

June 17, 2025

VIENNA, VIENNA, VIENNA

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CHARACTERS:

GABRIELE The grandmother, aged 90.

ELIZABETH Gabriele's daughter, 60's

NATASHA Gabriele's granddaughter, early 30's

The play is about three generations of Jewish women who travel together to Vienna to celebrate an award being given by the Austrian government to the grandmother, **Gabriele**, a Viennese refugee and prominent academic who fled the Nazis in March 1938 and who has been described by her husband as "often wrong but never in doubt". **Elizabeth** is a first-generation American theater director, and **Natasha** is her daughter, a lawyer who lives in Brooklyn.

TIME: June 2021. The pandemic has been going on for over a year.

PLACE: Various locations in Vienna, Austria, including a hotel room, a street corner, the interior of an old apartment, and the hallway of a museum

NOTE: The quotations from Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* are taken from the translations by Paul Schmidt (*The Plays of Anton Chekhov* translated by Paul Schmidt, New York: Harper Collins, 1997)

SCENE 1: ARRIVAL

GABRIELE, NATASHA and ELIZABETH in a hotel room in Vienna, June 2021. Early afternoon. GABRIELE and NATASHA are sitting across from each other by the window. There is a view of a Baroque church. ELIZABETH is stretched out on an elegant chaise in the corner. She's reading and checking her phone.

NATASHA: It's hard to imagine it's been eighty-three years!

GABRIELE: And two months. March 15, 1938.

ELIZABETH: *(looking up from the couch)* Beware the Ides of March.

GABRIELE: True! But that day was cold and wet, and today it's beautiful. *(kissing Natasha)* You look wonderful, even right off the plane. *(looking a bit critically at her hair)* Except for your hair. I like it blonder...

NATASHA: The world doesn't need more blonde lawyers. So—what's the plan?

GABRIELE: We have endless things to see. A week is hardly enough. I've made a list of every museum I love... plus the best Baroque churches... and the old neighborhood of course ... but the main thing is the award. It's a big event! My first public speech in German since I was seven.

NATASHA: *(teasing)* I had no idea you gave public speeches in German when you were seven.

GABRIELE: Every day. On the playground. No one could shut me up.

ELIZABETH: *(under her breath)* Imagine that!

GABRIELE: *(smiling as she takes in the room)* Isn't this a perfect hotel? They've made such a fuss. I asked for a suite of rooms with a view and

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look! *(she points out the window)* Peterskirche! My favorite church. I keep thinking how delighted my parents would have been. After all this time, it's as if we won.

NATASHA: You *have* won!

ELIZABETH: I'd say Hitler won.

GABRIELE: Don't be horrible. *(beat. Elizabeth checks her phone)* My parents dreamed of coming back to Vienna.

NATASHA: But they never did?

GABRIELE: *(shaking her head)* Better to just remember. Anyway, here we are-- three generations from across America, in Vienna! *(beat)* Let's hope your mother cheers up.

NATASHA: *(glancing across the room)* What's the matter?

GABRIELE: She's worried about her theater.

ELIZABETH: Please don't talk about me in the third person.

GABRIELE: *(ignoring this)* She's scared it won't survive.

NATASHA: We don't know if *anything* will survive – it's a pandemic!

GABRIELE: Even so... as Wittgenstein once said, the future is a *curve*, not a line. *(to Elizabeth)* You understand what I mean, darling? *(Elizabeth doesn't look up)* You've got to be resilient!

ELIZABETH: Don't be critical.

GABRIELE: I'm a critic, that's what I do. *(beat)* When I was a young professor, my colleagues didn't even *know* I was Viennese. I had made myself into a perfect American. And now I've written a definitive book on pre-war Austrian literature...

NATASHA: And everyone here wants to know you! *(beat)* Maybe they'll let us visit your old apartment...

GABRIELE: *(surprised)* The apartment? No, darling, I don't think so. Come on-- let's go downstairs and have some cake.

NATASHA: *Cake?*

ELIZABETH: She just got off the plane, Mutti.

GABRIELE: We'll have *gabel fruhstuck!* That means "second breakfast". Which includes cake. Or we could go out, if you prefer! *(enthusiastically)* When I was little I used to go to the Café Central with *Grospapa*. He took me there for *schokoladeneis* every time I got a good grade--that's why I had such fat cheeks. We'd sit in the corner table by the window with our mouths full of chocolate and schlag, and watch beautiful women passing by in their furs, on the way to the ballet or the opera...

NATASHA: I remember the pictures of him in his top hat and tails...

GABRIELE: He was a great man, a famous diplomat. The only Jew in the Ministry. Everyone stopped to greet him. And now they admire me, just like him. It's incredible, when you think about it.

NATASHA: Let's start with the cakes at the hotel and see if they're any good...

GABRIELE: Of course they'll be good! Viennese food is one of the world's great cuisines, whatever your mother says. When I close my eyes, I'm back in the nursery with Walter eating *palechinken*, my cheeks covered in powdered sugar. We used to play a game to see who could remember the most kinds of cake, starting with the lowliest--

NATASHA: (*laughing*) Which was...?

GABRIELE: *Krapfen*, of course. Doughnuts! We'd work our way up to *Dobostorte*—the one with the hard caramel icing that the Austrian Embassy gave *Grospapa* for his hundredth birthday, you remember, Elizabeth? (*Elizabeth nods*) And then there's *Sachertorte* —the *gold standard*—and *Linzertorte*, covered in raspberry jam, Grandmamma's favorite-- and *Malakofftorte*... and *Gugelhupf*... that's a kind of lemon bundt cake for tea time... and... oh yes! *Kardinalschnitte*!

NATASHA: What's in "*Kardinalschnitte*"?

GABRIELE: Meringue, jam and whipped cream piled in layers-- very rich.

ELIZABETH: As opposed to the other kinds, which are very light...

GABRIELE: A famous Cardinal invented it. But best of all-- my great love as a child-- *Rehrucken*—the chocolate hedgehog!

NATASHA: Seriously?

GABRIELE: It's a big round ball of cake dipped in melted dark chocolate and decorated with almond slivers—for the spikes—and little espresso bean eyes--

NATASHA: That's what I want!

GABRIELE: The hedgehog? Okay. You have that and I'll start with *Sachertorte!* *(to Elizabeth)* Elizabeth darling, do you want to go down with us? *(beat. Elizabeth doesn't look up)*

NATASHA: *(rising)* She's reading. We can go ahead...

GABRIELE: *(struggling to get up)* Oh my God I'm such a wreck. When I was seven, I could do twenty-five "round the worlds" with my jump rope. Can you imagine?

