept with at least two of the Three Stooges! At the same time!

CLEO

She would be interested in my story. In who I am.

JOSH

Well...

CLEO

And it would make it so much easier for us.

JOSH

I can't.

CLEO

She wouldn't say no to me.

JOSH

She hasn't met you.

*JUDAH enters and sits at the table. HE does not interact with JOSH or CLEO, and they don't with him, **because they can't.***

CLEO

Maybe...maybe you can invite her to dinner.

JOSH

What, here?

CLEO

Why not? See how the other half lives. Research for her next New Yorker piece.

JOSH

With the builders coming soon?

CLEO

Tuesday. If we can get the building to approve, they break through the wall into the other apartment on Tuesday.

JOSH

Your family was very generous.

CLEO

They have it. I used to think we were the only Black family with money. Then I went to Columbia and found out we were poor-rich, you know what I mean? We had money, but not real money.

JOSH

So two small apartments equal one big one.

CLEO

Enough for three. At least.

JOSH

One day.

CLEO

One day.

Pause.

You'll ask her?

Pause, as JOSH sighs.

JOSH

I'll ask her. At the right time.

CLARA, a young woman in her late 20s, enters with a cup of tea and some toast to the table, sets them down for JUDAH. Like him, she is dressed entirely in black and white, no colors, and does not interact with CLEO or JOSH. SHE sits.

JUDAH

Thank you, dear.

CLARA

The eggs are still on the stove. You need a big breakfast. Where will you eat dinner?

JUDAH

The cafeteria like I did last time.

CLARA

I worry about you. So much work.

JUDAH

I can do it.

CLARA

But you come home in the middle of the night so tired. I don't see you.

JUDAH

When I work a double shift, I make more money. When I make more money, we save more. Even if I have to drag it out of Max.

CLARA

Judah, I have something to tell you.

SHE stops.

Your eggs!

SHE runs offstage to the kitchen.

CLEO

Won't you eat?

JOSH

I'll grab a bean breakfast taco and a triple latte at Stumptown.

CLEO

Those things will kill you.

JOSH

But I'll be wide awake when it happens. I need to get my stuff. Have you seen my notebook?

CLEO

Check the closet.

JOSH leaves for the bedroom to look for his notebook. CLEO goes back to her magazine.

CLARA comes back with JUDAH's eggs.

JUDAH

Thank you. I love the spices you put in them. Not like my mother.

CLARA

Here they're called cumin, cilantro and turmeric. I forget what they called them back home. My grandmother used to put them in everything.

JUDAH

My grandmother put chicken fat in everything. It's amazing we all didn't drop dead at 30.

CLARA

Different cultures, my sweet.

JUDAH

I'm glad you're different.

CLARA

I know. But everyone else here is like you, not me.

JUDAH

What do you mean?

CLARA

I talk a little different, I sound a little different. All the other wives are from the same towns in Romania or Hungary or Poland, and they all stick together. They look at me like I'm crazy. No one wants to talk to me.

JUDAH

I do.

CLARA

But you're always working.

JUDAH

Let me...let me talk to a few of the men at work. Maybe they can say something to their women.

CLARA

Judah, I think something's happening.

JUDAH

Something?

CLARA

You know. With me.

HE stops, and puts down his food.

JUDAH

With you?

CLARA

Yes. I saw Doctor Cardozo.

JUDAH

Really?

CLARA

Maybe so.

JUDAH

But maybe so? That's...wonderful.

CLARA

I know.

THEY slowly break into great emotion.

JUDAH

A boy, *baruch ha-shem*?

CLARA

It's too early to know. But maybe.

JUDAH

A boy is good. A girl would be good too.

CLARA

Oh Judah...

THEY embrace. JOSH re-enters with his briefcase for work. JUDAH rises, and both he and JOSH head for the door.

JOSH

OK, I'm off.

JUDAH

I'll wake you when I get home tonight. Don't strain yourself. Take it easy.

CLEO

Dinner at the Ethiopian-Polish place tonight?

JOSH

Sure.

CLEO

Red lentil pierogis get me hot.

JOSH smiles.

Josh, I love you. Don't let Margot upset you.

CLARA

Judah, I love you. Don't let Max upset you.

JUDAH AND JOSH
(together)

And I love you too.

*JUDAH and JOSH leave, one after another, but do not – **and cannot** – acknowledge each other.*

CLEO turns to addresses the audience. CLARA holds in darkness.

CLEO

I'm what Josh calls a happy accident. And I'm also in a predicament.

I am, as you can see, a Black woman. Not gay or trans, but at least I check two of the woke boxes. I am also Jewish. Yes, a Jew both by birth and by choice – I'll explain – and a Jew of color. Sometimes the Jewish spaces I'm interested in aren't all that interested in me. I am marginalized, and damn proud of it. I kind of pity old cisgendered hetero – yes, Ashke-normative Josh. I didn't coin that but I'm trying to work it into every conversation I can.

At least he's Jewish – he's got that going for him. But he still has to learn that not all of us trace our lineage back to *Fiddler on the Roof*, Anatevka and the Pale of Settlement.

When I was a kid, I went to summer camp, and I learned how to juggle. It turned out to be a good life skill.

SHE calls offstage.

Can I get some balls here?

(to audience)

No jokes.

Two balls are thrown at her from off stage, and SHE catches them.

Another please? Juggling only two balls doesn't fit my metaphor here.

A third ball comes from offstage. SHE catches it and begins to juggle all three. SHE juggles for a short time, into the monologue if possible. It's all right if she drops one at any point. She should just pick it up and continue. She's an amateur juggler, not a professional. She can ad-lib something like "I haven't done this for a long time."

I began my journey in college. I registered for course 37-78 instead of 78-37, and accidentally signed up for Judaic Studies instead of Organic Chemistry. Which would be the title of the novel of our lives if anybody wrote it. *Organic Chemistry*. Any writers in the audience, feel free to use it.

*SHE stops juggling, but can play with the balls,
bouncing them, tossing them, whatever she wants.
SHE is very comfortable with them.*

I walked into the classroom – of course I was the only Black woman there – and the professor, an older gray-bearded man, gave a bit of a double take. It was just after Rosh Hashanah, and he told the old joke that it was 5771, but he was still writing 5770 on his checks. I knew then this might not be Organic Chem 101.

I got up to leave, and he said “Young lady, could you be in the wrong class?” I nodded, and he said the wisest thing I heard in four years at Columbia.

“Please stay,” he said. “Our traditions command us to welcome the stranger. And *we* might learn something from *you*.”

And even though I was “the stranger,” there was the promise of his wife’s sponge cake at the end of class, so I figured, give it a try.

I stayed the semester.

Something about Judaism intrigued me. An alien world, but a safe world, filled with both intellectual debate and mindless rituals. Arguments among rabbis over the purity of ovens alongside blessings before brushing your teeth. To a young Black girl from South Carolina, it was fascinating and compelling. My dad was a part-time reverend in our church, and he also owned a string of car dealerships that catered primarily to Black folk in Greenville. Being a man of the cloth helped him in his business. Always be fair to your customers, always be respectful, but remember, he told me, fairness and respect go both ways.

And while he always said he respected “our Jewish brothers and sisters,” as he would say, we didn’t know any.

But, in fact, we did. Somewhere back in the bad old days, my fourth great-grandfather Jeremiah was toiling in massa’s mansion in Charleston. Seems massa was Jewish, and he needed three more men for a minyan, the quorum of Jews attending certain rituals to make them legal. So he called in Jeremiah and two of his other...I guess we don’t call them *slaves* anymore, but that’s what my father said they were...and *hocus pocus*, the Rabbi pronounced them Jewish. They were property, and everyone felt you could do whatever you wanted with them. Which is horrendous when you look back on it.

(more)

CLEO (cont'd)

He had his minyan. But Jewish law prohibits owning Jewish slaves, so he freed them after the ceremony. Jeremiah was a free man.

One day I came home from college and told my father what I was studying, and that I was so enthusiastic about it. He looked at me for a good long minute, sighed, and he took me to his study, where he kept his books for the dealerships. He rummaged through a bookcase, pulled out an old Bible and showed me a worn, folded certificate, attesting that Jeremiah DeCosta – that was his so-called owner's last name – was pronounced Jewish and then freed along with his family – yes, they had families – on April 17, 1862, over a year after the start of the Civil War, to attend the ritual circumcision, the bris, of Mr. DeCosta's new son, Abraham.

The conversion and emancipation certificate was placed at chapter 2, verse 21, of the Book of Luke, oddly enough, which tells of Jesus's circumcision. One writer said the Holy Prepuce, as it's called, ascended to the skies and became the rings of Saturn.

Sometimes at night, when we're on vacation at some country inn or deep in the woods, when the skies are clear and I can see a bright spot in the southeastern sky, I think of Jeremiah, and the convoluted history I share with my Black and my unlikely Jewish ancestors. I still felt I wanted to learn more, and formally converted three years ago. Because of all the odd circumstances, I felt I had to.

Then I met Josh. Funny story. We worked in the same building, and I was running for the elevator in the morning with a container of coffee. The elevator closed, but I was stuck in the doors. He was in the elevator just to my right, forced the doors open and pulled me in. You OK? he asked me. I smiled at him, and he noticed my coffee had spilled. What about we go and get you a new latte? he said. That was five years ago.

So. My predicament, it's an odd one. Am I Black? Yes. Am I Jewish? Also yes. Am I young, waiting and wanting to conceive? Yes. Am I doing what I want to do? No. Am I in a field that's slow to recover from a global pandemic? Yes, but I really don't care about it. I could just as easily raise money for baby seals as I could for European Jewish immigrants. But I'm not a baby seal. And I'm not a European Jewish immigrant. In fact, I can trace my Judaism further back than most American Jews. Ain't that a kick.

And who I am is a product of countless happy accidents. Some happier than others, of course. Some downright loathsome in fact, but here we are.

(more)

CLEO (cont'd)

Sometimes, when I'm laying awake at 3 a.m., with Josh harrumphing and snorting next to me, I realize that after everything, it's a miracle I even exist as I am, that I can stand here, a freewoman and maybe soon a Freedman, the Black Jewish girlfriend of a wonderful brainy Jewish writer living at what may well be, even with the racists and antisemites and the global plagues and the crazy Trumpsters and with chaos all around us, the most extraordinary time in human history, in the most extraordinary city in the world.

FADE OUT.

Lights back up on the apartment, later that afternoon.

CLEO is wearing earbuds and walking around the apartment, on a telephone call.

At the same time, CLARA, in black and white, is sitting at the table, writing a letter.

Again, they do not see or notice each other, since they are separated by 100 years, although they are in the same place.

CLEO

Yes, that's right, Doctor Cohen. We're looking at a goal of one hundred thousand. Well, of course, an outright gift would be wonderful, but we're looking at using it as a matching fund, to multiply your generosity.

CLARA

(writes)

"To my dearest parents. I am writing you in English because here in America that's what everyone speaks. It helps me to learn English if I speak what I am writing to you as I write it. It looks like I am a crazy person talking to myself!"

CLEO

Where would it go? Well, we have a number of projects in the former Soviet Union and other parts of eastern Europe, where the money raised through your matching contribution would go very far to eliminate hunger and poverty among elderly survivors and their families.

CLARA

"I hope you are well and have enough to eat. I am sending you this ten dollar bill to help. Judah is doing very well in the factory and he may even be made assistant foreman. He is the first they call for extra work. His boss is a good man.

(more)

CLARA (cont'd)

He is upset he can't do more with his physics studies, but he works hard and one day maybe he will. Here in America a Jew can be whatever he wants. And one day, maybe even a woman could."

CLEO

Thank you, Doctor Cohen. Yes, of course we'll get back to you about your proposal for a new hospital wing dedicated to the elderly, it's a great idea. But about the matching fund, that's for more immediate, pressing needs.

CLARA

"In your last letter you said little Gabriel was sick. I hope he is better. Doctors and hospitals in America are very good, but very expensive. Doctor Cardozo says I might be...

SHE stops, and crosses that last sentence out.

"We are lucky that a man here in New York takes good care of people like us. He's from our part of the world. There are not many of us here. They are mostly from Europe, and say I have a funny accent. I say they're the ones with the funny accent!"

CLEO

Yes, Doctor Cohen, I'll remember to give Jack your regards. Can I get you to commit to the matching funds? Of course. We'd love to have lunch with you one day while you think it all over. Remember when everyone used to go to lunch with other people? I miss those days.

