

UNDER THE POPLAR TREES

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“We live as long as the memory of us is alive.”

---written in the barracks at Auschwitz

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CHARACTERS 4-5 male, 2 female

JOSEF...male, 20s-30s, concentration camp prisoner, high-spirited & idealistic.

YOUNG MEYER...male, 20s, concentration camp prisoner, a strong, thoughtful realist.

CLARA...female, 80s, Meyer's wife, a light-hearted optimist, devoted to her family.

MEYER...male, 90s, still strong, but haunted by his memories.

DESIREE...female, 20s-30s, a beautiful spirit, clothed in classical garb.

{AARON...male, 30s, Meyer's grandson, a journalist.

{VIKTOR...male, 30s, concentration camp prisoner.

Bracketed characters can double.

TIME

1942-1945 and the present.

SETTINGS

All minimally suggested:

Barracks, roll-call area & center road of a concentration camp.

Meyer's space, a table & chairs in his Brooklyn home.

Desiree's bower.

ACT ONE

Spotlight up on JOSEF, standing in the barracks. He holds a small tin dish.

JOSEF

We'll have more of that delicious chicken, if you please, cameriere, and another bottle of that fine white wine, yes, and while you're at it, let's have a bit more of the fresh bread and the butter and the delicious...yes, the veal, if you please...

Spotlight up on YOUNG MEYER, standing, also holding a tin dish. He hugs himself as if he were freezing.

YOUNG MEYER

(through labored breaths)

How can it be? I don't understand. I can't understand. All this time...and it goes on. What is the answer? If a person stops trying to live, why doesn't he die? But still...here I am.

JOSEF

And tell the violinist I want sweet, gentle music, romantic in the extreme. I want him to paint pictures with his bow, pictures to take me and my amour to places of beauty, halls of desire, caverns of seduction, and then, then you see...

YOUNG MEYER

What am I and what kind of a god is there that makes this go on? All around, such awfulness again and again, day after day. I know what I will do, I know what I must do. I will end it all. I will run to the fence. And then it will be over.

JOSEF

The music will make everything beautiful for my lady and me. Maybe we dance a bit, maybe we sing a bit, who knows? And then afterwards, after such an evening...

Lights slowly up full on the barracks.

YOUNG MEYER

This is no way to live. Running to the fence is the only answer, the right answer. I am a man, I can do it. I must do it. I will. It must be...tomorrow...I must...

JOSEF

After the sweetness of the music, then, oh, and then...time will pass, but the music of a man and a woman together...what is more beautiful?

YOUNG MEYER

Because if not...if not...what is there? What can there possibly be...for me?

Pause. Then, JOSEF turns to YOUNG MEYER & points with delight to the floor.

JOSEF

Look.

YOUNG MEYER looks up.

Look at that.

YOUNG MEYER

What?

JOSEF

That. Over there.

YOUNG MEYER

What in this shithole am I supposed to look at?

JOSEF

Him. The cockroach.

YOUNG MEYER

The...what?

JOSEF

He's feeling his way along the floor. See?

YOUNG MEYER

So? You want to give it a prize? Put a ribbon around its neck. Maybe put it on a little pedestal--

JOSEF

But he's a force, don't you see?

YOUNG MEYER

A what?

JOSEF

Motion. Energy. Propulsion. He moves and---

YOUNG MEYER

To what end? Where is it going?

JOSEF

Are you looking at him? Do you see him? He has direction, momentum. He's going from here to there.

YOUNG MEYER

So what? Have you never seen a cockroach before?

JOSEF

That's not the point.

YOUNG MEYER

Then if you would please be good enough to tell me, what is the point?

JOSEF

He eats and he moves and---

YOUNG MEYER

Listen to me, whatever your name is, I'm going to say this just once and that's all. It's a bug. Have you got that? That's all it is. A bug.

JOSEF

Josef Silberstrom. That's my name. And you?

YOUNG MEYER

Meyer. Meyer Abramson. Now, as I was saying---

JOSEF

No, as I was saying. He's not an it, this cockroach. He is a he. He deserves respect. He commands it, in fact.

YOUNG MEYER

Stop with your nonsense.

JOSEF

Then again, of course, he might be a she.

YOUNG MEYER

You're crazy. Leave me alone, will you? Just let me be.

JOSEF

There is a way to tell, of course. Do you know?

YOUNG MEYER

Do I know what?

JOSEF

How to tell the sexual identity of a cockroach?

YOUNG MEYER

Of course, I don't know how to tell the---

JOSEF

It's something about egg cases and wingspans, but I'm afraid I'm entirely ignorant of it. Science was never my forte.

YOUNG MEYER

I think you're entirely ignorant of everything.

JOSEF

That's a bit of an overstatement, but if that's how you feel---

YOUNG MEYER

Isn't it enough that we're buried in this hellhole? Must you drone on with this pointless babble? Finding something to smile about, to be happy about? Is that what it is with you? You're a fool, Josef whatever your name is. A walking, breathing fool.

JOSEF

Silberstrom, as I said. And I'm still pleased to meet you.

YOUNG MEYER

Well, I'm not pleased to meet you. And if you're going to talk like this, I'm not going to listen, do you understand? I will pay you absolutely no attention whatsoever, is that clear? None at all.

YOUNG MEYER turns away. Pause.
JOSEF gets down on the floor.

JOSEF

Ahh! Look at that. Just look at that! He has found it! My little friend has made his discovery. I knew it. I knew he would.

YOUNG MEYER struggles silently.

It was only a matter of time before all the forces aligned. And now, now---

YOUNG MEYER

Stop it, you, you...stop it!

JOSEF looks up.

JOSEF

What is it, Meyer?

YOUNG MEYER

You're just doing this to get me agitated. Is this part of their torture? Locking me up with a madman who talks of nothing? Are they trying to drive me crazy?

JOSEF

I'm not trying to drive you---

YOUNG MEYER

Well, what has he got? What in hell has he got?

JOSEF

The crumb.

YOUNG MEYER

The...what?

JOSEF

The crumb I put there for him. He has found it. Now he will live another day.

YOUNG MEYER

Isn't it enough? Endless work, scraps of food, barbed wire everywhere, guards watching all the time and now I'm locked up with an idiot. No yesterday, no today, no tomorrow.

JOSEF

That's just it. He's got a tomorrow.

YOUNG MEYER

And why should I give a shit about the tomorrow of a cockroach?

JOSEF

Because it's life, Meyer. Life. Going on.

YOUNG MEYER

Fine, fine. Penned up with a “philosopher.” Where do you come from, philosopher?

JOSEF

From Lodz. What about you?

YOUNG MEYER

It’s no matter.

JOSEF

Are you here long?

YOUNG MEYER

Long enough.

JOSEF

I just arrived.

YOUNG MEYER

That’s obvious. (sarcastically) Willkommen to Dachau, your lovely new home!

Pause.

JOSEF

Got any advice for the newcomer?

YOUNG MEYER

Well, I wouldn’t go around giving crumbs to cockroaches.

JOSEF

Anything more?

YOUNG MEYER

Not tonight. I need sleep. Or what passes for sleep here.

YOUNG MEYER turns away, lies down.

JOSEF

Of course. Good night, then.

YOUNG MEYER
(under his breath)

Two months.

JOSEF

What?

YOUNG MEYER

Nothing.

JOSEF

Now, Meyer, if we're going to be friends...

YOUNG MEYER

Who said we're going to be friends?

JOSEF

Well, naturally, I assumed... isn't it good to make a friend? After all, that's how we will win.

YOUNG MEYER

Win? In this place? Truly, you are mad.

JOSEF

Friendship's the one thing they can't take away from us, right?

YOUNG MEYER

You haven't been here long enough.

JOSEF

What? Different rules?

YOUNG MEYER

Of course, there are different rules. And the smart ones say, whatever you do, don't make a friend.

JOSEF

But why---

YOUNG MEYER

Think about it.

JOSEF

I am. But I don't understand---

YOUNG MEYER

Because it'll be that much worse. Don't you see?

JOSEF

You mean...

YOUNG MEYER

When they're gone. This is the other side of hell. Do you understand that much?

Pause.

JOSEF

Maybe.

YOUNG MEYER

Why "maybe"?

JOSEF

It's only hell if you think it's hell.

YOUNG MEYER

Oh, that's very smart. You are clearly a highly intelligent man. So where do you think we are?

JOSEF

It's a place. Just a place.

YOUNG MEYER

There's only one name for a place where they make you stand at attention for five hours. That's what happens here.

JOSEF

Still, I can't help thinking that the bonds of companionship could lighten one's burdens. I mean, faced with brutality, one can---

YOUNG MEYER

Oh, will you shut up?

JOSEF

Meyer----

YOUNG MEYER

You're here ten minutes and already I can't stand you! Are you completely blind? Do you know what this is? Do you know what could happen to us?

JOSEF
(beaming)

Thank you.

YOUNG MEYER

Now what?

JOSEF

From the bottom of my heart. Thank you.

YOUNG MEYER

For what, you imbecile?

JOSEF

You just said---

YOUNG MEYER

What? What did I say?

JOSEF

You said "us." And thus, the door opens.

JOSEF mimes opening a door.

See?

He gives YOUNG MEYER a hearty handshake which is accepted reluctantly.

YOUNG MEYER

Why does this matter so much?

JOSEF

We've made contact. We are together.