NATASHA: Let's go eat hedgehogs.

GABRIELE: *(excited)* Give me five minutes to comb my hair. *(Natasha helps her to her walker)*

NATASHA: Tomorrow, we should go see all the places you remember as a child. You'll bring your memoir, and we'll take turns reading what you wrote ...

GABRIELE: *(enthusiastically)* It'll be just like a play! Your mother can direct us.

ELIZABETH: *(looking up)* A rehearsal! Thank you, Jesus!

Gabriele exits. Beat. Natasha turns to her mother, concerned.

NATASHA: What's the matter? You haven't said two words since I got here.

ELIZABETH: *(checking her phone)* It's a hard time to be away.

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NATASHA: What's happened now? The theater's out of money? Some actor dropped out of a play?

ELIZABETH: What actor? What play? It's Covid—the theater is over! Everything's over.

NATASHA: Except for lawyers. The worse things get, the better we do.

ELIZABETH: You don't know how lucky you are.

NATASHA: You always say that – as if you didn't know that you're the luckiest person in the world.

ELIZABETH: According to whom?

NATASHA: You have the job of your dreams... *and* you've been married forever to a perfect man.

ELIZABETH: That's not luck.

NATASHA: What do you call it then?

ELIZABETH: Effort.

NATASHA: Effort? Since when is daddy "effort"?

ELIZABETH: (*Pointedly*) Making any relationship work takes *effort*.

NATASHA: Wow. You're already criticizing, and I've been here ten minutes?

ELIZABETH: No! I was just wondering how it was going? With Max, I mean. Are you ready to take the plunge?

NATASHA: Which plunge? To marry him or to leave him?

ELIZABETH: Either! Just make a choice...

NATASHA: It's none of your business!

ELIZABETH: So you're *not* marrying him?

NATASHA: I didn't say that.

ELIZABETH: How long is this tap dance going to go on? It's been *years!*

NATASHA: I'm working on it!

ELIZABETH: What's to work on? By the time you figure it out, you'll be so old you'll never have a baby!

NATASHA: (*stung*) Excuse me?

ELIZABETH: I'm just saying. If it's not meant to be, bail while you can. He doesn't seem to make you happy.

NATASHA: You want me to leave him?

ELIZABETH: It has nothing to do with what I want! I want you to figure out what *you* want!

NATASHA: I want you to get off my back.

ELIZABETH: (*apologetically*) I'm just trying to help. (*beat*) I don't know what choice to make either. When Grandma had her surgery, I figured in a few weeks she'd be back to her old self. Little did I know that spines

don't heal at age 90... and that I'd be spending Covid rushing over to her house every afternoon to look after her.

NATASHA: You said you wanted to.

ELIZABETH: What else could I say? "Sorry, Mutti, I can't keep you company in your last years because I'm too busy keeping my theater afloat?"

NATASHA: You can take care of grandma and still go on with your life!

ELIZABETH: She refuses to hire more help. And every time I walk through the door, I get sucked deeper into her universe—it's like a black hole of Wittgensteinian mud. Meanwhile my theater is fighting off its own existential crisis and... *(her phone pings. She has an email)* Oh Lord. The Board.

NATASHA: What do they want?

ELIZABETH: *(reading)* Who knows.

NATASHA: Tell them you're in Vienna.

ELIZABETH: They need to shut up and raise money! I keep telling them it's going to be *fine*—we made it through the financial crisis and we'll make it through the plague. I've organized a million things -- radio plays over Zoom -- vaccine clinics in the lobby—we've even mailed clown kits to our subscribers so their kids can perform!

NATASHA: *(laughing)* Why don't you give the clown kits to the *board*!

ELIZABETH: *(reading)* They want me to speak to Rachel later today.

NATASHA: Who's Rachel?

ELIZABETH: My new Board Chair. A peppy red-head who believes she's the goddess of digital marketing.

NATASHA: Ugh. (*making a face*) Tell them you're about to eat a chocolate hedgehog, and then you'd be happy to call Rachel and reassure her about the future of the American theater. (*picking up Elizabeth's book*) Why are you reading *Three Sisters*?

ELIZABETH: It's the first show of next season.

NATASHA: After the nightmare of Covid, you want to reopen with *Chekhov*?

ELIZABETH: It'll be cathartic! Don't you think?

NATASHA: How about offering a little *hope*?

ELIZABETH: Hope is over. You've got to meet people where they are. My audience will find Chekhov's despair deeply reassuring.

NATASHA: (*laughing*) What a great marketing angle— "Return to the theater! Share the despair!"

ELIZABETH: (*smiling*) Wait till you see the beautiful designs we're working on. (*rising*) Anyway, here we are, in glorious Vienna.

NATASHA: Did you not want to come?

ELIZABETH: I *had* to come—grandma would never have gotten here without me. She talked non-stop on the plane-- eleven hours from San Francisco to Vienna.

NATASHA: She's certainly eager for her cake.

ELIZABETH: (*making a face*) The food here—wait till you try it! Schnitzel, Schnitzel, Schnitzel, cream cake – (suspense) -- and more Schnitzel! While she naps this afternoon, we can go take a look at our ancestral city. Maybe it will inspire us.

NATASHA: I need to be back at 7 for a deposition. It's a big tech case—millions in billable hours. The firm doesn't even know I'm here.

ELIZABETH: Why not?

NATASHA: Because your grandmother could win *Wimbledon*, but if you're on a case, you're on a case.

ELIZABETH: It's a deposition—can't someone else take it?

NATASHA: No. Don't be critical!

ELIZABETH: I'm not being critical—

NATASHA: Anyway, what time does the award thing start tomorrow?

ELIZABETH: The ceremony's not tomorrow, it's Wednesday. With a big lunch at the Museum.

NATASHA: Oh that's right. (*rising*) You think we could find a more interesting part of town? That doesn't feel like a mausoleum?

ELIZABETH: I tried-- I walked for about an hour on the other side of the Danube yesterday. I was looking for Leopoldstadt, but there's nothing to see.

NATASHA: What's Leopoldstadt?

ELIZABETH: The 19th century Jewish quarter. Where all trace of Judaism has been erased.

NATASHA: How creepy.

ELIZABETH: Sometimes I wish we were better Jews.

NATASHA: Oh, please.

ELIZABETH: We need to really *care*! I should've raised you to be more observant...

NATASHA: The only religion you've ever had was *theater*. And you're the reigning deity.

ELIZABETH: Do you remember when you were asked what you wanted to be when you grew up ... and you said, "anything, as long as it's not *creative*!"?