CLARA

"Please tell Papa and Gabriel I miss them so much, and that one day you will all come to America and live with us. I miss the sun at home. Here in America it can get very cold. The women from Europe are used to that, but I never will be."

CLEO

Of course. Goodbye, Doctor Cohen.

CLARA

"Your loving daughter, Clara." Now I have to find a lot of stamps.

CLARA exits. CLEO takes her earbuds out.

CLEO

Damn obstetrician wouldn't close the deal. And my ears hurt.

(to the audience)
(more)

CLEO (cont'd)

By the way, this money? For people who don't look like me and wouldn't accept me as I am anyway.

CLEO rubs her ears, puts the earbuds back in and touches one lightly.

Hey Siri, call Josh.

SHE paces around the room as the call goes through. SHE perks up when SHE hears his voice, but it's his voicemail and her shoulders slump.

Hey. Wanted to hear your voice. Rough call with the OB-GYN. For a contribution, not for me. You're probably on the train. Come home and we'll go to the Polish dumpling place. Maybe later make a nice little coffee-colored Jewish dumpling of our own, if you catch my drift.

Pause.

I love you with all my heart. See you soon.

SHE touches her earbud to end the call, and takes them out of her ears.

These things are evil.

SHE hears JOSH's keys in the door, perks up, and opens it, but HE still has his key in one of the door's locks, and SHE drags him into the apartment. HE stumbles in and rubs his shoulder.

JOSH

Wow. Glad I'm not pitching tonight.

CLEO

Sorry about that. I just called you.

JOSH

I brought you a present.

HE hands her a small package.

It's as much for the box as anything else.

SHE opens it.

CLEO

Gummies?

JOSH

Weed gummies.

Pause.

And not just any weed gummies. *Kosher* weed gummies. See? It's got the O-U on it and everything. Kosher weed gummies. It's a big beautiful world out there, Golde.

CLEO

See? That's what I mean.

JOSH

Mean what?

CLEO

Oh, it's not you. I just spent twenty minutes trying to convince a Scarsdale obstetrician to donate money to help people I don't know, don't look like me, and would probably question my membership in their...*our* faith. Eastern European shtetl Jews are the default. They're the cisgender straight white males of Judaism.

JOSH

Cleo...

CLEO

And it leaves people like me as oddities at best, and fakes at the worst. What connects me to Tevye and Golde and Anatevka? Nothing, not the music, not the experience, not the language. My people didn't eat pastrami on rye, and they only wished they could have had the comfort of steerage class on the way over.

JOSH

You're upset.

CLEO

Of course I'm upset!

Pause.

Gimme one of those gummies. It'll take the edge off.

JOSH

So, dinner? Pierogis?

CLEO

After all that, you take me for Polish peasant dumplings?

JOSH

It was your idea. Can't you enjoy them like anyone else without politicizing them? They're just pierogis.

CLEO

No they're not. They're a symbol.

JOSH

(exasperated)

What do you want? Ham hocks and fried chicken?

CLEO

(incensed)

My father said you'd say something like that eventually!

JOSH

I'm sorry. You know I'm not like that.

CLEO

You must be if you said it!

JOSH

Really. You know me.

Pause.

CLEO

Yeah, I do. I know your Eastern European shtetl Chagall-lovin' ass all right. Rough day for both of us, I guess.

JOSH

I found out what the problem was.

CLEO

What is it?

JOSH

I'm not Charlie.

CLEO

What?

JOSH

Ostroff said she would only do the interview with Charlie. Margot had to persuade her for a half hour to let me do it. And she's still not happy. She asked if I was Jewish.

CLEO

Could a writer for shmendrik dot com not be Jewish?

JOSH

Gevalt dot com.

CLEO

Whatever. Can't you tell her to fuck off?

JOSH

Telling Cynthia Ostroff to fuck off is like asking Sylvia Plath to whistle a happy tune. And what about your reference?

CLEO

If she's that much trouble... But it would help. If you're okay with it.

JOSH

I guess. Anyway, Margot gave me Charlie's notes for the interview. They have nothing to do with my new take on it. Plus they're incomprehensible.

CLEO

Really?

JOSH

First off, he scribbles. He writes down notes and scribbles around them, like a 12 year old daydreaming in math class. He turns dots into hearts, hearts into clouds, clouds into dragons, until you can barely read what he started out with. And then he has all these references to her work, and I'll tell you, I haven't read her in years. Her second book, *The Perlman Papers* – I read that in comp lit in college. I called her the Henry James of Flatbush Avenue. I got a B plus.

CLEO

But you're a journalist. You should be able to write about anything.

JOSH

She wrote a memoir about how she slept with half of the PEN-Faulkner judges! And the entire editorial department of the *Kenyon Review*, men *and* women. *After* she was famous. She's been around since the 1950s, probably schtupped Jack Kennedy – in the White House – and I'm going to do the summing-it-all-up interview of the leading Jewish author of our time who doesn't want to talk to me for a tiny website on the Lower East Side that I'm sure she never heard of.

CLEO

The leading Eastern European shtetl author of our time.

JOSH

We're back to that? She's won the Pulitzer, the Mann-Booker, and was short-listed for the Nobel Prize for Literature the year Isaac Bashevis Singer won it. She probably schtupped him too.

CLEO

But she agreed to the interview.

JOSH

With Charlie. You know who Charlie's father was? Lester Shulman from the *Paris Review*. She had a three-year affair with him. Charlie called her "Auntie Cyn."

CLEO

When do you meet her?

JOSH

Margot said she gave her my number, and she'd call me when it was time. *If* she wants to do it. So I have to do a lot of research, not just read her Wikipedia page.

CLEO has been typing at the open laptop.

CLEO

She's so old school she doesn't have a web site!

JOSH

She doesn't need one. Did Norman Mailer have a website? Want to go eat?

CLEO

Sure. Let me get my things.

As CLEO collects her belongings – phone, keys, wallet, all the trappings of modern life – SHE turns to the audience.

CLEO

I've heard ghosts live in this building. In all the buildings down here. Ghosts of the immigrants who came in the 1920s. Not mine, of course. Mine came long before that. Personally, I don't believe in ghosts, but a lot of cultures do. But when different cultures on different continents in different times come up with the same seemingly crazy idea, maybe you have to sit up and listen.

Back in the scene, SHE puts her arm around JOSH and they begin to exit.

But as they try to open the door, it sticks a bit. At that point, JUDAH enters – he's been pulling it from the other side. After JUDAH enters, JOSH and CLEO try the door again, and it opens. JOSH gives a slightly quizzical look.

JOSH

Hmm. Gotta get that fixed.

And HE closes the door from the outside, while JUDAH pushes it closed from the inside.

JUDAH peeks into the kitchen.

JUDAH

Clara? Clara?

CLARA enters.

CLARA

I thought you were working late.

JUDAH

You're not happy to see me?

CLARA

Of course.

THEY hug.

JUDAH

I can only stay a few minutes. I have to be back at the shop in an hour for my overtime.
What are those?

CLARA

Jakie my boss calls them teddy bears.

JUDAH

(laughing)

Teddy bears?

CLARA

Toys for children. Didn't you have a toy when you were a child?

JUDAH

My sister had a rag doll. So in America, "teddy bears"?

CLARA

It's an easy job, and it passes the time while you're away.

JUDAH

Who's Teddy?

CLARA

I never asked.

JUDAH hands her a small paper bag.

JUDAH

Here. I wanted to give you this.

CLARA opens it. It's an orange, a newspaper and a magazine.

I know how you love oranges, and how we couldn't afford them, but with the extra money I'm making tonight, I thought you could have a treat.

CLARA looks at him with tears in her eyes.

Who knew that a gift of a simple orange could create such emotion!

CLARA

I'll have it with my soup tonight. And you?

JUDAH

Moishe is splitting his salami sandwich with me. He's a good guy. Came from my village. And oh – the newspaper!

CLARA

Judah, this is...I can read this! It's what we spoke at home.

JUDAH

See? All the comforts of home. It took me two hours to find a Portuguese newspaper, an orange and that poetry magazine you like. What more could a Jew want?

CLARA

(coyly)

You still have to go to work?

JUDAH

You still want that orange?

SHE laughs.

CLARA

Go. I'll wait for you.

JUDAH

Clara, my love for you is greater than the transfers on the Canal Street trolley car.

CLARA

Always a joker.

JUDAH

It's how I get through life.

CLARA

Go, and come home soon.

JUDAH

I will.

HE leaves, and CLARA looks at the audience. SHE seems nervous.

CLARA

Hello. Please forgive my nerves. I've never spoken in front of a crowd before in English. There must be more people here than in my entire village, unless it's a Wednesday night performance.

(more)

CLARA (cont'd)

My head is so full of things to say, and I have no one to say them to except for Judah. And he's not here all the time. He works, sometimes all day and all night, so we'll have enough for a baby. Here in America, a baby is expensive. Not just the doctor bills when they're born, but they need so much. In America, a baby can't just sleep in a drawer like where I come from. No. You need a crib, a new blanket, diapers by the dozen, toys. Like my father used to say, more money, more problems.

A reporter for the Forward came to the market on Essex Street a few weeks ago, and he said he was writing an article on the role of Jewish women in the Lower East Side. He had a kind face, and those horn rimmed glasses all the men wear today, but people laughed at him. Role? We shop, we take in laundry, we clean, we cook, we do piece work.

But he turned to me and I quietly said, "We wait."

We wait. We wait back home for our men to call for us in America. We wait in tiny apartments for them to come home from work. We wait for a child. We wait for someone to talk to us. We wait not to be invisible.

Some nights when Judah is sleeping beside me after a long day, when everything's quiet but I can't sleep, I put on a coat and walk around the neighborhood. At three in the morning, the streets are silent. The Jews are asleep, the Italians are asleep, even the Irish hoodlums are asleep. I walk, and I think. I think crazy thoughts. Like in the comics, will Little Orphan Annie ever find her family? I like that one. Judah likes Dick Tracy but the villains are too scary for me. Sometimes I sing. And I recite poetry. Poems that I wrote, many years ago. Women back home weren't allowed, but I did anyway. I couldn't write them down but I remembered them. My friend Dvoirey translated it for me.

*Some say the woman is like a rose
But roses have thorns that pierce the skin
Some say the woman is like a billowy cloud
But clouds bring rain, thunder and lightning
I say the woman is like a butterfly
Born as a moth, and then blossoming to beauty, giving of life.
I am a rose without thorns, a cloud without rain,
But I am a butterfly without wings.*

These teddy bears I make go to boys and girls I will never know. I hope they bring them happiness. But I made one with a special gold thread. That is for our child, God willing.

Until then, I walk. And I wait.

FADE OUT, then we see CLEO at the laptop on the table, and JOSH reading a heavy book, with a highlighter in his hand. Every so often, he reaches over and takes a note on a clipboard.

CLEO notices him writing on the clipboard.

CLEO

You're so old fashioned.

JOSH

What?

CLEO

You. Taking notes on with pen and paper.

JOSH

Pencil.

CLEO

Pencil?

JOSH

My mother loved pencils. Always had them. Her father worked near an old dusty store in Brooklyn that sold all types of pencils. He found these pencils that weren't as soft as your regular number 2 pencils, but didn't tear paper like number 3 pencils. They were two and a half. Perfect for everything.

CLEO

I literally have no idea what the hell you're talking about.

JOSH

(ignores her; in a reverie)

He bought two huge boxes, two hundred eighty-eight pencils, enough to last a lifetime. It did, and he gave her six dozen boxes to her, and she gave me three. I've gone through one box. This is one of those pencils. She wrote poems, you know.

CLEO

I thought your mother worked in a subway token booth.

JOSH

A perfect place to write poetry. I wish I had some of hers. When I use these pencils, it's like she's here writing with me.

JOSH goes back to his books as CLEO works on the laptop. SHE's suddenly alarmed at what she sees.

CLEO

Holy...Josh?

JOSH

(distracted)

Yep?

CLEO

This can't be right.

JOSH

What?

CLEO

This spreadsheet. The math is all wrong.

JOSH

You're asking a journalist about math?

CLEO

Come look at this.

JOSH goes and looks at her screen.

CLEO

See this number? The thirty thousand? That's supposed to be the amount I raised for the society last year.

JOSH

You did more than that.

CLEO

I did. I raised three *hundred* thousand. With me at thirty thousand, we all show a loss, and we have to lay people off. But watch this –

SHE hits a keystroke dramatically.