YOUNG MEYER

All right, all right. Don't push it.

JOSEF

I shall be mindful of your admonition, but it is the beginning, see? A real beginning. Now, just so we understand one another, why did you say "two months"? Two months to what?

YOUNG MEYER

Nothing. It's...nothing.

JOSEF

No. Something, I think. Explain please.

YOUNG MEYER

Two months was...I was taking a guess at how long...

JOSEF

Ahh. Until we know each other's life story?

YOUNG MEYER

Not that exactly. I...

JOSEF

Until we're getting each other's jokes? Until we're singing together? Dancing?

YOUNG MEYER

Please, please don't---

JOSEF

Telling tales of our romantic conquests? Is that it? I knew we would be simpatico, I knew---

YOUNG MEYER

Stop it. Until you're gone. That's what I meant.

JOSEF

Gone?

YOUNG MEYER

Two months until... Josef Silberstrom is...no more.

JOSEF

I see.

YOUNG MEYER

It...it's better not to speak of such things.

JOSEF

No, no, my friend. It's good we speak of them. Already---are you aware---already there is the thread.

YOUNG MEYER

What thread?

JOSEF

The thread between us. Do you see it?

YOUNG MEYER

I see nothing. Nothing. Let me sleep.

JOSEF

But you can feel it. It's there. This is why you didn't want to say it. Ten minutes ago you would have said it. But ten minutes later, you don't. You struggle with it. And there it is. The miracle.

YOUNG MEYER

Miracle?

JOSEF

Between two people. A connection.

Lights down on the barracks.
Spotlight up on AARON.

AARON

The city of Dachau sits on the bank of the River Amper northwest of Munich. For many years it was just a small market town with cobbled streets, notable mainly for its castle. Only one wing of the castle survives today. In it is a huge banquet hall with one of the most beautifully carved ceilings in all of Bavaria.

But in the twentieth century the name Dachau came to mean something very different.

In March 1933, in the days just after Adolf Hitler was named chancellor of Germany, a Nazi concentration camp was established at Dachau. It was the first such camp, and it became a model for all the others.

Spotlight down on AARON. Lights up on MEYER'S space. MEYER sits at the table with a book. After a moment, CLARA enters.

CLARA

You going out for a walk, Meyer?

MEYER

Just a short one. I want to finish this section first.

CLARA

How far have you gotten?

MEYER

The heretics. Dante puts them in the sixth circle.

CLARA

I told you Aaron was coming, didn't I?

MEYER

You did. Do we know why?

CLARA

Does our grandson need a reason to visit? I guess he just wants to see us.

MEYER

Fine, then.

CLARA

Oh, and guess what Ruthie tells me? Mrs. Stein's granddaughter is going to Austria in the fall. She applied for a junior year abroad program and she got it. She's majoring in music theory, so she'll start in Salzburg. That's where she'll study. But then she'll go to Vienna, of course, see all the important places, the Vienna State Opera, the ballet, hear the Philharmonic.

MEYER

Austria, huh? What does her husband Allan think of that?

CLARA

I suppose he thinks it's a wonderful opportunity for a girl her age. It made me think of David. Remember when he went to Madrid?

MEYER

Of course, I remember.

CLARA

What?

MEYER

Madrid is not Vienna, Clara.

CLARA

But it's a fine thing for any young person, to travel, see the world. And when they come back, they understand more about how things work. Why things are as they are.

MEYER

Perhaps.

CLARA

I think if people can travel, meet one another and exchange ideas, all those terrible things of long ago will never happen again.

MEYER

Maybe. Maybe not.

CLARA

But if young people can see things in a different light, there's a chance things will change.

MEYER

Change. What the world is always waiting for.

CLARA

Well, there's always hope. Can't there be hope?

MEYER

Did you read about this thing near Kansas City?

CLARA

No, what?

MEYER

This man goes to a Jewish community center. There were having auditions for some kind of show. Dozens of kids, teenagers, young people auditioning. And this character starts shooting people. Then he leaves there and goes to an assisted living center a mile away. Shoots somebody there. Three people dead.

CLARA

Guns. Too many guns.

MEYER

Not just guns, Clara. People's minds. When they arrested him, as they're putting handcuffs on him, he yells "Heil Hitler."

CLARA

Unbelievable.

MEYER

Believe it. It happened.

CLARA

Was this a young person?

MEYER

Younger than us. Seventy-something.

CLARA

Well, you can be old and crazy, too.

MEYER

What makes you so sure he's crazy? He's a white supremacist, determined to get rid of---

CLARA

Oh, how can you say he's not crazy? Of course, he's crazy. Some old coot running around with a gun shooting kids? That's crazy.

MEYER

Not just any kids, Clara, Jewish kids. It never stops. That's all I'm saying.

CLARA

But it's not like it was, Meyer. Not like it was when we were---

MEYER

It's the same. Ninety-one years I've lived on this earth and it's still the same. Still the hate.

CLARA

Yes, there's hate but we can't hate back.

MEYER

Maybe you can't...

CLARA

What was it the singing rebbe used to say?

MEYER

Who?

CLARA

You know. The one who made up so many songs and gave concerts. Carlebach, him. When he performed in Austria and Germany, people would say, "How can you go there? Don't you hate them?" And he'd say "If I had two souls, I'd devote one to hating them. But since I only have one soul, I don't want to waste it hating."

I'm happy for him.

MEYER

Must you always be so bitter?

CLARA

I can be what I want. I'm ninety-one.

MEYER

Well, I'm your wife. And I know how old you are.

CLARA

CLARA exits. JOSEF enters & strolls around a moment. MEYER does not acknowledge him.

She makes a point, Clara does. How do you stop the hating? Where does it end? When do you stop being a victim, Meyer?

JOSEF

MEYER determinedly turns a page.

Oh, I know what you'd say. "You haven't thought it through, Josef. You're missing the point. You're missing all the points." But my answer is the same. Where does it end?

MEYER closes his book & exits.

Still so stubborn. But I remain, as ever, optimistic.

JOSEF

Lights crossfade to DESIREE's bower where she sits as JOSEF crosses to her.

You again.

DESIREE

Yes, it's me. But not again.

JOSEF

DESIREE

Why not?

JOSEF

Because “again” puts us in an old frame.

DESIREE

And we’re not in an old frame?

JOSEF

Not us. We are new. New as green grass.

DESIREE

And yet...

JOSEF

Yes?

DESIREE

Somehow I prefer to think of us as old. Not aged, but old. Old as fine glass.

JOSEF

If you like.

DESIREE

So, tell me. Why do you go to him?

JOSEF

I can’t...I just can’t give up on him.

DESIREE

You mean you won’t give up.

JOSEF

It’s the same thing.

DESIREE

Not exactly. You lack a certain precision in language.

JOSEF

You sound like him.

DESIREE

Do I indeed?

JOSEF

Haven't you ever felt that way about someone?

DESIREE

Which way?

JOSEF

That you didn't want to give up on them.

DESIREE

Yes. But I found it to be an unworthy pursuit.

JOSEF

He wasn't worth it?

DESIREE

No. Although I don't exactly remember why.

JOSEF

That's because I'm here. I have made you forget.

DESIREE

Possibly.

JOSEF

So what shall we play at today?

DESIREE

Why do we have to play?

JOSEF

Let's just say it makes...the chase more exciting.

DESIREE

Always the chase with you. What if we just agreed to agree? I'm perfectly amenable to...

JOSEF

Anything?

DESIREE

Well, almost anything.

JOSEF

There's always a stipulation with you.

DESIREE

You need to remember, this is not your personal paradise. I have my own wishes and desires.

JOSEF

They are so like mine, Desiree.

DESIREE

Alike, yes, but not identical. Would you have a rag doll? A mannequin to smile a silly little mannequin smile at you?

JOSEF

Point taken. Now where did we leave off?

DESIREE

Geography is your province.

And yours?
JOSEF

Romance, naturally.
DESIREE

I think...we were somewhere around... here.
JOSEF

He takes her in his arms as the lights
crossfade to MEYER's space.
CLARA & AARON enter.

First things first. How is Sharon?
CLARA

She's good. Feeling strong. Not tired at all. She's getting a little anxious though.
AARON

Well, there's a lot to get anxious about.
CLARA

The waiting, you know?
AARON

Yes, waiting is hard. But the good things in life are worth waiting for. Now, you take her
this cake. She likes my apple cake and it'll do her good.
CLARA

You didn't have to do that, Bubbe.
AARON

This is not about "have to." This is for the mother of my great-grandson.
CLARA

And you're sure it's going to be a boy?
AARON

CLARA

You question me on this?

AARON

Of course not. Whatever you say.

CLARA

Now, let me get a good look at you. Are you getting enough sleep? This is the time to rest before the baby comes.

AARON

I know, Bubbe, I know.

CLARA

So, tell me what you want to eat?

AARON

Nothing, thanks. Sharon 'll have dinner when I get home.

CLARA

A piece of cake, then. Not Sharon's apple cake, that's for her. But I have this....

AARON

I'm not hungry. Honest.

CLARA

Well, you've got to have something. You can't just sit at my table and what? Examine the grain of the wood?

AARON

But I really don't want---

CLARA

One little piece of cake. You'll finish it in the blink of an eye.

AARON

I just joined a gym. I'm trying to get fit before the baby arrives.