NATASHA: Amen. (*quick change of subject*) Listen—a cool thing has come up. I have a colleague whose family was originally Romanian—they live in Vienna and she's gotten them to invite us over for coffee.

ELIZABETH: Why?

NATASHA: Her brother is a lawyer who works on reparations. (*conspiratorially*) I wonder if he might know how we could get access to grandma's old apartment!

ELIZABETH: (*wide-eyed*) What for?

NATASHA: To go in! Just once. To see what it was like! Wouldn't that be incredible?

ELIZABETH: Maybe...

NATASHA: I mean, why else are we here? To see Baroque churches? We've been imagining that apartment all our lives—I bet you can describe every room!

ELIZABETH: *(nodding)* That's true. *(thinking)* Even so... I'm sure it would be difficult to pull off. We'd have to ask Grandma.

Gabriele is standing at the door with her walker, her hair fixed up and with lipstick on, ready for cake.

GABRIELE: Ask me what? *(they look at her, caught)*

Blackout.

SCENE 2

NATASHA, GABRIELE and ELIZABETH at the hotel breakfast table the next morning, drinking coffee, in the middle of a conversation.

NATASHA: Wouldn't you love to just walk through the door and see the whole thing again? The place where you grew up?

GABRIELE: Who says the people living there now would want to show it to us?

NATASHA: (*insistent*) There must be a way.

GABRIELE: After eighty-three years? I can't imagine... And why should we trust your colleague's brother to get us in, darling? Those people who claim to care about reparations ... they're often the most anti-Semitic.

NATASHA: That's a ridiculous thing to say!

GABRIELE: Why are you two so hostile this morning? (*whispering*) Have you done your business?

NATASHA: (*embarrassed*) Grandma!

GABRIELE: Let me think about the apartment. But first I need to eat. Where's our breakfast?

ELIZABETH: I ordered us all soft-boiled eggs.

GABRIELE: (*back to Natasha, wrestling with the idea*) And when would we go? The only spare afternoon we have is Sunday and Angela wanted to take us to the country with Friedrich—

NATASHA: Who's Friedrich?

GABRIELE: Another member of the Translation Society. *(to Elizabeth)* Maybe there are some croissants we could have, darling, while we're waiting.

ELIZABETH: *(rising)* I'll go look. *(Elizabeth puts on her mask, rises, meanwhile pulling out her phone and checking it anxiously)*

GABRIELE: And stop checking your phone—you're on vacation!

ELIZABETH: The Chair of the Board was supposed to call me last night but she didn't --

GABRIELE: Maybe she's busy.

ELIZABETH: Then why didn't she let me know?

GABRIELE: Who knows? Please, darling—don't ruin our day. We have so much to do!

NATASHA: *(reassuring her mother)* She'll call, Mommy. Don't worry.

ELIZABETH: I'll get the croissants. *(she moves away)*

GABRIELE: *(confidentially, to Natasha)* I wish your mother would relax—she's driving me crazy!

NATASHA: She's trying to run a theater during Covid—it's stressful.

GABRIELE: So take a break for a week. We're in Vienna!

NATASHA: *(persisting)* Anyway, by Sunday, we will have seen Angela every single day, won't we?

GABRIELE: Angela is the reason we're here! She made the whole award happen, arranged the invitation—

NATASHA: And we're being incredibly nice to her—

GABRIELE: We should be—she's a remarkable woman. I've been working with her for two years on my translation project—*two years*-- it's not the same as meeting some stranger--

NATASHA: You don't have to go—I could ask him on my own--

Elizabeth returns, carrying a plate with some pastries on it.

ELIZABETH: Look! They even have *chocolate* ones today--

GABRIELE: (*delighted*) Just what we need! (*to Natasha*) I think you should be gracious and just stick with my plans. Both of you! It'll be wonderful! It's just that neither of you speaks German so you can't understand what's going on. (*to her daughter*) If you were here for your own work, you'd see what I mean.

ELIZABETH: Sure.

NATASHA: It's true! You should go to the theater while you're here!

ELIZABETH: (*angry*) If we had a *single* free night I might. They're performing *Phedre* at the Burgteater...

NATASHA: During Covid?

ELIZABETH: They're selling every other row and you have to be masked. (*caught*) I looked it up. Just for fun.

GABRIELE: (*aggrieved*) Then go do what you want – both of you! I'll see the countryside on my own. Could you pass me the jam?

ELIZABETH: (*passing the jam*) Never mind. Let's just go with Angela.

GABRIELE: I don't want you to go if you're going to be so negative. And the butter? (*Elizabeth passes the butter*)

ELIZABETH: Let's forget it, Natasha. It's probably too complicated anyway...

GABRIELE: (*enthusiastically*) You'd adore the Austrian countryside—it's so picturesque. (*eating the croissant*) The chocolate ones are delicious! (*To Natasha*) Don't you want one, darling? You must be starving.

NATASHA: I'll wait for the eggs. (*Elizabeth's phone pings*)

GABRIELE: I told you to turn it off!

ELIZABETH: (*looking at her phone*) It's an email from Rachel.

GABRIELE: Who's Rachel?

NATASHA: Her Board Chair. The one that was supposed to call. (*to her mother*) Read it.

GABRIELE: And then— put it away. We're *busy*!
Elizabeth clicks on the email. Begins to read. The other two women look at her.

NATASHA: So?

GABRIELE: Have they cut your budget for the millionth time?

NATASHA: Or do they want you to ditch Chekhov and reopen with *Clue*?
(Elizabeth stares at her phone) What is it? (beat. Elizabeth's mother and daughter look at her, concerned) Tell us. (Elizabeth doesn't reply)

GABRIELE: It can't be *that* terrible!

NATASHA: Come on, Mommy. They're always idiots, that board. (beat)
Are they making you furlough even more people? (Elizabeth shakes her head) Then what is it?

ELIZABETH: It's *me*.

NATASHA: What's you?

ELIZABETH: They want me to go.

GABRIELE: Go where?

ELIZABETH: *Go*. (beat) As in... leave.

NATASHA: Are you kidding?

GABRIELE: What do you mean, leave? (beat) You mean, leave the job?
(Elizabeth nods. She has no words) They're *firing* you?

NATASHA: They can't do that. You *founded* that theater. You built it up from *nothing*.

GABRIELE: That can't be right, darling. (beat) Read us what it says.
(Elizabeth takes a deep breath and stares at the screen)

ELIZABETH: "Dear Elizabeth, I hope this email finds you well."