Make it three hundred thousand, and suddenly there's a huge surplus. And look at everyone else's. All in five figures, when they should be six.

JOSH
A mistake?

CLEO
Wow. I hope so.

JOSH
Or...

CLEO
I don't want to think about that.

JOSH
Just ask Jack.

CLEO
What if Jack is the one doing it? He said he's going to promote me, too.

Pause.

JOSH
Who could you call?

CLEO
I don't know. What if everyone in management is in on it?

JOSH
There must be someone.

As THEY both look at the screen, JUDAH enters from the front door and collapses on a chair after work.

CLARA
Judah, is that you?

JUDAH
(exhausted)
No, it's President Coolidge. We're going to the White House for dinner.

CLARA
Supper's almost done.

JUDAH

Okay.

HE takes out an envelope and removes a few bills and coins from it – his weekly pay. HE counts it out, stops, and counts again. HE becomes agitated, and counts it over again and again until CLARA comes in.

CLARA

Dinner's almost ready. Something wrong?

JUDAH

Look at this.

HE spreads his money on the table.

You were always good with figures. I worked overtime three nights last week, and this is seven dollars less than I brought home last week.

CLARA

Taxes?

JUDAH

What taxes? He pays me in cash.

CLARA

You joined the union, remember? They charge dues.

JUDAH

Not seven dollars a week they don't.

CLARA

Is Max keeping it?

JUDAH

He wouldn't.

CLARA

He could.

JUDAH

We come from the same town. He says he's going to make me assistant foreman.

CLEO

(at the laptop)

Maybe it's just a mistake.

JOSH

It must be.

CLARA

(looking at the money)

Maybe it's just a mistake.

JUDAH

It must be.

CLARA

So ask him tomorrow.

CLEO

I'll text him tomorrow.

JOSH

Good.

JUDAH

I will.

CLARA

But be kind about it...

JOSH

Don't come right out and ask if he's embezzling.

CLEO

It's not the money.

JOSH

Of course.

JUDAH

Of course.

CLEO

Jews shouldn't act like this. We shouldn't steal from other Jews.

JUDAH

Do you know what seven dollars a week means for us? Food, clothing, milk for the baby when he comes.

CLARA

And he's from your town! We shouldn't steal from our own. We'd have to stop sending money to my family.

JOSH

(frustrated)

I am so far behind on my research. And she doesn't want to talk to me.

CLARA

Enough. If I don't get back to my sewing I'll miss my quota.

CLEO

(looks at laptop)

I'm not hungry now.

JOSH

I am.

CLEO

I guess I could eat. Should I order from the French-Ethiopian place or the Indonesian-Cuban place?

CLARA

I'll get our dinner.

JOSH

There's an Indonesian-Cuban place?

CLEO

The took over the spot from the halal Finnish place.

JOSH

Halal Finnish take out. Like I said, it's great wide world out there...

HE stops, as CLEO glares at him.

Sorry. My grandfather used to say it.

*CLARA returns with a bowl of soup and bread,
places it in front of JUDAH, who smells it and
swoons, but does not eat.*

JUDAH

The best things for a tired man, hot chicken soup bought by a beautiful wife.

CLARA

Could you get the candles and the wine?

JUDAH

Of course, my Shabbas angel.

*JUDAH exits to the kitchen while CLARA looks for
the matches.*

CLEO

I'll just order some tacos. Why complicate things. The usual?

JOSH

That Oaxaca place? Get me the pollo asado if they still have it.

CLEO checks her phone.

CLEO

They do.

JOSH

Muy bueno.

Pause.

It's not cultural appropriation. It's Spanish for very good. Or idiomatically, that's great.

CLEO

One day you'll say the wrong thing to the wrong person.

JOSH

It's New York. Everyone's offended all the time. Don't have it delivered. It's just down the block. I need the walk.

CLEO

See ya.

JOSH

Cleo. I love you.

CLEO looks up from her phone.

CLEO

And I love you, Joshua Freedman. Every cisgendered hetero Ashke-normative inch of you.

JOSH

Shabbat shalom. Now that's not appropriation.

SHE chuckles as HE exits out the front door.

JUDAH then enters with the Shabbat candles and a wine glass.

CLEO

And *tacos de lengua para mí*.

JUDAH

Aren't you eating?

CLARA

I'll get a bowl for myself.

CLARA turns to the audience.

CLARA

Judah is a good man. I knew it would be difficult for me to find a man like him in my circumstances. My first husband Chayim – it's complicated, you'll see – came to America before me from the Caribbean. Our ancestors were from Brazil. I was told the whole village uprooted itself and moved there in the 1600s from Portugal, before this was even New York. And our town grew and grew, and though we tried to stay among ourselves, we took husbands and wives from the outside world.

We married, and Chayim said he would send for me. But months went by, and months became years. He sent letters every week, said he was starting a printing business with a few friends in New York. His letters came every week, then every other week, then every month, and after two years, they stopped. Our town didn't know what to do.

They collected money for me to go to New York to find him.

I didn't speak English or Yiddish. I spoke Portuguese. *Eu falava português*. I was 22.

I stayed with my uncle Abraham, not far from here. He asked a few questions, and one day, he tells me Chayim is in the Bronx, running a printing press in someone else's shop. But that's all he says he knows.

(more)

CLARA (cont'd)

We went to see him on the train. It was my first time on the subway. When I walked down the stairs, I thought I was entering Hell. The smells, the noise, the heat, the crowds. Chayim's boss, an Italian man, gave us his address. Who are you, he asked me. I'm his wife, I said. The Italian man looked at me strangely – I'll never forget that look – and then he laughed. If you say so, he said.

If you say so.

We went to his apartment, bigger than this one since it was the Bronx, and I was going to knock on the door, when my uncle held my hand back. He pointed to the top of the side of the door, and it was empty. There was no mezuzah, the small case Jews put on their doors. It holds a small piece of parchment with the Shema on it, the oldest Jewish prayer, one we say every week in the synagogue, at home, and our last words before we die.

This is not his home, I said.

But on the door it said Mister and Mrs. C. Benayoun. And there was a baby carriage in the hall.

He had married the boss's daughter. She had his child.

And he never told me. I came to America for nothing. Less than nothing.

I ran screaming down the stairs, screaming and crying into the streets and back into the subway in Hell. I just ran and ran and ran. I wanted to vomit, but I couldn't. I got to the edge of the platform and thought for a second about what would happen if I just continued running onto the tracks. Would anyone notice? Would anyone care? The world would continue to turn with one less Jew in it.

But at that very moment a train was in the station with its doors open. They were closing, and I got caught in the door. It hurt. I was crying, heaving and stuck in a subway door.

Then a kind man who just happened to be standing right in front of the door forced the doors open and pulled me inside.

Bis du gut, miss? he asked me. Are you all right?

He sat me down and gave me a tissue, told me how to get back to the Lower East Side. He said his name was Judah, and that he came from a small town in eastern Prussia. You look sad, he said. Do you need some tea?

I just nodded.

(more)

CLARA (cont'd)

His voice was soft and calming, but I didn't understand what he said because it was Yiddish. I didn't know what to say. I was so ashamed. How could I have been so stupid? How could Chayim have been so cruel? To marry and have a child with another woman? And not a Jew? How could he?

Judah took me to a small shop on Second Avenue, and bought me tea and a plate of dumplings the Polish called pierogis. My grandmother called them sambusak, Judah says they're kreplach. I've learned the Chinese call them won ton, the Indians call them samosas, and the Italians call them ravioli. But a dumpling is a dumpling no matter who makes it. And these tasted so good.

He smiled at me. *Farvas veynt ir?* Why are you crying?

It took me weeks and weeks of pierogis and tea with Judah to tell him. When I finally did, he said, That's no way for a Jew to treat a lady.

That was two years ago. I talked to rabbis, we settled everything, and Judah and I were married last fall, just after the holidays.

Every month now, Judah and I go to that shop for tea and pierogis. It reminds me of the worst day in my life, and the best. And it was the same day.

Had I stopped on the way, or slowed my steps, or any number of a thousand things, I might have just continued running onto the tracks. Had he not happened to be standing right in front of the door, or had he stopped to talk to a friend and missed that train, or just gotten on another car, Judah would not have pulled me in.

You could say I met Judah by accident, but a happy one. Funny how that happens in life, isn't it?

*CLARA exits to the kitchen as CLEO finishes
ordering dinner on her phone.*

CLEO

It is Friday night. Maybe step up from paper plates. Real dishes and real silverware, even if it is Oaxaco take out.

*SHE smiles and laughs to herself, and turns to the
audience.*

Josh would say Oaxaca Takeout plays second base for the Yankees.

SHE goes to the kitchen cabinets and gets two plates, some silverware and two wine glasses, and places them on the table, alongside JUDAH, but not interacting with him.

CLARA re-enters with a bowl of soup and bread. SHE and JUDAH stand at the table. CLARA lights the candles and says the blessing.

As CLARA says the blessing, JOSH enters with their take out dinner.

JOSH

(while CLARA says the candle blessing and the blessings over the wine and challah)

You'll never believe what happened to me.

CLEO

You got dog shit on your new Eccos again?

JOSH

So I run into Aseem, you know, 3C? He also wants to break through his wall into 3D. The building gave him permission. So we can break the wall into next door and make one big space for little...what ever it is we're going to call it!

CLEO

That's great!

THEY embrace and kiss.

JUDAH

Come, my Shabbas bride, let's feast on this soup and then maybe other feasts will consume us.

CLARA playfully slaps his arm as JOSH takes food out of the bag.

JOSH

Let's celebrate with...octopus tamales?

CLEO

That's mine. And the tongue tacos too.

JOSH

(playfully)

Say that three times fast.

CLEO

(joining in)

The tongue tacos too. The tongue tacos too.

JOSH AND CLEO

The tongue tacos too!

They laugh. SHE looks at JOSH, and tightly holds his hand.

CLEO

As my father the Reverend says, Praise the Lord. And I mean it. The challenges we face are a blessing. Baruch Ha-Shem.

JUDAH stops eating, holds CLARA's hand, and turns to the audience.

JUDAH

Every morning, even with my problems, I add an extra blessing to my prayers. Oh God, Sovereign of the Universe, who brought me love, companionship and all I need in life, special delivery that day on the Seventh Avenue Local.

Happy accidents. Imagine if I had taken the Express.

SLOW FADE to black as all hold hands with their partners.

A few days later, but not too many. Night, maybe 11 pm.

In dark, we hear JOSH's cell phone ringing.

CLEO is still stressed out at her laptop, open on the table, with a big glass of wine. JOSH is on the couch reading and taking notes, drinking a beer.

JOSH's phone sounds as it did before, but HE's too busy reading to answer it.

*The more it rings, though, the more it distracts
CLEO, who finally breaks.*

CLEO

Just answer the damn phone. It's probably her.

JOSH

If it is I'm not ready to talk to her about her books, and definitely not about you.

CLEO

You're letting Cynthia Ostroff go to voicemail? Some balls on you.

JOSH

You're confusing courage with fear.

CLEO

But you will talk to her.

Pause.

Will you?

JOSH

Of course, of course.

*The phone continues to ring, and also as before, we
hear the old telephone in the hall, some murmuring,
and an off-stage shout.*

VOICE FROM HALL (O.S.)

(yells)

Mister Wolfman! Mister Wolfman! Telephone for you! At 11 o'clock at night yet! Sol,
from the union!

*JUDAH hurriedly runs in through the kitchen to the
exit to get the call in just shorts and a shirt. HE is
quickly followed by a half-asleep CLARA, in a
nightgown.*

CLARA

You shouldn't be out there in just your shorts! Someone's going to see.

JUDAH returns, slower.

JUDAH

No one saw.

CLARA

Who was it?

JUDAH

Sol, the union guy. He's a foreman at a shoe company a few blocks over from me. He wants to see me.

CLARA

See you? For what?

JUDAH

About the money I didn't get last payday. He's taking me to lunch tomorrow. At Lou Siegel's.

CLARA

(impressed)

I always wanted to go to there. You must dress up!

JUDAH

I can't. I work in the morning. I'll be fine.

CLARA

What does he want?

JUDAH

I'll find out.

CLARA

Come. You need your sleep.

JUDAH

What if I can't sleep?

CLARA looks at him, smiles broadly, and leads him to bedroom.

PHONE (V.O.)

Joshua Freedman? Hello. It's Cynthia Ostroff. I understand Charlie is still sick. I don't know you from dreck. You could be a little pisser writer trying to make a name for yourself at my expense. But I've thought it over and I'll give you an hour of my time.