CLARA

You're a smart boy, Aaron, but you've got it backwards. The time to lose weight is after the baby is born, not before. You'll be up half the night walking the little man. This is the time to bulk up, not slim down.

AARON

All right, all right, I'll have some cake.

CLARA

Very wise, my grandson.

She cuts him a piece of cake.

AARON

So where is he?

CLARA

Out. For his constitutional.

AARON

I thought he walked in the morning?

CLARA

He does. But sometimes he walks later on, too. He charts himself different routes all through Brooklyn. Most days he does three miles altogether. And his mind? Sharp as ever. I can't keep up with him. Nobody can. He's memorizing Dante's Inferno right now. Go figure.

AARON

Did you tell him what I wanted to talk about?

CLARA shakes her head "no."

CLARA

I don't know if you'll get anywhere. He never talks about it, never. But who knows? Maybe a grandson can get through better than a wife.

AARON

Please understand, Bubbe, I don't want to hassle him. I mean, he's not young. I don't want anything to happen to him.

CLARA

Aaron, something is going to happen to him. Something's going to happen to all of us. Nobody lives forever.

AARON

But what if it upsets him?

CLARA

Of course, it'll upset him. But if you can get him to open up, maybe he'll feel better. Plus, he could do some good. We had a friend, Nathan. He used to go to schools and talk to the students about it. When he got too ill to go, he tried to get Meyer to take his place but, no use. Wouldn't all that be worth a little upset?

AARON

And he's so smart. He's...there's nobody like him.

CLARA

Yes, he's one of a dying breed.

AARON laughs.

What?

AARON

I was going to say that but I didn't want to use that word.

CLARA

Aaron. You're a writer. Dying is a word, that's all. Just a word. And it's all part of the cycle. Your baby, he's in the cycle. He's on the way in. Us? We're on the way out. Nothing to be afraid of. Come on, eat the cake.

AARON

I'm eating, I'm eating.

CLARA

I just wish Meyer could find some peace about it. That's what I want for him, more than anything. It's like he's running away from something. You know, a wife understands what her husband says. But she has to try to understand what he doesn't say. Those three years over there, whatever happened, however horrible it was, sometimes I think it hurts him more that he doesn't talk about it. All this time and I've heard nothing but dribs and drabs.

AARON

And never a name? Never a---

CLARA

One name, yes. Sometimes in his sleep, he says Josef. Somebody named Josef.

AARON

And you never ask him?

CLARA

He won't let me in. The door's always closed. And I have to honor that. He's been a good husband.

AARON

And you've been a good wife.

CLARA

So, a good wife knows how far she can go.

Pause. MEYER enters.

Look who's here.

MEYER

Hey, the papa-to-be. How goes it?

AARON

It goes, Zayde. How do you feel?

MEYER

Everybody asks me the same question. "How do you feel?" From my grandson, I expected better.

CLARA

Talk nice to him. He's come here to see us.

AARON

It's okay, Bubbe.

MEYER

What did I say that was so wrong?

CLARA

I give up. I'm going next door to see Ruthie. Finish that, you hear me? And don't forget to take the cake for Sharon.

AARON

I will, I promise.

CLARA exits.

MEYER

Always with the cake. She refuses to believe anybody can get through the day without a piece of cake. Sharon all right?

AARON

She's fine. It's just a lot of waiting. Bubbe is sure it's going to be a boy, by the way.

MEYER

Well, she's usually right about such things.

AARON

I hear you're memorizing the Inferno. How far have you gotten?

MEYER

I'm almost at the seventh circle. That's the Minotaur.

AARON

Must be quite a challenge.

MEYER

Aw, memorizing is no big deal. Writing it...what an imagination the man had. And how's your writing? I keep reading how the newspapers have big money problems.

AARON

We're doing okay. It's just busy. We're trying to put out the same paper, they don't want to cut corners, but we've got a smaller staff.

MEYER

So. You've got a baby on the way, a busy job and you come here to ask me how I feel. What's on your mind, Aaron?

Pause.

AARON

I'm working on a series, Zayde. It's a pretty big story.

MEYER

Good, that's very good. They appreciate your talent. What's the story about?

AARON

It's...the Holocaust. Survivors of the Holocaust.

MEYER

I see.

AARON

They now say there were nearly a thousand concentration camps over there from France all the way to Russia. Not including the hundreds of prisoner of war camps, the slave labor camps, the brothels, the ghettos.

MEYER

It's all been written about, Aaron. Many times.

AARON

I know that. But the thing is, every month, every year, there are fewer people alive who survived it. My generation, we'll be the last who can say we personally knew somebody who made it through. You see how important that is? The significance of it?

Pause.

I've decided to focus on...Dachau. The people who lived through...Dachau.

MEYER

May I ask why?

AARON

Well, it was the first one, of course.

MEYER

That your only reason?

AARON

All right. I thought maybe...you could...

Pause.

MEYER

And this is why you come here.

AARON

Zayde, look I---

MEYER

I don't talk about this, Aaron. You know I don't talk about it.

AARON

Yes, my father always told me...

MEYER

But apparently you didn't listen.

AARON

Well, just because you've never spoken about it before, doesn't mean---

MEYER holds up his hand...stop.

Have you ever thought that maybe you need to do this? Before it's too late.

MEYER

I don't need to do anything but die. Which sometimes I wish I had done. Then I wouldn't have to sit here, listening to this from my grandson.

AARON

I'm sorry. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but---

MEYER

Why do people say they're sorry and then go right ahead and do what they say they're sorry for?

AARON

I just don't think you understand what---

MEYER

I understand exactly. You're the one who doesn't understand. Go find somebody else.

AARON

I did. I found a man last week. We spoke on the phone, but he had emphysema. We were supposed to talk again, I was going to drive out to see him, but now he's in the hospital, and he's not doing too well. There was a woman in a nursing home. I was going to...

AARON (cont'd.)
meet her the week before but she had a heart attack and...

MEYER
People get old, Aaron. And then they die.

AARON
That's just it. You're healthy, you're strong.

MEYER
So for this I'm to be bothered and pestered and...look, this is a free country, isn't it?

AARON
Yes, of course but---

MEYER
And in a free country, a man has the right to speak or not to speak. You find people who want to talk about it, mazel tov. Me, I want to be left alone.

Pause.

AARON
You're so smart, Zayde.

MEYER
But you think you're smarter.

AARON
I didn't say that.

MEYER
No, but you're about to tell me why you're right and I'm wrong.

AARON
I'm just asking you to tell me what I don't know. This is an important part of history, the history of Jewish people all over the world. Most important, it's your history.

MEYER

You want a history lesson? History is words on a page. History is orderly and precise and ...you think I can take what happened over there and make it come out like that? It's not possible.

AARON

You don't have to make it like a history book. Just talk to me, that's all. I'll come, I'll sit here, I'll listen and I'll take down every word.

AARON takes out a digital recorder.

Look, if you don't want to do it face-to-face, you could use this. It's very easy to operate. You just press this button and speak into here, see?

AARON holds it out to MEYER who turns away. AARON lays it on the table.

Please, Zayde. While you still have the chance.

MEYER

Before I die, you mean? A minute ago you said I was so healthy. Now all of a sudden, I'm at death's door.

AARON

I only meant...things can happen. Besides, I don't understand why---

MEYER

Oh, right, you "don't understand." Again.

AARON

Look, I want to learn. And I'm your grandson.

MEYER

That makes it even worse. A grandson should pay attention to his grandfather. You should have respect for my feelings.

AARON

I do respect your feelings.

MEYER

Doesn't sound like it to me.

AARON

What about your respect for me? Am I a stranger? Some kid you can tell to get lost? I'm asking you to do something only you can do. Don't you see? This would be your legacy. For future generations.

MEYER

What the hell do future generations matter to me?

AARON

My son is the future. You're saying he doesn't matter? What do I tell him when he's old enough to ask questions about his great grandfather?

MEYER

Tell him...I don't give a damn what you tell him.

AARON

What kind of an answer is that?

MEYER

It's the only one you're going to get from me on this.

AARON

But this is your responsibility.

MEYER

Why?

AARON

Because you survived. You lived through it.

MEYER

To hell with that!

But what about all the others? AARON

What others? MEYER

The ones who didn't make it. AARON

Enough with this, Aaron--- MEYER

Who speaks for them, Zayde? AARON

Don't ask me--- MEYER

Who speaks for Josef? AARON

Pause.

How do you...what do you know about...? MEYER

Who was he, Zayde? Was he your friend? Did he die over there? What's Josef's story? AARON

How dare you! How dare you even say his name! A man of such talent, such strength, and you... MEYER

I meant no disrespect. I just want to know--- AARON

MEYER

You don't deserve to know. Who are you to come here and talk to me about Josef? You, living in a world where everything's easy. Never starving, always a place to sleep, picking and choosing what you do for a living. What do you know of life? What do you know of anything?

AARON

Is it my fault I wasn't alive back then? Are you blaming me for this?

MEYER

Enough of you and your foolish questions.

AARON

I just want to write about what happened over there. All I'm asking for is your help.

MEYER

Well, you're not going to get it. You're not going to get anything from me. I don't care if you are the son of my son. You get out. Get out of my house right now.

Pause.

AARON

All right. All right.

AARON stands.

Tell Bubbe I said goodbye.