GABRIELE: “Well”?!

NATASHA: Go on.

ELIZABETH: “As you probably know, we have engaged a consultant to help us better understand how to navigate this challenging period for the institution.”

NATASHA: What consultant?

ELIZABETH: Some twenty-five year old with a laptop.

GABRIELE: “Navigate” — *(she blows a raspberry)* Don’t you *hate* the over-use of that word?!

NATASHA: Keep going.

ELIZABETH: “After much deliberation, the Executive Committee has come to the conclusion that the pandemic presents a welcome opportunity for us to reimagine our future.”

GABRIELE: A “welcome” opportunity?!

NATASHA: Assholes! *(Elizabeth puts the phone down. She can’t go on. Gabriele turns to Natasha)*

GABRIELE: You read it, darling.

NATASHA: Can I? *(Elizabeth nods. Natasha picks up the phone and continues reading)* “After celebrating your tenure here, we’d like to pivot to a relaunch of our organization with fresh vision.” *(outraged)* What is this, *Shark Tank*? *(Natasha hands the phone to her grandmother as if it’s poisoned. Gabriele finishes reading the email)*

GABRIELE: (*reading*) “We are grateful for your steadfast leadership and feel certain that this will be an exciting moment for you to activate your own personal goals.” (*putting the phone down*) Who are these fools? Do they think artists can be plucked off the shelf like fresh *towels*?

NATASHA: Are they actually allowed to *do* this?

ELIZABETH: They’d have to pay out the last year of my contract, but then... (*she gets quiet*)

NATASHA: (*stunned*) You *are* that theater.

GABRIELE: How can they not appreciate the *wisdom* you bring? Look at me—I’m 90 and I just published a new book!

NATASHA: I grew up in that building. I learned to walk by toddling down the aisles. That place was my childhood.

GABRIELE: You’re too smart for them, that’s what it is. That board has been getting stupider for years.

NATASHA: And how the hell are they going to reopen if they don’t have you to program a season?

GABRIELE: I think you should quit before they fire you! Don’t even give them six months. They’ll be sorry when they realize how indispensable you are.

NATASHA: Why don’t you start a new theater... somewhere else...

GABRIELE: Yes! Go do the work you want to do without being under the thumb of those morons.

NATASHA: And don't let them do this to you over *email*! Make that red-head tell you to your face! And pay out a huge severance if she wants you to leave.

GABRIELE: (*energetically*) Natasha's right. Get what you can and then ... let it go! It's sort of *fate*—here you are in Vienna, you have a whole week to see great art and hear beautiful music and contemplate your future--

ELIZABETH: What future?

GABRIELE: There's always a future! Eighty-three years ago my family got chased out of this country with nothing—we thought our lives were over! But look what the future has brought! I think you should delete that horrible email and eat your chocolate croissant! And don't answer them right away. Leave them to stew in their own juice.

NATASHA: You could definitely sue for damages.

ELIZABETH: The theater has no money.

NATASHA: I'll bet that fucking consultant got six figures!

ELIZABETH: (*rising*) I'm going to go call Andrew and tell him.

GABRIELE: That's a good idea—he'll know what to do. (*Elizabeth nods and crosses away. Gabriele turns to Natasha*) My goodness. Your poor mother. Those people are such philistines. We'll have to do something wonderful to cheer her up.

NATASHA: Like what?

GABRIELE: What's the best thing we could show her in Vienna?

NATASHA: (*dubiously*) I'm not sure anything about *Vienna* is going to cheer her up. It's such a creepy place.

GABRIELE: Why do you say that?

NATASHA: We took a long walk yesterday, while you napped... On the surface everything's perfect, but when you look down at the sidewalk there are plaques telling you who got deported and which camp they were gassed in. I don't understand how you can be so cheerful about it all.

GABRIELE: I'm not cheerful about what *happened*. I'm cheerful it's *over* and now I can come back.

NATASHA: Then why don't you want to see the apartment? I thought you'd be excited! We could make time, couldn't we? —we'll just skip a few Baroque churches!

GABRIELE: (*frostily*) I'm sorry you're so uninterested in the Baroque.

NATASHA: (*frustrated*) I don't understand. I'm trying to get access to your childhood home and you don't even seem to care!

GABRIELE: I told you I had to think about it! Don't push me. `

NATASHA: Okay, never mind. (*she gets up*) I have to go do some work.

GABRIELE: Wait! You haven't had your egg! (*Elizabeth returns*) Did you reach him?

ELIZABETH: He's on a site visit—he said he'd call back when he can.

NATASHA: Text me when you're ready to go out. (*She exits*)

GABRIELE: My goodness. Everyone's so touchy this morning! Sit down, darling, and have your breakfast. You'll feel better.

ELIZABETH: I don't want breakfast. What's she mad about?

GABRIELE: She's insisting we see the apartment. I told her I had to think about it. She shouldn't push me so hard.

ELIZABETH: She thought you'd be excited about it...

GABRIELE: Are you okay?

ELIZABETH: Of course not. Anyway, I don't think it's really about seeing the apartment... she's just upset.

GABRIELE: Everyone's upset! I mean, you *deserve* to be upset. But Natasha? Is it Max? Is he making her unhappy?

ELIZABETH: He's always competing with her—

GABRIELE: She's a lot to compete with.

ELIZABETH: Maybe. But she tries so hard to please him—I've watched her—and it's never enough. We should be nice to her—

GABRIELE: I'm always nice!

ELIZABETH: I think it's why she came to Vienna—to get away from him—

GABRIELE: What are you talking about? She came to be with me! How do you expect me to do this without you two? It's not as if I can wheel myself around. I'm the ninety-year-old invalid here—

ELIZABETH: You're not an invalid!

GABRIELE: I learned to ice skate in the park outside that window. I could even go backwards, really fast. And now... everything hurts!

ELIZABETH: (*eyeing her mother's fancy sneakers*) Your shoes are cute.

GABRIELE: When they compliment your sneakers, you know you're *kaput*. (*beat*) Let's go to that beautiful linen store on the Graben this afternoon—the one my grandmother loved so much. We'll buy Natasha something really elegant for her new apartment... and something beautiful for you too... would that cheer you up, darling?

ELIZABETH: She'd rather go meet that lawyer.

GABRIELE: (*looking at her daughter severely*) Elizabeth, we have to try to get along. It's only five days. I've never gotten an award like this—it's important for me!

ELIZABETH: I know.

GABRIELE: It'll take your mind off things, I promise you! (*Elizabeth smiles wanly*) I'm sure she just needed to eat. She doesn't eat enough.