(more)

PHONE (V.O.) (cont'd)

Can you come to my home today? 37 West 78th Street, just off the park. Please come at 11 am, we'll talk a bit, have lunch, and if I don't tire of you we'll talk some more. In fact, if all goes well I may have a favor to ask of you. See you then.

JOSH looks at CLEO.

A favor?

JOSH

What could she want from you?

CLEO

Publicity on *gevalt dot com* doesn't come cheap.

JOSH

Yes it does.

CLEO

True.

JOSH

Her message. That's just...odd.

CLEO

I'm not ready for this.

JOSH

Just let her talk. Be nice. Do a Q&A transcript.

CLEO

That's the easy way out.

JOSH

No reason you can't take it.

CLEO

There's too much left to read. I'm not ready.

JOSH

There will never be enough time to read everything you think you have to read. That's classic you.

CLEO

JOSH

What?

CLEO

Too much research, not enough gut. You think you procrastinate, but you're really just afraid you'll succeed.

JOSH

That's just what my therapist said.

CLEO

Joshie, that's what everyone's therapist says.

JOSH

So just go with it?

CLEO

Nothing wrong in that. Come to bed. You need your rest if you're going to interview her tomorrow. And get her recommendation for me.

JOSH

(scared)

This isn't just some old interview. Cynthia Ostroff called herself...what do you call that Greek one with all the snakes coming out of her hair?

CLEO

Medusa.

JOSH

Right. I was just reading an essay she wrote about how she was horrible to everyone she met, from the guy at the grocery to her personal secretary called "I, Medusa." Here...

*JOSH goes through papers, magazine and books
and finds it.*

I read this three times! I can't read anymore!

CLEO

Just go there and see what happens. I'm sure she'll let you come back for more.

SHE goes over to him and hugs him.

Just repeat after me... "I, Joshua Freedman..."

JOSH

(mumbles reluctantly)

“I, Joshua Freedman...”

CLEO

“...am the greatest, best, most intelligent reporter...”

JOSH

(mumbles reluctantly)

“...am the greatest, best, most intelligent reporter...”

CLEO

“...and the Jewiest Jew...”

JOSH

I’m not saying that.

CLEO

(more assertively)

“...and the Jewiest Jew...”

JOSH

(mumbles reluctantly and softly)

“...and the Jewiest Jew...”

CLEO

I can’t hear you.

JOSH

(louder)

“...and the Jewiest Jew...”

CLEO

“...on Rivington Street.”

JOSH

“...on Rivington Street.”

THEY kiss, but he is occupied.

CLEO

We're Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, Joshie, and we're going to make beautiful mocha-colored, kinky-haired, dark-eyed Jews who will confound Ashkenazi rabbis all over the city. Tomorrow they break down the wall into the next apartment. Now let's get to bed. And sleep.

JOSH

Sleep. Yes. Sleep.

SHE takes him by the hand and leads him to the bedroom.

FADE OUT.

Lights up on CYNTHIA's parlor, filled with books, overstuffed chairs, a sofa, and a desk with a typewriter on it.

CYNTHIA enters followed at a respectable distance by JOSH.

CYNTHIA

Who are you again? And why aren't you Charlie?

JOSH

I'm Joshua Freedman.

CYNTHIA

Yes, Margot told me. I know your name. But who *are* you? What was your last published piece.

JOSH

My last piece? Well, I think it was a listicle called *12 Jewish Baseball Players For Your Fantasy League*.

CYNTHIA

A listicle? What the hell is a listicle?

JOSH

Just a list of items around a common theme.

CYNTHIA

And has your listicle descended?

JOSH

Excuse me?

CYNTHIA

Never mind. I won't ask what a fantasy league is, because I have no need of knowing. Charlie's still sick?

JOSH

I haven't spoken to him, but it seems so.

CYNTHIA

Well, I have. He's worse than his father after a few vodkas. A few dozen vodkas. I've seen him like that. Not Charlie, his father. Can't keep a thought in his head. When I called him, he thought I was Margaret Atwood. I mean, I'm depressing, but not *that* depressing. Or depressingly goyish, anyway.

JOSH

You called Charlie?

CYNTHIA

Yes. He said you were, what did he say, "not my first choice, but he'll do." Not a ringing endorsement, and I'm still not fully convinced, but here you are. So Joshua Freedman, Grand Rebbe of Listicles, why should I talk to you?

JOSH

Well, Ms. Ostroff...

CYNTHIA

Miss. I was never into all that feminist stuff, if you want to know the truth. Betty Friedan was such a slob.

JOSH

Miss Ostroff, I was going to keep it simple, talk about your career and your new book, and introduce your writing to new and younger readers. But I have a question that's been haunting me, and I think you're the right person to answer it.

CYNTHIA

I am? Why?

JOSH

Because of your long experience in the Jewish literary community.

CYNTHIA

My what? Why do we have to have a “community”? Would you ask Jonathan Franzen about the pretentious stick-up-his-ass literary community? Did you read his last book? It was so big I sprained my wrist lifting it. If I were king, no book would be over two hundred pages. Two fifty max.

JOSH

So, my question...

CYNTHIA

Yes, your question.

JOSH

What does it mean to be a Jew in America, today?

Pause.

CYNTHIA

For the first time in years, I’m speechless. That’s a hell of a broad topic. Let me think it over and produce an appropriately pithy remark for our next meeting.

JOSH

Next meeting?

CYNTHIA

If I feel it’s necessary. And by the way, what’s in it for you?

JOSH

For me?

CYNTHIA

Because if there’s nothing, consider ourselves done here. I hope I’m more important to you than just filling a few pages on schnorrer dot com.

JOSH

Gevalt dot com.

CYNTHIA

Mine’s better. Does a website have pages? Never mind. So tell me. Like I said, what’s in it for you?

JOSH

If I get your interview, I’ll be assigned better, longer pieces.

CYNTHIA

Oh, it must be more than that.

JOSH

I'll prove myself to Margot.

CYNTHIA

Now we're getting closer. And what if on top of answering your unanswerable question, I gave you a scoop?

JOSH

A scoop? Like what?

CYNTHIA

Oh I'm not showing my hand just yet. But if you did get something juicy from me...

JOSH

I could get published in Harper's or the Atlantic. Even the New Yorker.

CYNTHIA

Okay. A little self-interest is a good thing. A lot of self-interest is even better.

JOSH

There is something else. But now's not the right time.

CYNTHIA

Oh. Even more? Intriguing. I like that, Rabbi Freedman. Do you live up here?

JOSH

No. Lower East Side. Rivington Street, in fact.

CYNTHIA

Rivington Street? My my. I don't think I've crossed 59th Street in years. The Upper West Side is my own little sanctuary. You know what I love? Getting insulted by the deli slicers at Zabar's. I can't eat that stuff anymore, too salty. But I'll go there for cheese, and ask for something small, just three slices of Muenster, thin, and they'll say, "Whassa matter, lady, last book didn't sell too good?" They know me.

SHE sits down, all business.

So how truthful do you want me to be?

JOSH

I hope you'll be honest.

CYNTHIA

I sincerely doubt that. But we can work on it.

JOSH

Well, thank you for your time.

CYNTHIA

Over already?

JOSH

No, I mean, just thank you for seeing me. I know you're busy.

CYNTHIA

Busy? It took me 15 years to write this last book. Because I hate writing, but if I don't write, who am I? Some old broad in a too-big apartment getting yelled at in Zabar's. They're a dime a dozen.

JOSH

Didn't you just come back from a national tour? Speaking engagements?

SHE sighs, as she retells a story she's told hundreds of times.

CYNTHIA

The doorman hails me a taxi because I refuse to use those phone things. I go to the airport, and I take off my shoes, show the same papers to five different rent-a-cops, and then I wait in line like I'm back in fucking Zabar's, but instead of cheese I get a first-class seat, a glass of cheap wine, and some quiet. I immediately fall asleep because Seconal is my best friend and constant companion. God forbid the plane goes down and I have to put on those stupid oxygen masks, or even worse help someone with theirs. They say to put yours on first before you help others. Must have been a New Yorker who figured that out.

A taxi picks me up at the airport, takes me to a hotel, my luggage is delivered, and I go back to sleep. They wake me three hours before my speech, I get in a taxi, ramble on, people laugh, they ask questions, I insult them, they laugh harder, I get in a taxi, go back to the hotel and go to sleep. Next day a taxi to the airport, do the process in reverse, and I'm home. A few days later, lather, rinse, repeat. It's the creative life.

JOSH picks up a photo from a table.

JOSH

Who's this young girl with you?

CYNTHIA

Nobody.

JOSH

I never knew you had a child.

CYNTHIA

What makes you think I had a child? Please put that down.

Pause.

Would you like something? Coffee?

JOSH

Yes, if you're making.

CYNTHIA

My editor bought me this battleship of a coffee maker to prod me to write more. It didn't work. A real pain in the ass, but it makes good coffee. He says a writer is a machine that turns coffee into words. In the meantime, read this. The galleys of my new book, first chapter.

CYNTHIA hands him a few pages, exits. JOSH begins to read it.

When HE is sure she's not looking, HE takes the photo and puts it in his pocket.

While HE is doing that, and CYNTHIA is making coffee, we see CLEO on one side of the stage.

SHE is on a crowded subway train, standing, hanging onto a metal bar with one hand, checking her phone with the other, AirPods in her ears. SHE addresses the audience.

CLEO

I hate the subway, but I love it too. It's messy, dark and unfathomable. Kinda like me. It's the great equalizer. No matter how much you make, where you were born, where you work, what you do or how often you bathe, you've got to ride the subway. One time...sorry, I have to take this. It's the construction guys breaking down the wall in our apartment. I'm so excited!

(more)

CLEO (cont'd)

(into the phone)

Hello? Yes. You found...you found *what*?

FADE OUT on CLEO.

CYNTHIA returns with coffee, and gives a heavy thick mug of it to JOSH, who sips it.

CYNTHIA

So what did you think?

JOSH

(nervously)

It's...it's quite good.

CYNTHIA

Which? The coffee or the book?

JOSH

Both, actually.

CYNTHIA

Don't patronize me. The coffee's good but the book is shit.

JOSH

It's...it's quite a departure for you.

CYNTHIA

In that it's shit.

JOSH

I wouldn't say that. Everyone thinks you're this sardonic, sarcastic satirist writing with an acid pen. But this is actually quite kind and gentle.

CYNTHIA

Which is why it's shit.

JOSH

More intellectually and spiritually probing.

CYNTHIA

So it's *pretentious* shit. The words aren't coming like they used to, Rabbi Listicle. I used to write stuff that would make Dorothy Parker shit her panties.

(more)

CYNTHIA (cont'd)

Now I'm "I'd like to thank" and "This one made my life worthwhile." Horseshit for the masses. Like the end of a ballplayer's career, when he's stayed past his expiration date. Willie Mays with the Mets.

JOSH

But you're so articulate at your speaking events.

CYNTHIA

Different part of the brain. Or what's left of it. At least the title's good. *Why Be Jewish?* Of course you know the answer to that question, which may be my answer to your question: *Why not?*

HE laughs.

You don't have to laugh. It's not that funny. Supposedly I'm a satirist, not a Borscht Belt comic. But it's true. You know, as I get older, I appreciate my background more and more. In your youth, you don't have time to consider the bigger questions. Unless you come from money and are loved unconditionally, and the two rarely go together. Do you?

JOSH

Not really. Not the money at least.

CYNTHIA

Yet you ask big questions. I commend you. I of course had neither, and I still don't. But I have the wisdom of my years, which I'd gladly trade for the ability to walk five blocks without stopping for a rest, or being able to write a coherent sentence without smoking a pack of cigarettes every 10 words.

Rabbi Joshua, I have a question for you.

JOSH

For me?

CYNTHIA

Yes. What does being Jewish mean to you?

Pause.

JOSH

I can't tell you. That's why I'm asking you.

CYNTHIA

That's because being Jewish is easy for people like you and me. We live in a Hebraic bubble here in New York. For me, it means looking out for the other guy, believe it or not, even if he tries to sneak ahead of you in line at Gristede's. But I think with this book, I'm done with Jews. I've been draining the same vein for 50 odd years. What else is there to say? We're brilliant, we're obstinate, we're creative, we're demanding, we're loving, we're obnoxious. You can say the same things about anybody. Except we scrutinize ourselves to death, like all the paragraphs devoted to the Boston Red Sox just because these simpering writers went to Harvard.