AARON exits. JOSEF enters. Again, MEYER does not acknowledge him.

JOSEF

Well, that was horrendous. The Meyer I knew, he wouldn't tell a grandson to get lost. But so be it. You're not very good company these days, that's all I've got to say. Good thing for me I've got other plans.

Lights down on MEYER's space.
Lights up on DESIREE in her space as he crosses to it.

DESIREE

Ah, comes the hunter home from the hills.

JOSEF

How are you, my lovely?

DESIREE

Better, methinks, than you, by the look of it.

JOSEF

I'll be fine soon enough. Shall we dance?

DESIREE

Later, I think. Somehow I feel your whole self is not in that invitation.

JOSEF

What about a round of cards then?

DESIREE

If you wish. What shall it be? Whist? Bezique? Hearts?

JOSEF

I was thinking more of strip poker.

DESIREE

Josef! Can't you be genteel at least some of the time?

JOSEF

Some of the time? Absolutely, my lovely.

DESIREE

May I deal?

JOSEF

Why not? You're holding all the cards.

She shuffles the cards.

DESIREE

Now I'm warning you. Don't count on winning all the time.

JOSEF

Desiree, would you deny a simple man like me the greatest pleasure of the afterlife?

DESIREE

Oh, please. If you're a simple man, I'm little Red Riding Hood.

JOSEF

You plan on dealing sometime tonight, red?

DESIREE

Patience, patience.

She deals.

JOSEF

Give me three.

DESIREE

There you are. And I'll take two. Well, look at that.

She lays down three of a kind.

JOSEF

Three little-bitty sixes. Very nice. But feast your eyes on three kings.

He lays down cards.

DESIREE

Some people might say you could be more of a gentleman.

JOSEF

Some people aren't playing strip poker with a beautiful woman.

DESIREE

I still have two more chances before we get serious.

She shuffles again.

JOSEF

Anytime tonight.

She deals.

DESIREE

So tell me about your latest visit. I take it, it did not go well?

JOSEF

He's impossible right now.

DESIREE

Some people always are. Where did you know him from?

JOSEF

We went to camp together.

DESIREE

What was he like there?

JOSEF

Serious. Sour sometimes, but such a thinker. When his mind opened up, no one could match him. He was truly a delight.

DESIREE

But today?

JOSEF

He's bitter. Almost eaten up by it.

DESIREE

Sometimes that's the case when the string is almost played out for them.

JOSEF

No, not him. There's a job he has to tackle. Speaking of tackling, what about this game?

DESIREE

What do you need?

JOSEF

My, oh, my, what a question.

DESIREE

Do you require some cards or not?

JOSEF

I'll take two.

DESIREE

There you are. Well?

JOSEF

I have a pair of threes.

DESIREE

Clearly, someone is not concentrating. I, on the other hand, have a full house.

JOSEF

How did I let that happen?

DESIREE

Fine fellow that you are, part of you is still in that other world.

She shuffles.

JOSEF

I've got one more chance. Can I persuade you to make it a good one?

DESIREE

Go ahead. Try.

JOSEF

We can still waltz.

DESIREE

Afterward, you mean.

JOSEF

Well, naturally.

DESIREE

Why do your dreams always take precedent?

JOSEF

It's not as if we never get to yours.

She deals.

DESIREE

You're going back to him, aren't you?

JOSEF

In a while, yes.

DESIREE

He's so important to you?

JOSEF

He's struggling, Desiree. He struggles mightily.

DESIREE

Against what?

JOSEF

Himself. His mind won't let him see what his heart feels.

DESIREE

And you think you can take the blinders off?

JOSEF

All I know is I can't stop trying. So what have you got?

DESIREE

A pair of eights.

JOSEF

While I am holding three fine young Jacks.

DESIREE

You know, when I agreed to play cards with you, I was not aware that the game would be eternal. Nor, that you would always have the upper hand.

JOSEF

I don't have the upper hand in everything.

DESIREE

Illustrate your point, please.

JOSEF

I am not the enchantress.

DESIREE

Flatterer. So, what will it be?

Isn't it time you lost that top?

JOSEF

Lights down on Desiree's space. Lights up on MEYER as CLARA enters.

Aaron left?

CLARA

Yes.

MEYER

Pause.

You knew what he wanted, didn't you?

All right. Yes, I knew. So what did you tell him?

CLARA

What do you think I told him?

MEYER

He opens his book. She sits & folds her arms. Finally, he looks up.

Meyer. Our grandson is asking you to help him and you---

CLARA

Tell me why I have to do this?

MEYER

Because.

CLARA

Because why? Answer the question.

MEYER

CLARA

Well, first, for the simple reason that you can. You're strong.

MEYER

Oh, yes, I'm Superman at the age of ninety-one.

CLARA

You don't have to keep announcing your age. The point is, do you remember Ari? Dead at eighty-seven and so sick those last three years? Samuel down the street just turned eighty-two and can't even get out of bed now. And you. You walk all over, you carry the bags in from the store, you're up and down the stairs like a kid. You have twice the energy of a man half your age. You know you do. You're one of the healthy ones, Meyer. Plus, more than all of that...you're strong up here.

She taps her forehead.

You remember things. You remember everything.

MEYER

What if I don't want to remember everything?

CLARA

Our grandson is trying to write something important. Something so that people will know what happened and you---

MEYER

I wanted to die over there, Clara. I wanted to kill myself many times. Do you want to know that?

CLARA

But you didn't die. You lived.

MEYER

You make it sound like an achievement.

CLARA

It is. When there was death everywhere you kept on. There were others who didn't, but you... isn't that enough?

MEYER

Is it? A man needs to know that he matters. In his own eyes, he has to see that he makes a difference. Otherwise...

CLARA

All I know is, you made it through. And the ones who didn't, no one to say kaddish for them, no one to---

MEYER

Why must you talk about them?

CLARA

I only meant...

Pause.

I'm sorry, Meyer. I don't have all the answers. I know that. I don't go deep into things the way you do. I never have. All I can say is, you found me and I found you and we made a life together. And then our children made a life. And now our grandchildren are having children. What could be more wonderful?

MEYER

It's always the children.

CLARA

Well, children are life going forward. This child of Aaron's, he will carry your name. And if you hadn't lived...

MEYER

Yes, I know.

CLARA

You survived. And now a baby is coming into the world. A brand new person. You won, don't you see?

Pause.

MEYER

It doesn't feel...it's never felt like...winning.

CLARA

What other name would you give it?

Pause.

Well, I better go fix dinner.

CLARA starts to exit.

We're having chicken, okay?

MEYER

Sure.

CLARA exits. Pause. Lights down on MEYER as he sits staring into space. Lights up on YOUNG MEYER & JOSEF in the barracks.

YOUNG MEYER

It's no use, I tell you, it's no damn use.

JOSEF

Come on, Meyer, try. Do it for my sake.

YOUNG MEYER rolls his eyes.

For her sake, then.

YOUNG MEYER

Her who?

JOSEF

The woman of your dreams.

YOUNG MEYER

There is no woman of my dreams.

JOSEF

Incredible! We'll tackle that tomorrow.

YOUNG MEYER

Josef---

JOSEF

Just do it, Meyer, do it. This is how we win.

Pause. YOUNG MEYER struggles.

YOUNG MEYER

I see...I see before me...

JOSEF gives him encouraging looks.

A chicken.

JOSEF

A chicken? That's the best you can do?

YOUNG MEYER

You told me to see something I like. I like chicken.

JOSEF

All right, all right. A chicken. And what does it look like, this chicken?

YOUNG MEYER

It...ahh...I don't know. It's just a chicken.

JOSEF

All right. So far, so good. But you must tell me about your chicken.

YOUNG MEYER

What do you want to know?

JOSEF

To make this work, you have to see the chicken in all its glory. Let's start with the size. How big is it?

YOUNG MEYER

Oh...like this.

YOUNG MEYER gestures an average-size chicken.

JOSEF

That's not very big.

YOUNG MEYER

Well, I guess it could be bigger. If that's important...

JOSEF

Of course, it's important. This is your dream, remember?

YOUNG MEYER

I told you, I'm no good at this. I was learning to be an engraver, that's all.

JOSEF

Even an engraver needs a fantasy.

YOUNG MEYER

Here?

JOSEF

Especially here. Do this right, Meyer, and it will serve you well tonight.

YOUNG MEYER

Well, then...

YOUNG MEYER gestures a bigger chicken.

JOSEF

Why not this?

JOSEF gestures with both arms
outstretched.

YOUNG MEYER

Why would I want that?

JOSEF

Too big?

YOUNG MEYER

Of course, it's too big. Who's ever seen a chicken that size? That would be a monster.

JOSEF

Aren't you hungry?

YOUNG MEYER

What kind of a question is that? I'm always hungry.

JOSEF

Then, what's wrong with imagining something big enough to feed you and everybody else?

YOUNG MEYER

I thought this was my chicken. Mine alone.

JOSEF

Very well, be that way. It's a chicken just for you and it's that big. Now. Color, please?

YOUNG MEYER

Color?

JOSEF

They come in colors. What color is it? Come on, you need to work at this.

YOUNG MEYER

Well, it's fresh and clean and the feathers are---

JOSEF

Feathers? What are you talking about?

YOUNG MEYER

Chickens have feathers.

JOSEF

Not when you're going to eat it.