ELIZABETH: I'll bring her a croissant.

GABRIELE: (*cheerfully*) Natasha says you're reading Chekhov...

ELIZABETH: I was preparing *Three Sisters*...

GABRIELE: My favorite! How wonderful!

ELIZABETH: (*unleashing*) Why is it wonderful? There'll be no more *Three Sisters* for me, ever again.

GABRIELE: Don't be so melodramatic! You have no idea what's going to happen.

ELIZABETH: I think it's fair to say I won't be going back to Moscow next season, Mutti. Moscow has been vaporized by Rachel the Red Head. Soon I'll be like poor pathetic Andrei... a cracked bell that no longer makes a sound.

GABRIELE: Maybe you'll be like Irina and set off on a new adventure.

ELIZABETH: To teach at some provincial kindergarten? Don't you get it? That organization was my life!

GABRIELE: And now your life is about to become something else.

ELIZABETH: Why? I loved my life.

GABRIELE: No, you didn't! It seemed wonderful when you first created that theater—but even then you spent your life eating chicken with the board and cajoling those reluctant subscribers. And now your field is just tripe about social issues—it's not even an *art form* anymore!

ELIZABETH: (*stung*) Really? Maybe poetry is over too and you should start analyzing the phone book...

GABRIELE: I'd take the phone book over most of the crap they're putting onstage. You know I'm right! You directed such interesting plays at the beginning of your career—real *literature*-- we all loved it! But now—

ELIZABETH: Being in rehearsal is when I'm happiest.

GABRIELE: Says who? Half the time the actors drive you crazy—they're always quitting or having nervous breakdowns... *(beat. Elizabeth doesn't respond. Gabriele eyes her)* Anyway, you've worked so hard all your life, maybe it's time to take a break.

ELIZABETH: Rachel hopes I'll take a permanent break.

GABRIELE: Please, darling. I know what a blow this is. But you have enjoy Vienna while we're here. Otherwise, you'll ruin it for me. *(beat. Resolutely)* And don't be so ungrateful. You've had a great career.

ELIZABETH: *(dramatically)* How am I going to fill the endless weeks and years ahead? All those shows I loved so much... all those actors and designers and composers and late nights and openings and closings —

GABRIELE: Change is hard -- you've always been so successful.

ELIZABETH: No, *you've* always been so successful.

GABRIELE: Because I never give up. The very people who drove my family out are now groveling and telling me how much they admire me! *(smiling at her daughter)* You'll see. Revenge is sweet.

ELIZABETH: I'll bear that in mind. Let's just hope it doesn't take me eighty years.

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BLACKOUT.

Scene 3

Lights shift. Natasha is wheeling her grandmother on the streets of Vienna, after lunch. Elizabeth is walking beside her.

NATASHA: *(to her mother)* I did some research on wrongful termination. And ageism. Just in case!

ELIZABETH: Thank you, darling. I'll take whatever I can get. *(they wheel)*

GABRIELE: I'm sorry the cobblestones make it so hard to push.

NATASHA: It's a good workout. *(to Elizabeth)* I emailed Anita and said we had no time to visit her family.

ELIZABETH: I'm sorry.

NATASHA: She thinks I should speak to her brother anyway. His name is Stefan. He's the one actively involved in Jewish reparations.

GABRIELE: I thought that family was Romanian—what do they care about Jewish reparations?

NATASHA: They seem eager to help.

GABRIELE: I *know* you want to see the apartment, darling—but I'm not sure it's a good idea. I've lasted eighty years without going back—what's the rush?

ELIZABETH: At least we could look at it from the outside-- we're going to pass right near it in a moment--

GABRIELE: (*sharply*) I *know* where it is. I could describe every inch of this neighborhood with my eyes closed! I'd rather walk along the Ringstrasse. Turn right.

NATASHA: Whatever you want. (*they turn right, and wheel her in silence for a moment*) Tell us what we're looking at.

GABRIELE: (*pointing*) That tram took you to grandmamma's—we'd go on Sunday afternoons and she'd serve chocolate *bretzels* on little blue china plates. Years later in the Bronx, my mother tried to do the same thing ... but the plates were just paper... and the cookies were stale... (*beat. She's sad. They wheel. Then her eyes light on a church*) Look at that gorgeous church! It was destroyed by the bombing, and they've put everything back together as if the war never happened!

ELIZABETH: And that's a good thing?

GABRIELE: It's wonderful! (*sensing their disapproval*) Would you rather it had all been replaced with hideous high rises? You'd feel exactly the same way if you went to see your old nursery school and it had disappeared.

ELIZABETH: True.

GABRIELE: (*to Natasha*) And you! You're so sentimental about your hometown—you hate it if a single store closes.

NATASHA: Maybe. But Hitler didn't march into San Francisco.

ELIZABETH: How can you look at all of this and not feel... I don't know... *enraged*? Appalled? I'm appalled! I feel absolutely... *furious*.

GABRIELE: It was a long time ago.

ELIZABETH: The Austrians act as if *they* were the victims. As if Hitler arrived in Heldenplatz against their will.

GABRIELE: No they don't. Not anymore. Now they acknowledge their complicity almost too much.

ELIZABETH: How can it possibly be too much?

GABRIELE: As compared to the Germans? Or the hypocritical French, who turn out to have been the sleaziest kind of collaborators? The Austrians went through a lot. And now they've moved on.

ELIZABETH: That's like saying Americans should just move on from slavery.

GABRIELE: Maybe we should!

ELIZABETH: I'm sure the parents of half the people we've met here were Nazis.

GABRIELE: What's the point of being so angry?

ELIZABETH: Because it's disgusting—and it was *not* that long ago!

GABRIELE: You have to forgive, eventually!

ELIZABETH: Why? Some things are not forgivable.

GABRIELE: You're just thinking about those creeps on your board. Who should definitely *not* be forgiven. Have you heard anything more?

ELIZABETH: Nope. They're probably dismantling my office as we speak.

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NATASHA: I hope they're nervous. They must be wondering what you're going to do.

ELIZABETH: *I'm* wondering what I'm going to do.

GABRIELE: You're going to make them regret they ever had the idea! What did Andrew have to say?

ELIZABETH: He's been warning me for months that Rachel was a snake—every time she popped up on Zoom with some inane Tik Tok idea for "getting our brand out there" he'd pretend to shoot her! I was the idiot who thought—how much harm could she possibly do?

NATASHA: And now you know.

ELIZABETH: He was so sweet on the phone. He said he'd move anywhere I wanted to go.

NATASHA: Except Vienna!