Let me tell you a story before that part of my brain goes too. Is that recorder of yours working yet?

JOSH

Thank you for reminding me.

JOSH takes out his phone and starts recording.

CYNTHIA

By the time I'm done you'll need a new phone.

My grandfather loved jazz. He came from a small town in Ohio. His parents came from Russia and started a small hardware store, which grew to three. They were the town's only Jewish family, and one of only 30 in the county. But they built a synagogue, and hired a traveling rabbi to come around every month for services, weddings, bar mitzvahs, and other things. They ran that poor rabbi ragged. A bar mitzvah in the morning, a hospital visit in the afternoon, and a wedding at night.

They had some money, and my grandfather decided to try his luck in New York. He collected old jazz records. Bix Beiderbecke, Ornette Coleman, Louie Armstrong, but he loved Cab Calloway. Couldn't get enough of him. He even went to the Cotton Club in Harlem to see him and his band.

Now, the interesting thing about Cab Calloway is that he was what you might call Jewish-adjacent. He knew some Yiddish, and he peppered his songs with it.

Anyway, in the 1940s, the famous violinist Yehudi Menuhin was going to be on a radio show. And one comedian said in a comic way "Who's Yehudi?" And it got such a laugh it took off, became a craze. It became shorthand for someone who wasn't there, a mysterious invisible stranger with an odd foreign name. Soon, there was a song by that name, Cab Calloway sang it and it became a huge hit.

Now, of course, Yehudi wasn't just the violinist's name. In Hebrew and Yiddish, it means Jew.

(more)

CYNTHIA (cont'd)

And in the 1940s, after the war and during the Red Scare and the Blacklist and all that, wanting to know “Who’s Yehudi?” could be taken in a very ominous way.

And from that, I thought my last work, and it will be my last work, more about that later, should be an investigation of my own Jewishness. Am I *yehudi*, what does it mean – and am I *yehudi* enough?

But I’m also a lot of other things. A woman, a writer. I walk. Do I ask myself if I’m enough of a walker? No. I just go to Central Park and walk. What is it with us Jews that we question our identity so much, that we’re worried if we’re living up to the expectations of a bunch of tailors and hat makers who came across in steerage a hundred years ago from little towns that aren’t there anymore?

JOSH’s phone sounds – a message.

You can get that. It’s not like I have any wisdom to impart.

JOSH

That’s okay.

Another message. HE picks up the phone and taps on it. HE pauses and is stunned by what HE’s read and seen.

Ah, I’m sorry, but I have to rush home. Can we reschedule?

CYNTHIA

Let me check my calendar.

Pause, as SHE does nothing.

I’m free. Everything all right?

JOSH

I shouldn’t.

CYNTHIA

Let an old cynic lend an ear.

JOSH

Well, my girlfriend and I, we’re breaking into the apartment next door.

CYNTHIA

Legally? In New York you have to ask.

JOSH

The entire wall, to make one large apartment.

CYNTHIA

Very ambitious.

JOSH

The construction team tore it down and apparently they found something.

CYNTHIA

I hope it's that mythical bag of drug dealer cash.

JOSH

No it's...

HE shows HER a picture on his phone.

CYNTHIA

My God. Even I have to stop and pause. Is that...

JOSH

Looks it.

CYNTHIA

So it does.

JOSH

(beginning to tear up)

Why? Who would do that?

CYNTHIA

It's an old building. Probably been around for a hundred, hundred and thirty years. Lots of people in and out, poor people probably. Jews, Italians, Hispanics, Blacks, druggies, and now hipsters. Lots of history. There are ghosts in those buildings. Ghosts of the past, ghosts of the present and ghosts of the future. Looks like you have all three.

JOSH gathers his things to leave.

JOSH

Please call me when you have time.

CYNTHIA

Let me know what happens.

JOSH

And we're trying to conceive, too.

CYNTHIA

Ironic.

JOSH

(near tears)

Why would anyone...

CYNTHIA

If you find out, let me know.

JOSH

Who would hide a baby's skeleton in the wall?

FADE OUT.

A late morning. JUDAH is stretched out on the sofa, nodding off while CLARA sews her toys. SHE is noticeably pregnant, but not yet close to giving birth.

CLARA

Judah...

JUDAH

Don't talk to me.

CLARA

It's been two weeks.

JUDAH

No one will hire me.

CLARA

Of course they will.

JUDAH

Not after what I did.

CLARA

It was only seven dollars.

JUDAH

Out of thirty. A week.

CLARA

But nothing? For two weeks?

JUDAH

Because I told them no.

CLARA

And why? Why did you tell them no?

JUDAH

If a man doesn't stand up for what's right, what is he?

CLARA

Employed!

JUDAH

Where there is no righteous man, strive to be one. It's in the Torah. The Talmud. One of them.

CLARA

But why you? And why now? Judah, I'm four months pregnant.

JUDAH

I know. Can you make me some tea? It might make me feel better.

CLARA

Of course.

*CLEO and JOSH enter, arm in arm, solemnly,
passing CLARA on her way to the kitchen.*

*There is a package wrapped in an old blanket
prominently placed on the dresser.*

*CLEO's phone rings – computerized tones of the
spiritual Let My People Go. It's in her pocket. SHE
takes it out and places it on the table, but does not
answer it.*

It rings and rings, then stops. SHE picks it up.

CLEO

Funeral director.

JOSH nods his head. SHE begins to cry, and HE comforts her as THEY sit in silence on the sofa, next to JUDAH.

JOSH

Did you ever talk to Jack?

CLEO

No. One crisis is all I can handle right now. I texted him. Politely.

CLARA enters with tea, and hands it to JUDAH.

CLARA

Can't you talk to them?

JUDAH

To who?

CLARA

Who was the man you had lunch with? Sol?

JUDAH

Sol is who got me into all this. Max held seven dollars from my pay and gave it to Sol.

CLARA

Why?

JUDAH

Because Sol is who decides who gets the jobs.

CLARA

Why him?

JUDAH

That's the way it works. Unions are great when you have a job, but not so good when you don't. It's a closed shop. The unions work with the bosses here. I made a stink about it. I might as well be selling pots and pans in the street.

CLARA

So you'll just sit around all day while I sew these toys?

JUDAH

Leave me alone.

CLARA

Talk to Max.

JUDAH

He won't talk to me.

CLARA

Go to the factory. Make him talk to you.

JUDAH

Easy for you to say.

CLARA

Judah, you're a sweet, caring man. But you've had an easy life. Now some trouble comes into your life – our life – and you back away from a fight.

JUDAH

An easy life? I was studying physics. I wanted to be a professor! Then I came here and schlepped women's dresses in the street.

CLARA

But you left because you couldn't become one.

JUDAH

A mob was going to kill me for wanting to make something of myself.

CLARA

But you *did* make something of yourself! You came here, you rescued me, you made a life for us. That's enough for one lifetime. You could do a million things. It doesn't matter. Your job doesn't matter. What you've done with your life, that's what matters. And we're going to have a child soon. Our child will have a better life because of you, and his child, and his child. They'll remember us and visit here when they're settled in some foreign place, maybe Hawaii, maybe the moon, and they'll come here and say my ancestors, Judah and Clara Wolfman, they were the ones who planted our seed, and we are their fruits, we are their futures. We live on the moon because they lived here.

Pause. JUDAH says nothing.

So go! Go get your job back, go drive a milk truck like your Tevye, but go!

JUDAH

I have my pride.

CLARA

But we have no money! I'm doing what I can, but I can only make so many of these toys. We're weeks behind, we owe everyone. You can't just sit on the couch. Have you talked to the rabbi?

JUDAH

I don't need help from a head in the clouds Rabbi.

CLARA

Talk to someone. To help you. Help your mind.

JUDAH

I don't need help.

CLARA

You do. I need you to be yourself again.

JUDAH

I know.

CLARA

For me. For you. And for our little one. And all the little ones that will spring from us.

Back to JOSH and CLEO.

JOSH

Are you going to call them back?

CLEO

Give me time.

JOSH

Of course.

CLEO

Do you think they could find out whose it was?

JOSH

The police said they'd run tests on it.

CLEO

You called the police?

JOSH

Why, sure.

CLEO

Tell me before they come. I'll be outside eating pirogies so they can't conveniently shoot me.

JOSH

Really?

CLEO

Really.

JOSH

Wow.

CLEO

Yeah. Wow. And what would they be looking for? DNA?

JOSH

Yes. But everyone's probably dead now.

CLEO

At least the funeral director left us the blanket. And they found a teddy bear with it. I wanted that back too. She's our responsibility now. To respect her. To honor her.

JOSH

You know, I've read it's not uncommon in old tenements to find things hidden in the walls.

CLEO

But babies? Skeletons?

JOSH

It's happened before.

CLEO

That's no help.

Pause.

JOSH

I need to show you something. Here.

HE takes the photo from his pocket and shows her.

I took this from her apartment.

CLEO

Took? Josh...

JOSH

It's so overfilled with stuff she won't miss it. It's her and a young girl she won't talk about. Closed me down immediately. But my instinct says it's something.

Back to JUDAH and CLARA.

JUDAH

I'll talk to him.

CLARA

Thank you.

JOSH turns to CLEO.

JOSH

That's her on the dresser?

CLEO nods in the direction of the bundle. JOSH walks over to the dresser, and is hesitant about approaching it, then turns around to CLEO.

What if she was Jewish?

SLOW FADE OUT.

But an immediate spotlight on CLEO.

CLEO

Notice he didn't ask what if she was Black. And frankly, neither did I.

BLACKOUT.

CYNTHIA's apartment, a few days later.

CYNTHIA

I was thinking about that baby's skeleton you found.

JOSH

Wrapped in newspapers from 1926.

CYNTHIA

What newspapers?

JOSH

Hmmm?

CYNTHIA

Could be a clue.

JOSH

The sports section of *Il Progresso*, July 18, 1926. Yankees beat the Browns 3 to 2.

CYNTHIA

Italian? Hmm. Perhaps a clue, perhaps they just picked up what was handy. Old newspapers are like a time machine. Amazing you can see how many hits Lou Gehrig had, but you know in 15 years or so he'll die of a horrible disease. The people in the newspaper, they have no idea. That's creepy, isn't it? What will you do with it?

JOSH

We don't know. The city took it for testing, It was wrapped in a blanket with a stuffed toy, so they gave us that for now. Cleo called a funeral home. We thought we give it a decent burial.

CYNTHIA

Very noble of you two. I've decided you can interview me. But, and you're the rare person I've asked this, is there anything I can do?

JOSH

Not that I can think of.

CYNTHIA

Don't think of me just as a subject for a two-thousand word screed on the sorry state and lingering death of the Jewish American novel and novelist. Think of me as a...a fr...fr...

SHE can't say "friend."

As a well-wisher.

JOSH

Thanks. I will.

CYNTHIA

(quoting The Godfather)

Because, one day, I may ask of a favor of you. And that day may come sooner than you think.

JOSH

I just don't get it. A hundred years old. If it had lived it would probably be dead by now.

CYNTHIA

Like a glimpse into the past. A time machine. Time traveling. We're all time travelers, if you think about it. Traveling through time at the rate of one second per second. I've been reading up on quantum physics, quantum mechanics, string theory. Writers find lots of ways not to write.

There's the block theory of time, which says every event that has happened, is happening, and will happen is in a huge four-dimensional block, and that fourth dimension is time. But we, as mere carbon-based meat, can only experience the here and now where time only moves forward. Physicists say we can see the future if we go fast enough, beyond the speed of light – which is not impossible, but pretty much impractical. This is all theory, of course. In the same way, we can, they also say, go to the past, but we cannot alter it. Or we can go back to the past, but our present is just one of many, and the odds of returning to our one special little one is infinitesimal. So you can go back, but you can't come home.

Then there's the loaf of bread theory, that says the entire...*everything*, because there are multiple universes, is like a loaf of sliced bread, and we're on one slice, and the slices do not and cannot interact.

As Stephen Hawking said to me once...

Beat.

...there's just as much reality to the future and the past as there is to the present. What has happened has happened, and that's that, as far as our little slice knows. And no, I didn't fuck him.

But the writer in me thinks there are moments when they do interact, which can explain a lot of things, like apparitions, or that funny feeling you're exactly reliving an experience you've had before, or that someone's with you when they're not. Nabakov said to me when I was a girl – Vladimir Nabakov, he was old and sick of defending *Lolita* – that in Russia, the past is rewritten so quickly you don't know what will happen yesterday.