YOUNG MEYER

You told me to imagine. Right now, I'm imagining the perfect chicken. Her feathers are ruffling in the wind and she arches her pretty neck as she struts around the yard.

JOSEF

You're in a barnyard? This is where you want to be?

YOUNG MEYER

Is that a problem? You said I should think of something I want, right? In a place where I want to see it, correct?

JOSEF

That's all well and good, but---

YOUNG MEYER

Then that's what I'm doing. My chicken is beautiful and her feathers are very clean.

JOSEF

But, what kind of dream is it, if you can't eat it?

YOUNG MEYER

I didn't say I wouldn't eat it. I just said I wouldn't eat it right now.

JOSEF

If I dreamed of a chicken, it would be fat. Its skin would be glistening with butter. And the smell! You could take the aroma and live on that until---

YOUNG MEYER

Well, my chicken is white, milky white. She is like a queen there in her barnyard. And she...struts around eating kernels of corn. I would like to stroke her maybe, and brush her little feathers as she---

JOSEF

Is this a pet or a meal?

YOUNG MEYER

Did I attack you when you were feeding crumbs to cockroaches?

JOSEF

All right. I'll admit she sounds pretty, this chicken of yours, but she's not very exciting.

YOUNG MEYER

Is this my dream or yours?

JOSEF

I'm just saying. To me, this chicken sounds a little skinny.

YOUNG MEYER

There is nothing wrong with my chicken! And I refuse to let you say there is!

JOSEF applauds.

JOSEF

Bravo, Meyer! Bravo!

YOUNG MEYER

Why, bravo?

JOSEF

You successfully, strongly defended your dream. That is marvelous! You are truly an amazing man, you know that?

YOUNG MEYER

Thank you. But...wait a minute. Did you go after me deliberately? So I would do that?

JOSEF

Of course.

YOUNG MEYER

But that's...that's not fair.

JOSEF

For a man to have a dream, he must be invested in it. Truly, deeply invested, so that nothing anyone does, can touch it. That's what we're about here. Then you have it, you own it and you get to keep it.

YOUNG MEYER

But Josef, I don't have it. How can it be good to think of something I want so badly and, and...

JOSEF

It's tonight's dream, Meyer. Tomorrow we'll have another.

YOUNG MEYER

It's a lot of work, this dream business.

JOSEF

They always are, Meyer. They always are. And now we must sing.

YOUNG MEYER

Why?

JOSEF

Why what?

YOUNG MEYER

Why should we sing, Josef?

JOSEF

A better question would be, why shouldn't we sing? The day has been too long not to have singing.

YOUNG MEYER

But---

JOSEF

We should sing because we have air.

YOUNG MEYER

In this lousy place, what kind of air?

JOSEF

Now, Meyer, correct me if I'm wrong here.

YOUNG MEYER

I will, Josef. You know I will.

JOSEF

So. If we are talking, we must be breathing, correct?

YOUNG MEYER

Well...

JOSEF

The answer, please?

YOUNG MEYER

All right, all right. We're talking, therefore, we're breathing. Yes I admit that, but---

JOSEF

Then, clearly, we have air enough to---

YOUNG MEYER

I will not be coaxed into the idea that we should sing. That I refuse to admit.

JOSEF

Ah, my friend, you are powerful tonight. Mighty as they come is Meyer at this moment.

YOUNG MEYER

I'm glad you recognize that.

JOSEF

What kind of a friend would I be not to recognize the strength, the fortitude of my very good friend? However...

YOUNG MEYER

There's always a however with you. What?

JOSEF

Only because your intellect demands the full breadth of my reasoning. If you were like one of these others, like Hyman for instance, or David. Do you think I would waste my breath laying out the rationale, describing the whys and the wherefores to them? Of course not. It would be like talking to a couple of asses. But you, Meyer, you are the challenge that forces me to dig deep down into the reservoirs of my being and bring forth---

YOUNG MEYER

Just tell me why we have to sing?

JOSEF

We have to sing, Meyer, because...there is absolutely no reason not to sing.

YOUNG MEYER

What?

JOSEF

You heard me.

YOUNG MEYER

There are lots of reasons not to sing.

JOSEF

Such as...

YOUNG MEYER

I'm tired. No, no, I'm beyond tired, I'm exhausted. And I'm hungry. I'm very, very hungry. So are you. Admit it.

JOSEF

Nevertheless, no man should ever be too tired to sing.

YOUNG MEYER

Well, you're looking at one right here.

JOSEF

I don't believe it.

YOUNG MEYER

How am I supposed to prove it to you?

JOSEF

Listen to me, Meyer, listen.

YOUNG MEYER

I'm tired of listening to you. Leave me alone.

JOSEF

Oh, my friend, that is the one thing I cannot do.

YOUNG MEYER

But what about the hunger? Address that, if you please.

JOSEF

Do you think opera singers eat before they perform? They do not. They sing better on an empty stomach. One little song and we'll call it a night. Something easy, something simple, yes? I'm thinking of the sextet from Lucia di Lammermoor. Donizetti. A very simple, pleasant melody. How about it?

YOUNG MEYER

No! One. I don't know it. Two, if I did know it, I wouldn't sing it. So there.

JOSEF

Of course, you know it. Everyone knows it. It's a lovely tune to sing with a lady or to a lady or after you've been with a lady...

YOUNG MEYER

Well, you go find a lady and sing. I'm going to sleep.

JOSEF

You're going to sleep while I'm singing the sextet from Lucia? Come on, Meyer, I can't do it without you.

YOUNG MEYER

Wait a minute. What is a sextet? Is it six---

JOSEF

Exactly. Six people singing. Edgardo, Enrico, Lucia and a few others.

YOUNG MEYER

Well, how can we two sing for six people?

JOSEF

We just do it, that's all. It's the effort that counts. Ready?

JOSEF begins singing, not necessarily the Italian lyrics but more likely...

JOSEF

(singing)

La, la la...lala, la la la...la la la...lalala, la la la...

(speaking)

And here's the most beautiful part.

(singing)

La la lalala...lalala la la la...la lala...

YOUNG MEYER regards him wearily
for a few moments but when Josef puts
his arm around him, he begins to sing.

JOSEF & YOUNG MEYER

La, la la... lala la la la...

Lights slowly down on barracks.

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO

Spotlight up on AARON.

AARON

There is only one entrance into the concentration camp at Dachau and the gates still hold the words...Arbeit macht frei...work makes you free. In the twelve years of its existence, two hundred thousand prisoners from all over Europe were sent there. At least thirty thousand, possibly as many as forty-three thousand died there.

There were thirty-four barracks at the camp, seventeen on each side of the camp road. Barracks one, three and five became notorious as the site for so-called medical experimentation on inmates by Nazi doctors.

Between the barracks and the big maintenance building which held the workshops and the kitchen was the roll-call area. Mornings and evenings prisoners lined up to be counted. If someone was missing or had tried to escape, prisoners were made to stand motionless, often for many hours.

Spotlight down on AARON.
Lights up on roll-call area. JOSEF and
YOUNG MEYER stand at attention.
They speak through clenched teeth.

JOSEF

Thirty-six hundred.

YOUNG MEYER

What?

JOSEF

We could say three thousand six hundred. But I think...correct me if I'm wrong here, but I believe that three thousand six hundred...sounds longer than thirty-six hundred. What's your opinion?

YOUNG MEYER

My opinion? What in god's name does it matter what my opinion is on this?

JOSEF

Meyer, you know your opinion always matters very much to me.

YOUNG MEYER

We are standing out here in---

JOSEF

Where are we standing?

YOUNG MEYER

(louder)

You know where.

JOSEF

Easy, Meyer. Easy.

YOUNG MEYER

Don't ask ridiculous questions. You know where we are. I know where we are.

JOSEF

Just for the record then. It's good to be precise. It's necessary to---

YOUNG MEYER

Why? Why in hell is it necessary to do anything but---

JOSEF

Because we can. Because it's under our control. Because it's important...to us.

YOUNG MEYER

To us? Josef, you're really trying my patience here.

JOSEF

More than before?

YOUNG MEYER

More than ever.

JOSEF

Well, that's something. Still, back to the matter at hand...

YOUNG MEYER

I don't see why it matters.

JOSEF

And furthermore...go ahead.

YOUNG MEYER

And furthermore, if we must...if we must stand here...perfectly still...in the cold...

JOSEF

Yes, go on, go on.

YOUNG MEYER

In the dark. And you're going to tell me it's not yet completely dark, aren't you, Josef? Because that's the kind of nonsensical hair-splitting you enjoy, isn't it?

JOSEF

You are brilliant, Meyer, you really are.

YOUNG MEYER

All right then. Not yet dark.

JOSEF

You are right. Absolutely, positively right. But what do we call it? Can we perhaps give it a better name?

Evening?
YOUNG MEYER

Dusk?
JOSEF

Twilight?
YOUNG MEYER

Gloaming.
JOSEF

What's gloaming?
YOUNG MEYER

The time before night. It's Scottish, I believe.
JOSEF

We're not Scottish, Josef.
YOUNG MEYER

That's true. You prefer...
JOSEF

Not yet dark. That says it.
YOUNG MEYER

All right then.
JOSEF

As I was saying...we are standing here in the cold.
YOUNG MEYER

In the not yet dark.
JOSEF

YOUNG MEYER

Yes, yes. And how long has it been---

JOSEF

Easy, easy with that one.