ELIZABETH: True. I can't imagine him wanting to come here.

GABRIELE: Natasha wanted to come!

ELIZABETH: (*with a pointed glance at her daughter*) Natasha wanted to get out of New York for a week.

NATASHA: Natasha does not want to be talked about in the third person.

GABRIELE: Besides, since when do you care so much about being Jewish? Look who you married. I mean, we *adore* Andrew, but—

ELIZABETH: But what? Marrying a WASP doesn't mean I don't care about the Holocaust!

GABRIELE: (*shrugging*) Fine. I've had a wonderful life. I was lucky to end up in America. I've loved being American. I don't regret it for a moment.

ELIZABETH: You don't regret having to flee for your life?

GABRIELE: Lots of people flee for their lives, all the time! Why do you think Natasha's kept so busy with her asylum cases? It was a terrible moment in history. For everyone. That's what you don't understand. Millions of Russians were killed, millions of Poles were put to work as slaves in German munitions factories—millions of Italians were displaced after the war, wandering aimlessly without knowing where they'd end up, no trains, no help, nothing. Read Primo Levi.

ELIZABETH: (*stung*) I've read Primo Levi. Isn't that why Jews are commanded to *remember*? So that we can *blot out the names* of our enemies!

GABRIELE: So go ahead, blot them out!

ELIZABETH: (*persisting*) You don't find it weird that they rebuilt this whole city exactly as if the Emperor were still alive? It's so phony. After all, Warsaw was destroyed in the war, and it slowly came back to life as a modern city...

GABRIELE: You're comparing Vienna to *Warsaw*? Warsaw was always a total backwater. (*suddenly looks up*) Stop! (*beat*) That's the train station-- (*she grows quiet*)

ELIZABETH: The station where --? (*GABRIELE nods*)

NATASHA: (*beat*) Should we go in? (*Gabriele shakes her head*)

GABRIELE: No, let's stay here. (*they stop*) It looks exactly the same. Except it was late at night by the time we got there. It was pouring rain. And there were soldiers with swastikas everywhere.

NATASHA: But they let you through?

GABRIELE: (*nodding*) I think my father spoke to them—he was always ready with a little joke. When we got to the platform, they opened his luggage and dumped everything out—I remember his war medals scattered all over the ground. We waited for what seemed like forever for the train... I got hungry and my mother gave me a little ham roll from her purse.

NATASHA: A ham roll. The perfect snack for a little Jewish girl.

GABRIELE: We had to pretend not to know our own cousins. We laughed at that, Walter and I. We thought it was a game.

ELIZABETH: What a game.

GABRIELE: How come this horrible station didn't get bombed like everything else? (*beat*) I don't know how my mother survived it. Forced to separate from her two beloved sisters and everything she knew...

ELIZABETH: They were three sisters! Of course! I never thought of that.

GABRIELE: She was so upset when we finally got across the border that she forgot to take her hat off for a whole day. Months went by... and when we arrived in Hoboken in the blazing August heat, Walter was wearing glasses so he didn't match his visa photo and that caused a lot of trouble. And our papers had gotten wet in transit so my mother was terrified they wouldn't pass muster. Eventually, when everything had been stamped, we got the ferry and arrived at our new home. Oxford Avenue. The Bronx. My mother sat on a bench outside the house in total silence.

ELIZABETH: She was in shock.

GABRIELE: But we had a swing set and a sandbox in America, so I was happy. Even though I was called a "yid" by the neighborhood kids —that I *do* remember! My mother would say, (*German accent*) "the poor things are so *ignorant* they don't know what they're saying" and give me a piece of chocolate.

ELIZABETH: Maybe it helped that your parents were so young. They could start over...

GABRIELE: They did what they had to do. (*to Natasha*) That's why I find it so stupid, all this moaning today about not having children because it's too *hard*...

NATASHA: It *is* hard.

GABRIELE: In the old days when terrible things happened, people had to *manage*! They didn't spend their life whining. (*mockingly*) "Oh my goodness, so much *climate change*! How can I possibly have a child?"

NATASHA: (*impatiently*) I get the point.

GABRIELE: *(insistently)* Then why do you keep saying “I’m not ready to have a baby”?

NATASHA: *(her hackles up immediately)* Grandma!

GABRIELE: *(insistently)* It’s never a good time! You just have to do it.

NATASHA: *(furious)* That’s very helpful, thank you!

ELIZABETH: Please let’s not start on the baby thing now. We’ve got enough shit to deal with. How about a snack? *(she gets a little bag of bakery goods out of her purse and holds it out to her mother)*

GABRIELE: *(eagerly)* What is it?

ELIZABETH: Cookies.

GABRIELE: *(taking a cookie and then continuing, undeterred)* Natasha would be such a wonderful mother—you know she would! --it seems like such a shame--

ELIZABETH: *(to Natasha)* Have one, darling.

NATASHA: A *baby*?

ELIZABETH: A cookie!

NATASHA: I don’t want one! *(to her grandmother)* And it’s none of your business whether I have a baby or not!

GABRIELE: Of course it is! I’m your grandmother. *(eating)* They’re delicious. Hazelnut!

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NATASHA: I'm supposed to have it for *you*?

GABRIELE: For all of us! Think how it would distract your mother.

ELIZABETH: What?! I don't need Natasha to solve the void in my life.

GABRIELE: Why not? It'll be the most incredible experience, for all of us. Besides, once you have a baby, you're not as narcissistic and self-involved... you have to think about someone other than yourself. *(to Elizabeth)* Do you have a napkin? *(Elizabeth hands her mother a tissue)*

NATASHA: You're saying I don't think about people other than myself? Ask my asylum clients!

ELIZABETH: *(quickly)* We know. *(to Gabriele)* Why do you keep bringing this up?

GABRIELE: It's important!

NATASHA: You have no idea what you're talking about!

GABRIELE: *(reassuringly)* I know you work incredibly hard, darling, and I know your clients adore you. But that's not the same.

NATASHA: When I'm ready to have a child, I'll have one!

GABRIELE: But if you wait till you're ready, it might never happen. Something else will intervene... or maybe you won't be able to, and then you'll be so unhappy.

NATASHA: What if *he's* not ready? It's not just up to me!

GABRIELE: But if you had it, he'd be ready.

NATASHA: I'm supposed to just get pregnant and then let him know?

GABRIELE: Women have been doing that since time immemorial!

ELIZABETH: That's a crazy thing to say!