I know, I don't really understand it either. But it doesn't matter. Like Bob Dylan says, "How does it feel?" By the way, a very picky eater, that boy.

(more)

CYNTHIA (cont'd)

Ah, I've bored you with my rant. How is your girlfriend doing?

JOSH

We're both numb.

CYNTHIA

That's understandable.

JOSH

She's taking it very hard.

CYNTHIA

A hundred years ago. You could look at census records, that sort of thing.

JOSH

No matter what we find out, what could we do? I don't want to start tracking down relatives.

CYNTHIA

Why not?

JOSH

It's too painful.

CYNTHIA

Painful? Do you think I'd be where I am if I had had a normal, happy childhood? My parents had survivor guilt, and tried to pass it on to me. Without the psychological trauma and torture I endured, I wouldn't have my career as the leading Jewish-American pain in the ass.

JOSH

Was it worth it?

CYNTHIA

At the time, no. In the long run, I don't know. But that's how most of life works. The teenaged tortured souls become the voices of their generation 20 years later. The trick is to milk it for the next forty.

JOSH

So is that what your new book is about? Staying the voice of your Jewish generation?

Pause.

I have to get that angle in.

CYNTHIA

My new book, young man, is about paying my bill at the Fairway market so they'll let me in. The speaking engagements dried up during Covid, and I could either sit around here and watch the pigeons on Broadway, or occasionally play a judge on *Law & Order*. Or write my obituary, which this book is. A flawed, poorly written elegy for my prefrontal cortex.

JOSH

Obituary?

CYNTHIA

Kinda getting straight with God. Telling Him what I think of Him. Josh, I told this to Charlie's father last time we slept together. I was hoping to ask this of Charlie, but you'll have to do. I have to ask a favor.

I have early stage liver cancer. Precancerous, really. Found out a few weeks ago. It hasn't spread yet, but it soon could. I've always hated going to doctors. They're humorless know-it-alls and scolds.

JOSH

I'm...I don't know what to say. I'm sorry doesn't really cut it, does it.

CYNTHIA

This may well be my last interview. In a few months if I don't do anything I may be on morphine and just ride out into the sunset. I've been expecting it, really. No great loss. The words aren't coming like they used to. And like I said, if I can't write, there's no reason to go on. I was wondering what would take me down. Maybe they can put me in a wall to be discovered in a hundred years. I like the mystery of that.

Pause, as JOSH doesn't know what to say. HE leans forward to say something, but HE's stymied, and retreats.

Good thing you write for a web site. If you wrote for a print magazine I could be dead by the time it went to press. And now you have a scoop. At least someone will get something good out of it.

JOSH

This is too much.

CYNTHIA

Well, life is like that. All my friends are dropping dead. I could go to a funeral every week if I wanted. But I don't. Not my style. Well, sometimes I do. If I like the caterer.

Pause.

However...

JOSH

Yes?

CYNTHIA

You know, there's a reason I agreed to do an interview with your website. And especially with Charlie, no matter that his father never bathed sufficiently.

JOSH

Really?

CYNTHIA

Charlie, and I'd bet most of the writers on *gevalt dot com* – who came up with that godawful name? – are Jewish. And you?

Pause.

JOSH

I am.

CYNTHIA

With roots in Eastern Europe?

JOSH

My grandparents were, yes.

CYNTHIA

Do you drink to excess?

JOSH

Excuse me?

CYNTHIA

Just what I said.

JOSH

No. Just an occasional beer or two.

CYNTHIA

Imported or domestic?

JOSH

What are you asking me?

CYNTHIA

To be blunt, I'm asking you for half your liver.

Pause.

Not with fava beans and a nice Chianti, dear.

Pause.

A transplant. An...exchange, if you will. My answer to your unanswerable question, and all the prestige that comes with it, for one of the two lobes of your liver. Left or right, doesn't really matter I'm told. Don't worry – you only need one, and the liver is the only body part that can regenerate. Unless you count toenails.

JOSH

You're really asking me to trade half my liver for an interview?

CYNTHIA

Not just an interview, and but an answer to your question. Why be Jewish? To save the life of a literary legend, resurrect her career, all while mourning a tenement baby. It would immediately catapult you to the top of the literary world, and you could get a real position at a real live magazine, something you can hold in your hands, not an ephemeral bunch of pixels and electrons. Some place with history, where you could add to the collection of human knowledge, and not just write listicles on the ten best places to find kosher pickles in Greenpoint.

JOSH

But my liver?

CYNTHIA

It's a simple process, I'm told. What's a few days in the hospital compared to an essay in the New Yorker. *They Saved Ostroff's Brain*. Or liver, actually. Maybe even a book deal. *Liver Come Back to Me*.

JOSH

Let me... I need time... I need to talk...

CYNTHIA

To your girlfriend? Leave it to me. I can convince her. I'd like to meet her. Besides, I want to take a look at what you found. How's this? Why don't I buy you two dinner tonight. You and your girlfriend. I'll bring Chinese takeout. That's the most exotic I get. General Tso and I are best friends. At your place.

JOSH

Downtown?

CYNTHIA

Sure. Do taxis still go south of Canal Street?

JOSH

Let me call her. I don't know if she's up to having company.

CYNTHIA

I'm sure she's up to having *me*. Let me order a few things, and I can be at your apartment at 6. Get some wine, we'll liquor her up, and I can persuade her. But no wine for you. We need to keep that liver pure and heathy. And as for the article, I want something big and flashy. I want to be back in the headlines again. This will jumpstart my book sales, I can order more cheese at Zabar's, you'll be a literary star, and we can all live happily ever. It will be like *Tuesdays With Morrie*, but with fucking.

JOSH

What if one of us dies on the operating table?

CYNTHIA

No one's going to die. We have the best doctors here in New York. You're young and healthy, and I quit smoking last month. I'll pay for everything. I'm sure the medical benefits aren't the best at schmendrik dot com.

JOSH

Gevalt dot com.

CYNTHIA

Same thing. It'll be easy copy. I cheat death, and you help me. You'll have them in tears.

JOSH

But I wanted to do something more in depth on your work.

CYNTHIA

My work? Who cares about my work. Yesterday's news written on tissue paper. That was done for money. *This* is about life. You're buying me a future.

(more)

CYNTHIA (cont'd)

You know, I've grown to like you, Josh. You're an interesting person. I get out so little these days. Thank you for giving me something to live for, a future. Remember that four dimensional box with everything in it.

JOSH

But this story, it can't just be easy. You're Cynthia Ostroff. It can't be a puff piece.

CYNTHIA

Please. Don't I deserve a puff piece? Doesn't everyone, really?

FADE OUT.

FADE IN on JUDAH, front of stage.

JUDAH

I am a very unlucky man. You may say, Judah, you live in a great country. You escaped from murderous thugs. You're married to the most beautiful, exotic, dark-eyed woman in New York, who will bless me with a son one day very soon she tells me. Or a daughter. You have the luxury of living with that wife in your own apartment. Small, but we don't have to share it with boarders like Mr. Pincus in 2A. And I'm a Jew, living in America, a place where it's okay to be a Jew. For the most part. The Irish give us a little trouble when we walk to shul, but the Irish give everybody trouble.

My parents were killed in a local riot, a pogrom, in Poland when I was 15. Some of my friends in the factory say when they get rich enough, they'll go back to visit where they came from, see all the old places again. Some even said they might move back, where they're more at home. I think about that every now and then. It's the 20th century, a modern age. Perhaps things have changed and it's safe now.

When I came to this country I was 19, but I had been studying physics in Warsaw. Niels Bohr, Schrodinger, Heisenberg, Max Planck. It expanded my world. I could barely keep up, but I loved it. I still read about it. I'd like to study more.

When I came to New York, I stayed with my Uncle Wolfie. That was his name, Wolfie. Not Wolf, or Wolfgang. Even with the government, Wolfie. It's not a name that leads to success in America.

But two weeks after I get here, Uncle Wolfie takes me to his factory in the Bronx. I say "takes" because it feels like it was yesterday, but it was 16 years ago. Time is funny that way. I start schlepping heavy stuff around, then after a few years, Uncle Wolfie shows me how to cut cloth from a pattern into men's suits. That's what he did. After a while, I learned to use a jigsaw to make cheap suits a dozen at a time. And the more suits I cut, the better I got and the faster I cut them.

(more)

JUDAH (cont'd)

It was very easy to get bored, cutting suits day after day. Boredom can be dangerous. My friend Avram, at the next table, as sure a cutter as I ever saw, got bored one day and cut off the top of his left first finger. *ZUP* – off it comes! He screamed and screamed, but the boss was more concerned with all the blood ruining the cloth. Avram went to the hospital and we never saw him again. I got all his work, and more money. But I heard the boss docked him for the cloth that he ruined.

I can't get Avram out of my head. Not just losing a finger, but losing his job, and not just his job, but his livelihood. What good is a suit cutter with nine fingers, who's afraid of his tools? Who would hire him? No work. Nothing to show he's a man. Because that is what a man does in America. Works, pays his own way, finds a good woman, and provides for his family. Anything else, you're not a man, not a Jew. Sometimes a man has to stand up for himself. Clara says yes, but sometimes he has to learn just how far up he can stand without falling over.

Maybe I've fallen over too far, and I can't stand up straight anymore. Maybe she's right and I should go back and apologize. Why can't I just work, get paid, come home and build something for us?

Later that day, after Avram lost his finger, I was coming home from work on the subway, and I was consumed with my thoughts. We stopped at Freeman Street, and I saw this woman crying, stuck in the doors. She was different. Darker skin than mine, but dressed like a fine Jewish woman. So I pushed the doors open and pulled her in. She was breathing so hard, I tried to calm her down, and talked to her in Yiddish. She didn't understand. I know now that she was Jewish, but not like I was. She comes from Brazil by way of Curaçao, Portugal, all these crazy countries I never knew existed. So I try a little English. I speak Yiddish all the time at work and at home, but I learned English by reading the Daily News, then I read the Times. One day I want to do the crossword puzzles. The Monday and Tuesday at least.

I got her some tea around the corner from her home, on the Lower East Side near where I was staying with some other men from my town. She thanked me, and said I was kind. I told her she was beautiful, and taught her two Yiddish words she hadn't heard before – *gut glik*, good luck. She laughed. And two years later, well, here we are on Rivington Street.

Some nights, when it's quiet outside and I can't sleep, I imagine who will live in this apartment after us, and after them, and after them. Who will live here 100 years from now. What will their life be like? What will they do? What will they look like? Will they be Jewish? Will they change America, or will America change them? Or will it be a little of both?

(more)

JUDAH (cont'd)

Maybe I should become a street philosopher instead of cutting suits.

HE begins to turn into the next scene, but turns back to the audience.

Oh yes. So why am I unlucky, you ask?

When I pulled Clara into the subway car, my watch fell on the tracks. Gone, crushed under the train. Don't laugh! I bought it in France on the way over. Maybe it was an even trade. A beautiful watch for a beautiful wife. Of course, a watch can't laugh with you, cry with you, comfort you when you need comforting, or keep you warm at night. Or give you children.

On the other hand, you can't pawn your wife when you're broke.

Actually, now that I consider it, maybe I got the better of the deal. But the question is, did she?

FADE OUT.

It is early afternoon.

JUDAH sits on the sofa, forlornly, his head in his hands. CLARA walks in slowly from the bedroom. SHE is visibly pregnant, but not ready to give birth just yet. SHE sits down next to JUDAH, and puts her arm around him to console him.

CLEO soon follows her, sipping from a cup of tea. SHE is quiet, lost in thought. SHE approaches the bundle, puts her hand on it, and mumbles a Hebrew prayer.

SHE turns to the audience.

CLEO

I ...

Pause.

I have nothing to say.

CLEO stands by the cabinet and keeps her hands on the bundle, lost in thought.

JUDAH

I hate that I'm here. I'm a grown man. I should be providing for you, not having to rely on a woman sewing stuffed animals for my bread.

CLARA

Something will turn up. It always has.

JUDAH

Maybe we should move to another city. I'm dirty goods here. I've heard Chicago is good for Jews.

CLARA

With me the way I am?

JUDAH

I know. It's probably the worst timing in the world.

CLARA goes to an offstage closet and quickly returns with a small blanket.

CLARA

One of our neighbors, Mrs. Levinsky, gave me this. For when it's time. Isn't it beautiful. Blue with a gold thread.