YOUNG MEYER

Then, shall we talk about why?

JOSEF

Powerful word, why. But in this case...

YOUNG MEYER

Agreed. The "why" is...

JOSEF

Irrational. Wouldn't you say so?

YOUNG MEYER

Yes. Not to them, of course. They said we must stand here because two prisoners from barrack eight tried to escape.

JOSEF

Not that they made it.

YOUNG MEYER

No. They didn't.

JOSEF

Caught as they came out on the other side of the fence.

YOUNG MEYER

And then hung.

JOSEF

Yes.

Pause.

YOUNG MEYER

The one was young.

JOSEF

Yes. He was.

Pause.

YOUNG MEYER

But if they've been caught. And if they've been killed. Why then keep us standing here? What purpose does it serve?

JOSEF

Careful. We mustn't ask questions we don't want to know the answer to. We're agreed on that, correct?

YOUNG MEYER

Yes. But there's a part of me that still wants to know why.

JOSEF

Will you feel better if you know?

YOUNG MEYER

I will. I truly believe I will.

JOSEF

Very well, then.

YOUNG MEYER

Tell me, Josef. Tell me why.

JOSEF

All right, Meyer. Here it is. The answer is...clearly, they are absurdists.

YOUNG MEYER

Absurdists?

JOSEF

Yes.

YOUNG MEYER

What's an absurdist?

JOSEF

Someone who lives in an absurd universe. The problem is, of course...they don't know that they're absurdists.

YOUNG MEYER

That's not our only problem.

JOSEF

Careful. In a situation like this, it's best to speak in non self-referential language.

YOUNG MEYER

I am freezing. Do you understand? Freezing!

JOSEF

Steady, Meyer, steady.

YOUNG MEYER

How can I talk without reference to myself when I am freezing? It's not possible.

JOSEF

But that's what we are doing. That's what we have been doing. Right?

YOUNG MEYER

Your madness approaches new heights, Josef. Or is it possibly new depths?

JOSEF

And your analysis is, as always, precise.

YOUNG MEYER

So. How many hours have we been standing---

JOSEF

Meyer, we must be sure we're ready to hear the answer before we ask the question.

YOUNG MEYER

How...long?

Pause.

JOSEF

Three. It's a guess of course. I'd prefer to think of it as an educated guess. But would you agree that probably, we have done three. We have done that much.

Pause.

YOUNG MEYER

Josef, what if...what if they make it...four? I don't...I don't think I can---

JOSEF

Be still, Meyer. Just be still another...second. Can you do that?

YOUNG MEYER

A second?

JOSEF

Just one second.

YOUNG MEYER

That's all?

JOSEF

Yes. You can, see? We can both stand still here another second. Two seconds, maybe? Three seconds...

YOUNG MEYER

But a second is so short, so---

JOSEF

Exactly! That's precisely it. We do one second.

Pause.

There it goes.

YOUNG MEYER

I think that was more like two seconds. Or three or even four. Your counting is faulty.

JOSEF

That's why I need your help to do it.

YOUNG MEYER

But...how high must we...

JOSEF

It's what I said before. Thirty-six hundred.

YOUNG MEYER

Thirty-six...hundred?

JOSEF

There are thirty-six hundred seconds in an hour.

Pause.

YOUNG MEYER

Oh, I don't know if I can...

JOSEF

Think of it as one second at a time. Then we can do it.

YOUNG MEYER

Are you sure?

JOSEF

Absolutely.

Pause.

YOUNG MEYER

When do we begin?

JOSEF

Now. I'll start. One.

YOUNG MEYER

But what if...?

JOSEF

Yes?

YOUNG MEYER

What if we begin at the end?

JOSEF

You mean...

YOUNG MEYER

Thirty-six hundred. Minus one.

JOSEF

That's brilliant, Meyer! Ever brilliant. Thirty-five hundred-ninety-nine. Superb!

YOUNG MEYER

Thirty-five hundred ninety-eight.

JOSEF

Thirty-five hundred ninety-seven.

Lights slowly down.

YOUNG MEYER

Thirty-five-hundred-ninety-six...

JOSEF

Thirty-five hundred-ninety-five...

Lights down on roll-call area.
Lights up on MEYER in MEYER's
space. CLARA enters.

CLARA

You're up early. Want some breakfast?

MEYER

I guess.

CLARA

What's wrong?

MEYER

A stupid thing. There's a song I can't get out of my mind.

CLARA

What song?

MEYER

You know, that old...

(singing)

Du, du, liegst mir I'm herzen.

CLARA
(singing)

Du du liegst mir in sinn.

They share a laugh.

What made you think of that?

MEYER

I don't know. Like I said, it's stupid.

CLARA

Meyer. A love song is never stupid. So long as you're thinking of the right person when you sing it.

Pause.

I'll get your breakfast.

She starts to exit, then stops.

MEYER

What is it?

CLARA

He called again.

MEYER

Who?

CLARA

That man.

MEYER

The same one?

CLARA nods.

What did you tell him?

CLARA

I said you wouldn't speak to him.

MEYER

Then there's an end to it.

CLARA

What if he calls back?

MEYER

So you'll tell him again. He says he wants to speak to me, you say I don't wish to be disturbed. And that's that.

CLARA

But if he keeps on calling---

MEYER

If this is the way he wants to spend his time, what matter is it to me? I won't talk to him.

CLARA

Would it be so horrible to take a minute and---

MEYER

I have no wish to discuss this.

CLARA

But he says there's a fund. To give money to survivors.

MEYER

Clara, I'm not interested.

CLARA

But it's for people like you. Those who were never compensated. All you have to do is---

MEYER

Ask for it, you mean. Beg.

CLARA

Well, you have to fill out an application. But don't you see? They owe it to you. You're part of a special group, Meyer. Fifty thousand people around the world, twenty thousand here in the US, and in this state, three-hundred-and-forty-eight. Including you.

MEYER

Three-hundred-forty-seven then. I will not be included. Besides, no one knows if any of those numbers are real.

CLARA

You wouldn't have to keep the money. You could give it away. It's just the idea of it. It's reparation for---

MEYER

Enough with the fancy words. It's guilt money. They think they can throw a couple thousand euros at an old man like me and that'll make up for it. That'll make it all go away. Well, not this old man. I won't lift a finger to help them sleep better at night.

CLARA

But he says---

MEYER

I don't care what he says. I want nothing to do with it. Leave me alone. I'm busy with my work.

CLARA

Oh, of course. Memorizing "The Inferno." How could I forget? Very important work.

MEYER

Why can't I do what I want? I'm ninety-one years old.

CLARA

There you go again, with your age, all the time.

MEYER

Clara---

CLARA

I don't know why you have to be so stubborn. It's like a brick up there.

MEYER

And the brick says enough. I've told you before. It's over. It's done. Now leave me be.

MEYER opens his book.

CLARA

Never in all my life did I meet such a hardhead.

CLARA exits. MEYER sits, staring into space. JOSEF enters. As before, MEYER takes no notice.

JOSEF

Do you have to be so harsh with her? She's only trying to look out for your best interests. Besides, this thing that's being asked of you, is it so much? You have been offended, yes, but when the offender asks for forgiveness, "one should forgive with a sincere mind and a willing spirit." Otherwise...what about the harm you may have done? I am sad to leave you older, Meyer, but no wiser.

Lights crossfade to DESIREE as JOSEF crosses to her. She is doing needlework.

JOSEF

Ah, the lovely lady at her needle. Can I persuade you to put that aside?

DESIREE

But this is so relaxing. I could do it by the hour.

JOSEF

Any hour when I'm not here.

DESIREE

Have patience, man.

JOSEF

Didn't bring it with me.

DESIREE

Is that so?

JOSEF

I chucked it with my mortal coil. Now, put this stuff away please.

DESIREE

It's not stuff. It's the physical expression of my feminine creativity.

JOSEF

You have other better ways of expressing that.

DESIREE

Are you trying to give me grief?

JOSEF

It's only grief if you think it's grief.

DESIREE

You're not sitting where I'm sitting.

JOSEF

Oh, how I would love to be that chair.

DESIREE

Josef, please! I think I'm paying the price for your difficulties with you know who.

JOSEF

I don't bring that to your door.

DESIREE

You most certainly do.

JOSEF

You think I should stop going back to him?

DESIREE

It's a fruitless path, Josef.

JOSEF

But people can change.

DESIREE

We don't.

JOSEF

No, we are as we were. With them, it's not over until...it's over.

DESIREE

But what exactly are you fighting for? What is it you hope to win?

JOSEF

I've told you. I'm battling for his better self.

DESIREE

She battles him. And he hears her. And it makes no difference to him. If anything, he becomes more entrenched in his position. With you, unseen...what's the point?

JOSEF

It's true enough that he hears her and he doesn't listen. He doesn't hear me, but I still think there's a part of him that listens.

DESIREE

Like before, long ago?

JOSEF

Like before.

DESIREE

So why do you blame yourself?

JOSEF

Who says I blame---

But you do. DESIREE

Well...some of it lies at my feet. JOSEF

Because... DESIREE

I led him down a primrose path. And then...abandoned him. JOSEF

You left, Josef, that's all. It was your time. Wasn't he strong enough to go it on his own? DESIREE

He was and he did. But it's as if he can't recognize that. Besides, he feels guilty. JOSEF

For...? DESIREE

My final hours. JOSEF

Maybe he can't help it. The ones we leave behind mark all of that so much. You know, the last time he did this or the final time she did that. As if they could have predicted our departure and made it a golden moment. DESIREE

Pause.