GABRIELE: Crazy, but true. I'll bet Max would be thrilled—

NATASHA: Max spends his life in therapy talking about how everyone betrays him. Lying to him to get pregnant doesn't seem like a great way to start the parenting thing. He's enough of a mess as it is.

GABRIELE: Everyone's a mess these days. It's the fashion.

NATASHA: Anyway, my friends who *do* have children spend their lives worrying their kids will be drug addicts or get some awful disease or not be as successful as their parents... it's a nightmare just getting them into *pre-school*.

GABRIELE: It was *always* a nightmare—they told your mother she had to wait a year to go to nursery school because she sucked her dress!

ELIZABETH: But you refused to take no for an answer...

GABRIELE: If my mother had suspected that seven years after she had me, Hitler would invade Austria-- you think she would've thought, "oh good, let's have a child!"?

ELIZABETH: (*to her mother*) You're comparing Natasha's circumstance to Hitler's invasion of Austria?

GABRIELE: (*looking at Elizabeth*) You were younger than Natasha is now when you got pregnant with her.

ELIZABETH: I did everything too young. And *now* look at me!

NATASHA: This isn't about you.

GABRIELE: I'm just saying -- everything's easier when you're young.

NATASHA: Nothing's easier! Half the people I know are still living at home because they can't afford to pay rent! And if they *do* have kids, there's no childcare!

ELIZABETH: When I couldn't figure out another plan, I just brought you to rehearsals, and you charmed everyone in the room.

NATASHA: You could only do that because you were the boss.

ELIZABETH: That's right! So be the boss. (*Natasha rolls her eyes*)

NATASHA: I'll do my best.

GABRIELE: Besides, think how totally adorable your baby would be! You were remarkable from the moment you appeared! (*Natasha smiles in spite of herself*)

ELIZABETH: It's true. You had big cheeks and blonde curls, and every morning at dawn, you stood up in your crib to announce you were ready for your day!

GABRIELE: You had that funny British accent, remember? (*imitating, with a British accent*) "I can't do it properly".

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NATASHA: *(smiling)* I can't really have sounded like that...

GABRIELE: You were imitating your father--

ELIZABETH: Daddy was over the moon when you were born. I don't understand what Max is so worried about!

NATASHA: He gets furious when I even bring it up. At which point I get furious, and then he starts implying that I'm not mature enough to have a child.

ELIZABETH: *(shocked)* What?! *(her phone pings)* You're the most mature person I know! You're *perfect!* *(looking at her phone)* It's Mindy asking about payroll.

NATASHA: Tell her to call the Red-Head!

GABRIELE: *(incensed about Max)* Why would Max even *think* such a thing?

NATASHA: He has very absolute ideas. Lines in the sand about what's right and wrong. That's why he has so much trouble at the firm. You have to run with the cases they assign if you want to get ahead.

GABRIELE: Of course.

NATASHA: But he complains... constantly... and then he claims they don't appreciate him enough. *(beat)* He's mad I'm more successful than he is.

ELIZABETH: *(to her mother)* Can you believe this? What were we fighting for all those years if women like Natasha *still* have to apologize to men for being successful?

GABRIELE: It's a sad fact-- men need a lot of reassurance.

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Natasha's phone pings. She reads a message.

NATASHA: It's Max.

GABRIELE: Oh good! How is he?

NATASHA: He can't talk—he's assembling binders.

ELIZABETH: So why is he texting you?

NATASHA: *(shrugging)* He says there's no food at home.

ELIZABETH: So go to a diner!

GABRIELE: Give him our best.

NATASHA: I'll order him some groceries. But you have to stop bringing the baby stuff up. Please. Why don't you trust me?

GABRIELE: I do trust you. That's why I want you to have a baby.

NATASHA: It's not only up to me! Why is that so hard to understand? You think you've figured out what I should do with my life, but you have no idea! *(beat)* I know-- you went through horrible, terrifying things that would've defeated *anyone* – but still, you managed to accomplish everything you dreamed of —love and children and fame and satisfaction *(to her mother)* and you too! *(to her grandmother)* and everyone admires you and honors you-- *both* of you— *(to her mother)* okay, maybe not *you* at the moment, but still... I look at myself and think-- what am I *doing*? Where has the time gone? Will I ever have children—why have I never been loved the way I long to be loved? I dream about it—that's all I dream about!

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ELIZABETH: (*smiling*) Oh sweetheart, you sound just like Irina in the fire scene!

NATASHA: (*furious*) What is the *matter* with you? This isn't a play—it's my *life*! (*weeping*) I'm thirty-two and I've never really been in love! I thought Max was the one—I really did—I have tried and tried—I give him gifts and write him funny notes, I cook him fabulous meals and hide my successes at work and agree with everything he says—and for what? I long for one day when I don't have to fight or explain or accommodate. I want to come home at night and know that I'm not the only one holding the entire thing together by sheer force of will!

GABRIELE: It will happen when you least expect it, darling. Life is funny that way.

Elizabeth kisses Natasha. Beat.

ELIZABETH: Come on. Let's go sue someone.

They wheel offstage.

Scene 4

Wednesday morning. 8 a.m. Gabriele's hotel room. Elizabeth is helping her mother get ready for breakfast.

ELIZABETH: Are you excited?

GABRIELE: I'm nervous. It's a big day for me. Did you sleep?

ELIZABETH: Not really.

GABRIELE: Me neither. *(listening to bells outside)* Aren't the church bells beautiful? When I was little, I always wished I were Catholic. Their music is so much nicer than what's played at synagogue.

ELIZABETH: Don't say that.

GABRIELE: Anyway, I was up till 2. Worrying. It makes me so angry, what they've done to you! Can you help me with my shoes?

ELIZABETH: Sure. Which ones --?

GABRIELE: The Prada sneakers. *(Elizabeth gets the sneakers)* Thanks. *(Elizabeth sits on the floor, untying the shoes)* Right one first. *(Gabriele bends over to look)* It's so embarrassing. Who would've imagined I would be rewarded for my Wittgenstein criticism and lose the ability to tie my own shoes at the same time? *(Elizabeth begins putting on the right shoe)* Guess what I saw out the window last night when I couldn't sleep? Natasha heading across the square all dressed up, in high heels.

ELIZABETH: Really? Where was she going?

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GABRIELE: She looked like she was heading off for a rendezvous... (*re: the shoe laces*) Ouch! You have to be careful!

ELIZABETH: Don't yell at me, I'm not the maid.

GABRIELE: Well, pay attention!

ELIZABETH: I am! God. You've gotten so used to having me wait on you—

GABRIELE: I can't do it by myself anymore --I didn't realize it was such a problem for you to help me!