JUDAH

How can we have a baby when I've lost my job?

CLARA

Judah, my darling husband, it's only money.

JUDAH

Only money? No it's not. I traveled thousands of miles and married you just to put you into poverty?

CLARA

I was already in poverty. You rescued me.

JUDAH

No I didn't. I condemned you to a life in a walk up tenement with dirt and rats. Go back to the Bronx. Take the subway. I can't help you anymore.

CLARA

Judah! You are my husband. You can get another job.

JUDAH

Driving a taxi? Selling vegetables in the street like a peddler? Me? I was making good money to afford a nice home, working at something I could do well, and you want me to what, come home smelling of fish or something?

CLARA

No – I just want you to be with me. And our baby.

JUDAH

How will we feed it? How will we clothe it? I'm not taking handouts. And we're not giving up this apartment, or taking in strangers.

CLARA

Maybe I can ask for more sewing work, and you can help.

JUDAH

I should have stayed back home.

CLARA

And you never would have met me.

JUDAH

You would have been better not to have met me.

CLARA

Judah, you *saved* me!

JUDAH

No. I brought you into my hell. Maybe I should go. Just...go.

CLARA

Where?

JUDAH

I don't know. Maybe... I need to go.

CLARA

Don't leave!

JUDAH

Just let me go!

JUDAH gets up and exits the apartment through the front door.

CLARA begins to go after him, retreats, and sits back at the table to work.

CLARA

I'll wait for you, my beloved.

SHE continues to sew, as JOSH and CYNTHIA enter loudly, with bags of takeout food for dinner.

CYNTHIA

There is not a speck of Chinese food left on the Lower East Side! It's all in these bags.

JOSH

Hi. I brought wine.

CLEO

Oh. Sorry. I was...

CYNTHIA

You must be Cleo. You're Black.

CLEO

You noticed.

CYNTHIA

I thought Josh told me all about you, but he conveniently left that out. It doesn't matter to me. I can never remember if I have to acknowledge it or not.

CLEO

And you're an Upper West Side...

JOSH

Cleo, let's not get off on the wrong foot here. What about some wine? I did *Ten Brooklyn Wines You Must Drink Before You Die* last year. This is a 2021 Gowanus Cab Sauv. You can taste the notes of old tires and dead mobsters.

HE opens a wine bottle and gets a regular sized wine glass, looks at it, puts it back and gets a gigantic glass. HE pours CLEO a very large glass of wine and gives it to her.

You'll need this.

CYNTHIA

And is this...

CYNTHIA nods at the wrapped bundle on the dresser.

CLEO

Yes.

CYNTHIA

May I?

CYNTHIA puts down her bags of food and slowly approaches the bundle. SHE touches it.

It's certainly small enough. Have you...

CLEO

Unwrapped it? No.

CYNTHIA

Then how can you be sure?

CLEO

The builders said they found it wrapped in newspapers and this blue and gold blanket, with a teddy bear. The police gave us back the blanket and the bear. We'll have...her...for the burial. But this had...*has*...her touch.

CYNTHIA

Come.

HE's hesitant.

It won't bite. Not anymore at least.

JOSH approaches the bundle, but does not touch it.

CLEO looks at him, takes his hand in hers, and together they lift the bundle. SHE soon takes it and holds it close to her.

CLEO

Aren't we supposed to name her? We've decided it was a girl.

CYNTHIA

Name her?

CLEO

Yes. Give her a name. The dignity of a name. It deserves that at least. If you give something a name, it lives forever.

CYNTHIA

In a fashion. You can be remembered, you can "live on," as they say, but you can't go to the opera.

CLEO

It's not a laughing matter. This was someone's child. How could they do such a thing?

JOSH

You don't know the circumstances. A hundred years ago, the people who lived here were poor immigrants. Maybe they couldn't afford to bury it. Maybe the mother was a young girl herself, and they were ashamed. Maybe the mother and the child both died during childbirth, and it was too much to handle.

CYNTHIA

Gothic horror. I like it.

CLEO

It's just so overwhelming. The blanket, a teddy bear with a gold thread. I'm glad she had that all these years.

CYNTHIA

You know, Josh and I have become very close. He's a good kid from solid Eastern European Jewish stock. You don't see many of those these days. Everyone's hyphenated, half this, a quarter that. Give me a son of the old lumpen proletariat every day.

CLEO

(slightly angry but holding back)

So someone not like me.

CYNTHIA

I didn't say that.

CLEO

Yes you did.

CYNTHIA

I say a lot of things. He'll be very useful. And I can assure you that once I'm through with him, he'll have a great career at a real print magazine where they actually number the pages and the ink rubs off on your fingers.

CLEO

Josh does an amazing job where he is right now!

JOSH

We've got enough food for an army platoon here, so let's put it out and eat, okay?

HE digs in the bags and pulls out containers of food, placing them on the table. CLARA continues to work at the same table.

Who ordered Jī gān?

CYNTHIA

Oh that's me. Szechuan bean sprouts. With chicken livers.

Beat.

And more wine! Red wine builds good blood.

(to CLEO)

More wine glasses, please.

CLEO folds her arms and looks daggers at CYNTHIA. SHE looks at JOSH, and realizes CYNTHIA holds both their futures in her hands. SHE relents and gets two more wine glasses.

CYNTHIA pours JOSH a glass of wine. SHE sets it in front of him, but quickly takes it back and drinks it herself quickly.

Sorry. Forgot. We have to keep you alcohol-free.

Pause.

Have you told her?

CLEO

Told me what?

CYNTHIA

Your husband is a very brave man. The things he does for love. And for career. And more importantly, for me.

JOSH

Cynthia has asked me to donate...it's...it's hard for me to say.

CYNTHIA

Where are your plates? Forks and spoons and all that?

CLEO

I'll get some.

SHE brings out dishes and silverware, talking as she exits and re-enters.

It's just so weird that we're eating here, while...it's right there.

CYNTHIA

Oh, it'll get weirder soon enough.

CYNTHIA, CLEO and JOSH start doling out food and sitting at the table. CYNTHIA is more enthusiastic about it than CLEO and JOSH, who are troubled, for different reasons.

JUDAH enters from the front door, bloodied and staggering. CLARA sees him and is shocked.

CLARA

Judah? What happened? Who did this to you?

JUDAH

Someone ran at me from behind, knocked me down, and hit my knees with a club. Then they threw this at me.

HE takes out a few dollar bills from his pocket.

Seven dollars.

CLARA

Was it Max?

JUDAH

They said “Don’t come back.”

CLARA

“Don’t come back?”

JUDAH

It was the bosses. The company. Max was just doing what he was told, passing back the cut. If he didn’t, they’d hurt him too.

JUDAH continues to moan, and CLARA tends to his wounds, wiping away blood, etc.

Meanwhile, at the same table, CLEO, JUDAH and CYNTHIA are eating Chinese food.

CLEO

(trying to butter her up)

It’s great to have you here, Ms. Ostroff.

JOSH

Miss.

CLEO

Oh.

CYNTHIA

Just call me Cynthia. We should all become good friends. Pass the egg rolls.

JOSH and CLEO look uneasy as CYNTHIA eats.

CLARA

What are you going to do?

JUDAH

Please. Not now. Let me rest and think.

JUDAH exits to the bedroom, sloppily leaving his jacket on the chair. CLARA smooths it out, and finds something in his inside pocket.

SHE takes it out – an envelope – and opens it, taking out a paper and a cardboard ticket. SHE reads the paper, looks at the ticket, is still, then begins to tear them. But SHE stops, carefully puts them back in the envelope and returns it to JUDAH's jacket pocket.

SHE sits, quietly, fidgeting, gets up, not knowing what to do with herself. SHE eventually sits, and then begins to cry, more and more, then SHE wails.

Meanwhile, JOSH, CLEO and CYNTHIA are eating at the same table.

CYNTHIA

So...Cleo is it?

CLEO

Yes.

CYNTHIA

That's an interesting name. Like Cleopatra. You know, I did one of those DNA tests.

JOSH

Me too. Mixture of Russian and Polish.

CYNTHIA

Just a big red circle – one hundred percent USDA-certified Ashkenazi Jew. A daughter of the shtetl. Nothing I didn't know. Have you done it? Pass the rice, please – I'll try the brown in your honor.

CLEO

No. I know who I am.

CYNTHIA

(getting indignant)

When did you convert?

Pause.

CLEO

What makes you think I'm a convert?

CYNTHIA

Have you checked yourself in a mirror lately? You don't exactly look like the second coming of the Baal Shem Tov, dear.

CLEO

(angrily)

My Jewish roots in this country go back further than yours, lady!

JOSH

Not now. Remember.

CYNTHIA

Remember what?

JOSH

Cleo, do you want to ask her?

CLEO

(burying her rage)

I...I have something to ask you.

CYNTHIA

What a coincidence. I have something to ask of your boyfriend.

JOSH

(offers her food)

Chee Cheong Fun? Intestine rolls.

CYNTHIA

Actually a little up and to the left.

JOSH

Cleo, Cynthia is ill.

CYNTHIA

Very ill. Where's the sweet and sour chicken?

JOSH

And she's asked me to help her. I could be instrumental in saving her life.

CLEO
Really?

JOSH
She needs my liver.

CLEO
I didn't know Chinese restaurants served liver.

JOSH
Anyone want some wine?

*CYNTHIA turns for more wine, and then sees her
photo on a table. SHE gets up and holds it.*

CYNTHIA
(angrily, to JOSH)
You stole this from my apartment!

SHE stares at JOSH who is silent.

*Back to CLARA. JUDAH enters with a baseball bat,
still rubbing his wounds.*

CLARA
What are you doing with that?

JUDAH
I'm going to find those bastards and give them their seven dollars back and then some!

CLARA
Judah! No!

JUDAH
I have to.

CLARA
Don't go. Stay here with me.

JUDAH
I have to.

Pause.

CLARA

I forbid it!

Beat.

JUDAH

What? You forbid it? You forbid *me*?

CLARA

Yes!

JUDAH

Who are you to forbid me?

CLARA

Your wife!

JUDAH relents, and collapses in his chair. CLARA comes and sits next to him as HE recovers.

Back to CYNTHIA.

CYNTHIA

I thought we had an agreement, Josh. You'd give me half your liver and write a nice story about a poor old writer, and I'd give you the validation to write for the New Yorker, which isn't what it used to be, by the way.

Pause.

CLEO

Your liver? Don't you have to be on a...a waiting list?

CYNTHIA

Not for a living donor.

CYNTHIA

We go to the hospital, I get half his liver, and it regrows in three weeks. Faster than hair. But I did not give you permission to delve into my past, much less steal a photo of my daughter...

SHE stops.

What were you going to do with this? Did you ever plan on giving it back? My God, were you going to publish it on that shitty little website of yours?

CLEO

How safe is this?

CYNTHIA

The liver thing? No worse than a old fashioned gall bladder I've been told.

CLEO

This is crazy!

JOSH

I'm doing it for you!

Pause.

CLEO

Oh, no... No no no.

CYNTHIA

Now this is interesting. You steal my past, and yet you don't come clean to your girlfriend?

Pause.

I should be angry, and I am.

CLEO

Wait just a second. I am incensed you didn't discuss this me with before.

JOSH

It's my liver.

CLEO

No you dumb white boy, it's OUR liver. We're a team. If we're going to have a baby, everything you have is mine and that includes your liver. I love you, you dumb motherfucker. And you will not give this woman a half, a quarter, even a speck of your organs, you hear me? I need you whole and intact and ready to procreate and raise a child, and if that means you stay a writer for schlepper dot com, so be it.

JOSH

Gevalt dot com.

CLEO

Whatever.

JOSH turns to CYNTHIA.

CYNTHIA

Well, I guess that's that.

CLEO

Josh, I need you. I need you to make us a baby. Please.

Pause.

JOSH

Cynthia. I can't. She's right. She needs me. You know. You've had a child. The girl in the photo. She's your daughter, isn't she?

CYNTHIA

Yes. Yes. My daughter. Happy you're making an old woman cry?

CLEO

You're not crying.

CYNTHIA

I don't cry. But I know when I should.

SHE takes the photo.

She got hit by a car in Central Park riding her bicycle. Only six years old. Can you imagine? A car accident. Just a child. A baby.

JOSH

I don't remember you being married.

CYNTHIA

You two aren't. I wasn't, but it was different then. We said she was my niece. My publisher had enough pull to hush it all up, and when it happened, they worked with lawyers and insurance companies and all that.