Desiree...you can make this moment golden. JOSEF

Pause.

All right. DESIREE

She puts her needlework aside and embraces him.

DESIREE

Time to un-forrow your brow.

JOSEF

As only you can, my precious. As only you can.

Lights down on DESIREE's bower.
Spotlight up on AARON.

AARON

The camp road ran down the middle of the camp between the rows of barracks. It was lined with poplar trees, trees prisoners had planted. Beyond the barracks on either side there were strips of grass all around. Beyond the grass, there was a ditch and then finally the fence, with seven guard towers spaced along it. The fence was made of barbed wire and it was electrified.

In the limited free time they had, prisoners sat outside along the camp road or moved about. But even then, of course, they were still under the watchful eyes of the guards.

Spotlight down on AARON.
Lights up on YOUNG MEYER,
sitting on the ground. JOSEF enters
and sits.

JOSEF

So, what is Meyer thinking about on this fine spring day?

YOUNG MEYER

Nothing. Nothing much.

JOSEF

No contemplations at all? Good or ill?

YOUNG MEYER

Certainly nothing good.

JOSEF

Ill, then?

YOUNG MEYER

Just that...I think that this is the worst part of being here.

JOSEF

The free time, you mean?

YOUNG MEYER

(bitterly)

“Free time.” Such a joke.

JOSEF

Because...?

YOUNG MEYER

Because it cannot be. A man who is not free cannot have “free time.”

JOSEF

Well, it’s a respite then. A brief respite, I’ll admit but---

YOUNG MEYER

Look around, Josef. What do you see?

JOSEF

I see grass and trees and sky and---

YOUNG MEYER

No, you’re blind.

JOSEF

Well, what do you see?

YOUNG MEYER

I see what is here. I see what is real. I see the camp road and the barracks and---

JOSEF

Don't forget the poplars. They're part of it.

YOUNG MEYER

All right, yes, poplar trees. So there's the road and the barracks and the trees...

JOSEF

And grass, right? Green growing grass, because it's spring, because it's April.

YOUNG MEYER

How can grass even grow in such a place?

JOSEF

But it does, Meyer. See how, even here, it does.

YOUNG MEYER

And beyond the grass, do you see the ditch?

JOSEF

Of course, I see it.

YOUNG MEYER

And then the fence, the barbed wire fence. Have I described it?

JOSEF

Yes. See how important we are?

YOUNG MEYER

Important?

JOSEF

We are so important, they go to all this trouble just to keep you and me sitting here on the ground under the poplar trees. It's crazy, don't you think?

YOUNG MEYER

Crazy?

JOSEF

Yes. They make this whole big place just to keep us in. Of all the uses you might have for bricks and stone and wire, this is it? The cathedral to their high ideals? And the craziest thing is, it doesn't work. The sky is still overhead. The grass is still beneath us. And look at the poplar trees. The way the leaves tremble in the breeze. They're beautiful, yes?

YOUNG MEYER shakes his head.

YOUNG MEYER

I still say this is the worst part.

JOSEF

Why the worst, my friend?

YOUNG MEYER

Because in your so called "free time" we have time to think.

JOSEF

And Meyer doesn't want to think? Come now---

YOUNG MEYER

No, no, you will not change my mind on this. We both know that when a man thinks, the person inside comes out.

JOSEF

I agree. And sometimes it's a very good person.

YOUNG MEYER

But look at them, Josef. Look at these men we spend our days with.

JOSEF

Well, I'll admit some of them are perhaps a little...

YOUNG MEYER

Defeated, without hope. That's what's missing in these faces.

JOSEF

Meyer, my friend, did you not know men before who were the same? Before you came here, weren't there some who took every shadow, each stumble in their lives and made it a tragedy?

YOUNG MEYER

Even so...

JOSEF

Some men are never free. No matter that there's no barbed wire like that along the fence. Some men carry around their own barbed wire, their own locks and chains.

YOUNG MEYER

Look at us then. Lucky we don't have mirrors. See what we have become. See what we have lost, how little we have left. Josef, I---

JOSEF

Easy, my friend. Be easy with yourself. If you are right, and I don't say you are completely right, but if there is some truth in what you say, then join me in looking up at the silvery poplar trees. A bit of a breeze comes and the leaves shimmer, their white undersides like waves almost, waves upon the sea. They grow fast these trees but they don't last long.

YOUNG MEYER

They last long enough. When you and I are gone, Josef, this tree will still be here.

VIKTOR enters, smiling, looks around at the other unseen prisoners & plants himself center stage.

JOSEF

Hey, Viktor.

VIKTOR acknowledges JOSEF.

YOUNG MEYER

Is that the musician?

JOSEF

Yes.

VIKTOR

(addressing everyone)

So what do we do today, my fine fellows?

JOSEF

They say he can play any musical instrument. Any instrument at all. He sings too. Not that I've ever heard him.

VIKTOR

On such a fine day we need some music. That will brighten our mood, don't you think?

JOSEF

Good idea, Viktor.

VIKTOR

So we will have a song, yes?

JOSEF

Yes. That's what we need. You lead us.

VIKTOR

All right, I'll start but you all have to join in.

(singing in a booming voice)

Du, du, liegst mir I'm herzen, du, du, liegst mir in sinn...du, du, machst mir viel schmerzen ...weisst nicht wie gut ich dir bin... Ja, ja, ja, ja, Weisst nicht wie gut ich dir bin...Ja, ja, ja, ja...

VIKTOR continues singing.

YOUNG MEYER

He has a strong voice, doesn't he?

JOSEF

It's a wonderful voice.

YOUNG MEYER

I mean, I know he's lost weight since he's been here but his voice is powerful.

JOSEF

Must be the music. It gives him strength.

VIKTOR

Come on now, you must sing with me. You all know this old folk song.

(singing & conducting)

Du, du, liegst mir I'm herzen, du, du, liegst mir in sinn...du, du, machst mir viel schmerzen ...weisst night wie gut ich dir bin....

JOSEF

Come on, Meyer. We must sing with him.

(singing)

Du, du, machst mir viel schmerzen ...weisst night wie gut ich dir bin....

(talking)

Come on.

YOUNG MEYER joins in.

VIKTOR, JOSEF & YOUNG MEYER

(singing)

Ja, ja, ja, ja, Weisst nicht wie gut ich dir bin...Ja, ja, ja, ja... weisst night wie gut ich dir bin....

VIKTOR

Come on, everybody. This is for us. No one can stop us from singing. We'll sing the next part.

VIKTOR, JOSEF & YOUNG MEYER

(singing)

So, So, wie ich dich liebe, So, So, liebe auch mich. Die, Die, zaertlichen triebe, Fuehl'ich allein nur fuer dich. Ja, ja, ja, ja...

JOSEF & YOUNG MEYER sing energetically. VIKTOR begins to dance. JOSEF, laughing, jumps up. He does an elaborate bow & he & VIKTOR begin to waltz.

YOUNG MEYER watches, smiling.

VIKTOR, JOSEF & YOUNG MEYER

(singing as JOSEF & VIKTOR waltz)

Doch, doch, darf ich dir trauen....dir, dir, mit leightem sinn....du, du, kannst auch mich bauen....Weisst ja wie gut ich dir bin...Ja, ja, ja, ja...

The singing and dancing continues.

Then suddenly, JOSEF, no longer smiling, but looking straight at VIKTOR, stops dancing. He grabs VIKTOR by the arms. VIKTOR stares back, still grinning. For a moment they're locked in place. Then VIKTOR breaks away.

JOSEF

No, Viktor, don't, don't---

VIKTOR turns & exits, running, his arms spread out, head thrown back.

(yelling)

No, Viktor, no.

JOSEF exits, running after him.

YOUNG MEYER

(yelling)

Josef! Let him go. Don't! They'll shoot, they'll---

SOUND of gunshots.
BLACKOUT. Pause.

Lights up on barracks.
YOUNG MEYER enters, supporting JOSEF, whose pants leg is bloody.

YOUNG MEYER

We've got to get you in here. How can we hide all this blood?

YOUNG MEYER looks for something to wrap JOSEF's leg.

What have we got to deal with this?

He grabs a rag & ties JOSEF's leg.

YOUNG MEYER

And why in hell did you do it?

JOSEF

I had to try, Meyer. I saw what he was going to do. I saw it in his eyes.

YOUNG MEYER

Damn it, Josef, have you learned nothing all this time?

JOSEF

I thought I could stop him. I...had to try.

YOUNG MEYER

Determined as he was and you were going to stop him? We've seen it before. Once a man decides to run to the fence, it's over. You know that. And you getting shot. For what? Always the same stupid irrationality.

JOSEF

It's all right, Meyer.

YOUNG MEYER

All right? Nothing's all right.

JOSEF

No. Things are...as they should be.

YOUNG MEYER

What things, madman? How can you talk such nonsense? Don't you know what's going to happen? Don't you know what they're going to do to you?

JOSEF

Easy. Easy does it.

YOUNG MEYER

They'll come looking for you. They'll come looking and when they find you, it'll be... god, all this blood...you'll be in block five tomorrow and those monsters with their surgical knives...