We were living in a small basement apartment on East 48th, just enough for the two of us. I was working, taking travel reservations for a hotel chain during the day and pounding out my first book at night. She was excited to start school in a few months. I would read *Goodnight Moon* to her before she went to sleep. I had no idea how to be a mother, but I guess no one does, really. I'd put her to bed, and then hit the typewriter keys all night. When that damn mouse went to sleep, so did she, and I restarted my double life. Wrote novels, articles, essays, got some fame.

(more)

CYNTHIA (cont'd)

One day, about eight months after it happened, a messenger comes with an envelope with a check for a half million dollars. Insane. It can't replace her. It can't replace her future. I never really knew her, what her future would be. Six years old. But that money paid for my apartment and then some. It let me relax and write. It sounds cold and cruel, but that's the honest truth. But I couldn't. And that's when I stopped writing. There was no one to write for anymore. I hoped she'd read it when she was older, in her twenties, and know what I was like when she was younger. A novel really is a portal to the past, to the writer's past, like traveling back in time. A different slice in the bread loaf.

Pause.

If you print any of this, I'll take every bit of your liver. Whether you want me to or not.

You remind me of her, Cleo. She was a fighter. She challenged me. Even at six. Never wanted to go to sleep. Never wanted to eat what I gave her. In a friend, that's a reason for murder. But in a child, your own child, I liked it. She had her own mind.

CLEO

What was her name?

CYNTHIA

Heather. Can you imagine? Heather. There's no heather within 100 miles of here. What was I thinking? Poor sweet girl. Heather. But I never really got the chance to know her. I was robbed of her future, but I got an apartment in exchange. It's not fair. It's not fair.

CYNTHIA sits, and drinks some wine, silently.

Back to JUDAH and CLARA. After silence, SHE gets the letter with the tickets.

CLARA

Judah, my sweet, proud, insane Judah, what's this?

JUDAH

We can't stay here. It's not safe.

CLARA

But these are steamship tickets.

JUDAH

We're going home.

CLARA

Whose home?

JUDAH

What do you mean?

CLARA

These are tickets to Europe. I've never been to Europe.

JUDAH

I'll show you around.

CLARA

It's not my home!

JUDAH

Home is home.

CLARA

Why don't I take you to Brazil and see how you fit in?

JUDAH

I know people back home. We can make a life for ourselves and for our child. It's safe now.

CLARA

And what will I do? I don't know the language, I don't know the land, I don't know anything about it. I need someplace to fit in.

JUDAH

We have to go.

CLARA

And what if I say no?

JUDAH

We can't stay here.

CLARA turns his back on him.

CYNTHIA has been silently holding her daughter's photo. SHE gathers herself and puts it in her handbag.

In the meantime, CLEO's phone rings. SHE ignores it. It rings again. SHE ignores it again. A third time. It goes to voicemail.

CYNTHIA

That's a very annoying habit.

PHONE (V.O.)

(formally and intensely)

Cleo, this is Jack. Frankly, I'm offended you would even think I was stealing from the fund. I don't think we can work together anymore under those circumstances. Since you've been working from home, there's nothing to pack up. Expect your final pay in three days, and I hope you've learned your lesson. Goodbye, and don't even think of asking for a reference.

JOSH

You talked to Jack?

CLEO

Texted. But I never accused him...

JOSH

He fired you?

CLEO

It sounds it.

JOSH

You're better off.

CLEO

Have you ever been fired?

JOSH

You hated that job.

CLEO

It's insulting!

CYNTHIA

I've never said this before in my life, but here goes – is there something I can do to help?

Pause, as JOSH and CLEO turn to look at CYNTHIA.

JOSH

As a matter of fact...

(to CLEO)

Do you have it?

CLEO

Keep your hands off his liver. Understood?

CLEO goes to the bedroom to get the recommendation letter.

JOSH

Uh, any more wine? It's a dry Court Street Chardonnay.

CLARA turns to JUDAH.

CLARA

Go. Go look for them. Take your bat. Then go back home. All the way home.

Pause.

But if you leave now, you leave without me. I was a butterfly without wings, but now I am growing them. I am growing my own wings! So go! Go if you want to. But you will go without me.

CLARA holds, and stares at JUDAH.

CLEO returns with the recommendation letter.

CLEO

I was...we were wondering if you could sign this.

CYNTHIA

Your recommendation for the school on Ludlow.

JOSH

How did you know?

CYNTHIA

My lox slicer sends her kids there.

Beat.

I was as surprised as you are. Imagine! A female lox slicer!

CLEO

So you'll sign it?

CYNTHIA

Of course. You'll make a fine headmaster...mistress. If you protect the kids as fiercely as you protect your man, and fight as hard as you do, you'll be great. I signed Heather up for pre-K there 25 years ago. She never got to go. Give me the letter.

CLEO hands it to her, and SHE reads it over.

JUDAH grabs the baseball bat, looks at CLARA, gets his jacket, and exits through the front door.

CLARA holds, and looks at the door. SHE sighs heavily. Then she goes to her pile of work, the teddy bears, and starts to her sewing. SHE sews for a few seconds, and then breaks down crying. SHE soon gathers herself together, and through her tears, she sews again.

CYNTHIA stops, gets up with the letter, and walks to the bundle on the dresser. SHE touches it, holds there, thinking, then turns back and signs the letter.

CYNTHIA

Oh, fuck it. Fuck it all. Fuck my liver. Fuck me. I'm...I'm not... I'm not worth it. The words. The words, Josh. The words aren't there. All I have is piles of paper with wrong words. Or no words at all. It's all terrible and I'm just incompetent. It's me. I tried to write something yesterday, and I stared at the paper for two hours. Two entire hours. Nothing. Absolutely jack shit nothing.

JOSH

I know what that's like.

CYNTHIA

No you don't. The top of the mountain is in front of you. All I can see is the bicycle rental rack at the bottom. And if I'm not a writer, what am I? A silly old woman with a shopping cart who used to make editors tremble when they heard I was waiting outside their office. I could call William Shawn at the New Yorker and tell him to hold two full pages for me without those stupid cartoons and he'd do it. I should move in with my niece in Ohio.

(more)

CYNTHIA (cont'd)

That's as good as dying. It's like a Roach Motel for writers – authors check in, but they don't check out.

Let's face it, I have three good years left at the most before I start microwriting like a dementia patient, if the liver doesn't get me first. Not your fault. It's too much to ask for too little a return. I just wonder who'll get my apartment next. Who'll be sleeping in that room next year, or in ten or even a hundred years. Damn. *Ohio*. Ah well. I had a hell of a run. Now, Rabbi Freedman, can you call me one of those Nazi taxis?

JOSH

Nazi taxis?

CYNTHIA

Über.

Beat.

Indulge me. I've waited five years to tell that joke. And while we're waiting, pass the bang bang shrimp and that bottle of Bed-Stuy Bordeaux. Every drink probably takes six hours off my life. Each bottle is about a day. Count your days in bottles of wine, Josh. Count your days in bottles of the best wine you can find.

SLOW FADE.

JOSH and CLEO come forward to address the audience.

JOSH

Cynthia lived four more years. Her liver reacted well to the usual treatment. She didn't need a transplant. But she couldn't live with not being what she once was. She published only one more piece, a short story about a young girl's trip to Florida with her family. Critics dismissed it as too derivative of J.D. Salinger. She's at rest in a family plot in Dayton, Ohio, of all places. Next to her daughter, and uncles and aunts from the 1800's she never knew. All together.

CLEO

I got that job at the day school on Ludlow. I love it. I'm still there. They treat me like I'm just another multihued multi-Jew in this multi-boroughd multiverse. It's comfortable. But I'm not sure if I like comfortable. I like having something to butt up against. Maybe that's why I was made doubly-Jewish. We still don't have a child of our own. But we still try. We have a schedule. We try in the spring and summer when the Yankees win, and the fall and winter when the Knicks win. It was Josh's idea. He calls it the Jewish Rhythm method. We're reliant on relief pitchers and point guards.

JOSH

My story on Cynthia got some notice. I pulled a few punches, didn't go into the whole liver stuff, or her daughter, but it was a serious piece about a lonely writer who argued with the lox police at Zabar's and thought she couldn't hit a home run anymore. I've been published in the Atlantic, Harper's and the New Yorker. But whenever I publish a piece, I think to myself, what's next? Is that the last piece I'll publish? Then I convince myself I'm a fraud. Then I get some good news, and I'm back to normal. Like she said, That's the creative life. Lather, rinse, repeat.

CLEO

We got a piece of mail a few days ago addressed to someone who used to live here. You ever get one of those? It's like a time machine into the past. I look at the letter, some junk mail from a painter or an offer for new windows, and I wonder, who was this person? Who were Mister and Mrs. Judah Wolfman? When did they live here? It sounds like they were Jewish like us. Maybe not exactly like us. Were they one of those Jews Josh is constantly comparing himself to? Whatever happened to them? Was their life like ours? What did they want? What drove them? What was their story? What would they think of us? Then the phone rings and I get distracted and throw it into the junk mail recycling bin.

JOSH

And what about our time traveling baby?

CLEO

We called it Cynthia Jeremiah, since while we decided it was a girl, we couldn't actually tell what it was...it is... Our little non-binary, marginalized, accidental Jew, Cynthia Jeremiah DeCosta Spellman-Freedman. We bought a plot for her in the Bronx, and we take the subway to visit every now and then.

JOSH

You may have noticed tonight the relative absence of certain words. God, Torah, and Israel. What's a play about Jews without God, Torah, and Israel?

CLEO

We're not those kind of people. I'm not sure how that sits with some of you, but that's who we are.

But she's interrupted by someone from the wings coming on stage and handing her a note. SHE reads it and looks at the audience.

I've just been told to make sure you all know that studying Torah is important.

(more)

CLEO (cont'd)

But as I was saying, our kind of person, our kind of Jew, we're like an anarchist collective. Anybody anywhere any time is invited as long as you fit in.

JOSH

You don't even have to be Jewish. It helps, of course. A big loving community of the worried and the driven, the overanxious and the sleep-deprived.

CLEO

The sardonic and the dreamers, the intrepid and the scared.

JOSH

The loved and unloved, the overeducated and the under-appreciated.

CLEO

The alienated and the inalienable. The giving and the protecting, the strivers and the settled, the profound and the profane, Black, white, Latinx, Asian, gay, trans, questioning – a community of people living lives turned up to 11.

JOSH

And time travelers, all of us.

CLEO

We grieve for the past, we strive in the present, and we hope for the future.

JOSH

It's hard work being us, but if you do it right, you don't have to work *at* it.

CLEO

Like the ghosts of the immigrants who used to live here a hundred years ago. We just...*are*. And I was one, even before I knew it.

JOSH

Good night. Get home safely. And tonight, in those odd few minutes between being awake and being asleep, when you can hear your breaths go in and out, and you can feel your heart gently beat, think of what Jewish life in America will be one hundred years from today. Will they have the same problems you have? Will they have the same wants and needs you have? Imagine them in your home, in your kitchen. People you know, people like you, but will never meet.

Physicists say we can only travel in one direction, one second per second.

They touch the bundle.

CLEO

But in reality, our travels are limitless.

Pause.

THEY exit, and as they do, CYNTHIA enters, wearing a white flowing gown, and walks slowly and deliberately to the dresser. CLEO and JOSH cannot see her.

SHE lifts the bundle, holds it close to her, and exits with it.

END OF PLAY

Author's statement

While my play *Who's Yehoodi?* looks at the Jewish experience in America over the past 100 years, it has a universal theme – *who belongs?* As we get farther and farther away from the immigrants of the 1920s, the old rules don't hold anymore. That's why in the play, I show two couples of similar circumstances – a modern-day Eastern European man and his Black Jewish girlfriend, alongside a 1920s Eastern European man and his Sephardic-Hispanic wife – living in the same apartment at the same time, yet separated by 100 years.

Both women do not “belong,” are different, out of the ordinary, and challenge the societal norms. They are both looking for a place to be accepted, just as all of those on the margins of society today are.

As I've written more plays and received more productions and readings, I wanted to delve into very big topics, and have my plays ask very big questions. Being Jewish, I wanted to look at what it means to be Jewish in America today, and how this generation's view of it differs from that of my immigrant grandparents'. I've also noticed that this generation is moving into the very same Lower East Side apartments lived in by their great-grandparents. The play came together from these observations.