JOSEF

I've told you before. What they do makes no difference. In the end, in the end, we will---

YOUNG MEYER

How can you say that? How can any man in his right mind say such a thing?

JOSEF

As always, Meyer, you get to the heart of the matter, the very soul of---

YOUNG MEYER

Stop it. I can't listen anymore. Not with you like this. It's hard to look at you when I think what they're going to do.

JOSEF

Then don't look, Meyer. They can't touch me. You'll see. You'll see what---

YOUNG MEYER

Madness. It's more of your madness. That's what this is.

JOSEF

Feel free to think so.

YOUNG MEYER

You're insane, you're crazy. I was the fool of the world for listening to you. It's bad enough being here without this.

JOSEF

I'm sorry, Meyer. I know I distress you. You, the one who likes to swim in the deep water.

YOUNG MEYER cradles him.

YOUNG MEYER

It's not that I like to, it's just how I'm made. I can't help it.

JOSEF

Always so fixed on the abyss. And you never forget anything.

YOUNG MEYER

I wish I could forget. I wish, I wish...

JOSEF

What would you forget if you could?

YOUNG MEYER

This. This day. This night.

JOSEF

Now, Meyer, we must...between us we must always have the truth. It's me you want to forget, isn't it? Me, most of all.

YOUNG MEYER

All right, Josef, yes. Yes! Why of all the people in the world? Why did you have to come here? Why couldn't you be somewhere else? Why?

JOSEF

You're the deep one. You figure it out. All I know is, first a man is here and then later on, he's there. That's all there is. Remember the cockroach?

MEYER

Of course, I remember the damn cockroach. So what?

JOSEF

The cockroach went on. Remember?

YOUNG MEYER

I don't care. It didn't matter then and it doesn't matter now.

JOSEF

No, you must care. The cockroach went on and so must you. You're the one who will make it. We've both known that all along, you and I.

YOUNG MEYER

But without you, I...why me? Why must I...

JOSEF

You have to, Meyer. You have to win.

YOUNG MEYER

There is no winning.

JOSEF

You'll see. One day you'll see and then---

YOUNG MEYER

Stop it, save your strength. They're going to come for you. Any minute they'll be here.

JOSEF

And then you can sleep.

YOUNG MEYER

Sleep? You think I can sleep tonight? Damn you, Josef.

JOSEF

You must sleep. You need your rest. We are dealing with absurdists, remember? Absurdists in an absurd universe.

YOUNG MEYER

Enough, Josef. Enough.

JOSEF

You're so angry. Be at peace, my friend. It's all right. It's really quite all right.

Pause.

JOSEF

Meyer?

YOUNG MEYER

What is it?

JOSEF

Will you sing with me?

YOUNG MEYER

Don't ask me this Josef, please don't...

JOSEF

(singing softly)

Du, Du liegst mir I'm Herzen ... du, du liegst mir in Sinn

Pause.

Come on, Meyer. One last time.

(singing softly)

Ja, ja, ja, ja...weiss nicht wie gut ich dir bin.

YOUNG MEYER

Damn you, Josef, goddamn you.

At the back, a door opens with a loud BANG. Lights down on barracks. Pause.

Lights slowly up on MEYER, sitting alone. Pause. There's the SOUND of breaking glass. He stirs.

MEYER

Clara? Is everything all right?

Pause.

Clara?

MEYER exits quickly.

BLACKOUT. Pause.

Lights up slowly on MEYER's space. He enters in a suit coat & sits. Pause. AARON enters in a suit.

AARON

Good evening, Zayde.

MEYER looks up.

I'm sorry. I'm very sorry about Bubbe. She was...very special. One of a kind.

MEYER

Yes. She was.

AARON

We figured she'd be here to see the baby. Never dawned on us she'd be gone before the baby came.

MEYER

Well, who can figure? Who's got the book?

AARON

You mean, who lives and dies?

MEYER nods.

MEYER

I always thought she'd be around to take care of me in my old age. Who knows? Maybe I've already had my old age.

AARON

She seemed so strong. Like she would go on forever.

MEYER

Nobody does that, Aaron. But the life in her. So much life she had. Even when it was just the two of us, the house was full.

AARON

Well, I...I wanted to come and tell you how sorry I am.

MEYER

Thank you. Sit down.

AARON continues to stand.

AARON

Something else I want to say. I'm sorry for getting you upset that day I came to see you. When I get into a story, I sometimes lose track of the fact that other people are not as involved in it as I am. Forgive me, Zayde. Forgive me for upsetting you.

Pause.

MEYER

You're a good boy, Aaron. Ahh...a good man. Already you know more than your grandfather.

AARON

No, Zayde. What do you mean?

MEYER

You know that if you cause harm, you go and ask for forgiveness. That's what we're taught, that's what the Torah says. Now sit down.

AARON

One more thing I need to say.

MEYER

You can't sit down and say it?

AARON continues to stand.

AARON

It's about the baby.

MEYER

Is everything all right?

AARON

It's fine. Absolutely fine. But Sharon and I...we've decided on the name. And we want you to know.

MEYER

Shouldn't you wait until after the baby comes?

AARON

Well, we want you to know right now. If it's a girl, we want to name her Clara.

MEYER nods.

MEYER

That's nice. She would like that. She'd like that very much.

AARON

That's what we thought. But...Bubbe said...she was sure it would be a boy.

MEYER

She was usually right about such things.

AARON

So we thought...

Pause.

MEYER

Well, you can't name him after me. I'm ninety-one, but I don't plan on dying. Not yet anyway.

AARON

That's understood, Zayde. We were thinking of...I was thinking of your friend.

MEYER

My...

AARON

From Dachau.

Pause.

MEYER

I see.

AARON

You said...the day I was here, you said he was a man of strength and talent.

MEYER

Yes, he was, he was...

AARON

Then I...I want his spirit. I want his name. I claim them for my son.

MEYER

You don't know anything about him.

AARON

I can live with that. My son can live with that. If that's how it has to be.

Pause.

MEYER

Aaron, are you trying to trick me into telling you---

AARON

There's no tricks here, Zayde. It's not a game. I'm just telling you the name I want to give my son. I want him to be Josef. Now if you want to throw me out of the house again, it's all right. I'll go.

Pause.

MEYER

Sit down, Aaron. Sit.

AARON sits. Long Pause.

He never got to have a son.

AARON

He died over there?

MEYER nods.

MEYER

But he didn't have to die. Not then anyway.

Pause.

He was just trying to keep another prisoner from killing himself.

AARON

How would that happen?

MEYER

The fence around the camp was electrified. From time to time men would...they would run to the fence...throw themselves at it. Sometimes the guards didn't let that happen. Sometimes...they shot the prisoner before he got there. Other times, no. You never knew what they were going to do. It was...kind of a game with the guards.

AARON

So, the other prisoner ran to the fence. And...?

MEYER

Josef ran after him, trying to stop him. Josef they shot.

AARON

I see.

MEYER

And the night it happened, I was so angry. All I could think of was myself. How was I going to get along without him? He lay bleeding in my arms and I did nothing, nothing to help him.

AARON

What would any man have done, Zayde? You couldn't save him. Not in that place.

MEYER

I might have killed him. I could have done that. I could have ended his suffering right then and there. But I did nothing.

AARON

But if you had killed him...wouldn't they have killed you?

MEYER nods.

MEYER

The crazy thing is, nine days later...April the twenty-ninth, nineteen forty-five, the Americans marched in and it was over. Just nine days...and that was the end.

Pause.

But that night, that last night...he wanted me to sing with him and...I didn't even do that. Then they took him away and...it's an awful thing when you can't go to someone and ask for forgiveness. Nothing on this earth, nothing tastes as rotten as regret.

Pause. AARON starts to say something but stops.

What?

AARON

He sang?

MEYER

He sang all the time. He danced. How he could do that in that place, I don't know, but...he did. Sometimes he got me to sing. Not that I sounded so good.

AARON

What did he sing?

MEYER

Anything. Everything. Songs, opera. He was just full of life.

AARON

Like Bubbe.

MEYER

Yes. Like Bubbe. Two people in my life, so...so special.

Pause.

AARON
Zayde, his story...you're the only one who can tell it.

MEYER
And if I don't?

AARON
Then it never gets told. Never.

Pause.

MEYER
Never's a long time.

AARON
Yes. It is.

Pause.

MEYER
You would have to get it right, Aaron. If you don't get it right---

AARON
I will get it exactly as you tell me. And we can go over it. You can read every line.

MEYER
Every word. I will read every word.

AARON
Of course, Zayde, of course.

MEYER
And where to start? I know the ending, but...

AARON
At the beginning, naturally. When you first met him?

MEYER

Yes. The cockroach.

AARON

Cockroach? What was---

MEYER

Tomorrow. Come tomorrow, Aaron, and we'll talk then. Now I think I'd like to take a little rest.

AARON

Okay, sure.

AARON stands. MEYER stands.

Can I help you?

MEYER

I think I can take a nap by myself. I'm ninety-one, you know.

AARON

Yes, Zayde. I know.

Lights partly down as MEYER exits.
AARON exits.

MUSIC, faint at first, then louder:
Du, Du, liegst mir I'm herzen.
JOSEF & DESIREE enter smiling
& waltzing. They waltz out.

Lights down.

END OF PLAY