ELIZABETH: What do you think I'm doing, if not helping?

GABRIEL: Being in Vienna isn't *helping*, it's a *treat*! You said you wanted to come. I bought your ticket—I arranged the hotel—the only thing you had to do was turn up.

ELIZABETH: I *have* turned up! I get you dressed and wheel you around and all you do is yell.

GABRIELE: If you don't want to be here, then leave.

ELIZABETH: Too late.

GABRIELE: You used to be so much fun to be with!

ELIZABETH: And then I got fired! (*trying to avoid getting enraged*) Look, let's just get through this, and then we'll never have to do anything like it again.

GABRIELE: Why don't you just leave me here to die?

ELIZABETH: Don't be ridiculous. You're not going to die.

GABRIELE: Sooner or later I will. And then you'll be liberated. Or maybe I'll stay in Vienna! There are worse things...

ELIZABETH: Like what?

GABRIELE: I have sometimes fantasized about coming back to Austria at the end of my life...

ELIZABETH: Then why don't you want to see the apartment?

GABRIELE: That train station was close enough. *(Elizabeth's phone pings. She retrieves a text)* I wish you'd turn off your phone!

ELIZABETH: I need to know what's going on. *(reading the text)* My poor staff knows something's up. They're asking why the board suddenly wants details on everyone's salaries...

GABRIELE: *(firmly)* Listen to me, Elizabeth. That staff is not going to save you, no matter what you think. They may pretend to be sympathetic... but in the end, people only look out for themselves.

ELIZABETH: That's not true! *(deeply discouraged)* Is it? *(beat)* How could I not have seen it coming? That board was just waiting for me to leave town before they got the knives out.

GABRIELE: I know exactly how you feel. I had to go to a mediocre graduate school because I had children and couldn't leave town—and when I finally got to my dissertation defense, I was side-lined by two obnoxious old codgers who told me I was “insubordinate”. Which of course I was. They made me rewrite the last two chapters of my

dissertation just to humiliate me. *(smiling)* But eventually one of them dropped dead and the other faded into obscurity.

ELIZABETH: I don't think Rachel's going to drop dead... *or* fade into obscurity. *(she stops. Looks at her mother)* So what do I do? Hmmm? Just let it all go and walk away? *(beat)* Can you imagine how humiliated I feel?

GABRIELE: I'm sorry it's so difficult.

ELIZABETH: *(a wan joke)* What, putting on your shoes or solving my life? *(beat)* Give me the left foot. *(she starts on the left shoe. There's a moment of silence between the women)* I'm a failure, Mutti. That's the truth. It looks like our legendary family genes have finally given out.

GABRIELE: Genes don't give out.

ELIZABETH: Mine have. I might as well face it. What I'm doing just isn't *important* anymore.

GABRIELE: *(referring to the sneaker)* That's too tight!

ELIZABETH: *(Elizabeth loosens the laces)* Maybe people stopped paying attention a long time ago and I never noticed. Maybe I've been fading away like an old landscape painting and now it's time to take me off the wall. Maybe my only legacy will be a name plate on the way to the bathroom...

GABRIELE: You've been reading too much Chekhov.

ELIZABETH: In Act 1 of *The Cherry Orchard*, Lyubov says "Without the orchard my life makes no sense, and if you have to sell it, you might as well sell me along with it."

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GABRIELE: But they sell it anyway, sweetheart, and they all survive! The same will be true for you.

ELIZABETH: How do you know? And whatever Wittgenstein says, if you tell me the future is a curve not a line *one more time*, I'll kill you!

GABRIELE Okay. (*beat*) But it's true.

ELIZABETH: You always act as if everything in life can be *willed* into being.

GABRIELE: It can.

ELIZABETH: Not for me! And not for Natasha either! I think she should cut her losses while she can. With Max, I mean. If it's not meant to be—

GABRIELE: Don't say that! Don't even give her that idea! She has wasted years of her life trying to make it work with Max. You have to *want* it to be.

ELIZABETH: You don't always get what you want!

GABRIELE: When I married daddy, I was happy he was a cardiologist. If he'd been a *podiatrist*, I would have said no.

ELIZABETH: So?

GABRIELE: My point is, you have to be clear about what you're looking for in life! You wouldn't have married a podiatrist either. And what do you suggest, that Natasha just walk away from Max, after all that, and get involved with some Austrian she doesn't even know?

ELIZABETH: At least he's not a podiatrist.

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Natasha enters.

NATASHA: Please don't talk about me behind my back.

ELIZABETH: We're not!

NATASHA: You left the door open.

GABRIELE: Did we?

ELIZABETH: We were just saying...

NATASHA: What?

GABRIELE: About Max...

NATASHA: What about him?

ELIZABETH: We're so relieved he isn't a podiatrist.

NATASHA: (*bewildered*) Why would he be a podiatrist?

GABRIELE: People are surprising. Good morning, darling—we're almost ready. Could you get me my scarf? The new one. In the closet. (*Natasha goes to get it*) No, not that one—the silk one.

NATASHA: Which?

GABRIELE (*impatiently*): The *yellow* one! Beside it. Yes. Isn't that beautiful? Marilyn gave it to me!

ELIZABETH: Really?

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GABRIELE: (*pointedly, to Elizabeth*) She gives the nicest presents for a housekeeper! (*Natasha hands Gabriele the scarf*)

ELIZABETH: Are you implying that I don't give you nice presents?

GABRIELE: You don't give me *any* presents.

ELIZABETH: You don't *need* any presents.

GABRIELE: (*dramatically*) "O reason not the need!" (*smiling*) That's *King Lear*.

ELIZABETH: I *know*! I've directed it—*twice*. (*helping her mother with the scarf, while turning to Natasha*) Did you sleep okay, darling?

NATASHA: Till Max woke me up. He was out walking in Prospect Park...

ELIZABETH: Isn't it dark in New York right now? I mean, it's... (*looking at her watch*)—isn't it about 3 a.m. there?

NATASHA: Yes.

ELIZABETH: What was he doing walking in Prospect Park at 3 a.m.?

NATASHA: He's an insomniac. He seems to come to life after midnight.

GABRIELE: Like me! Gertrude Stein becomes clear to me late at night in a way she never is in daylight.

NATASHA: But Gertrude Stein wasn't a lawyer who had to work at 8 a.m. Max has slept through way too many morning Zooms...

ELIZABETH: You're not worried that he's out walking so late?

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GABRIELE: *(to Natasha)* What were *you* doing out so late, for that matter?

ELIZABETH: *(explaining)* She saw you, out the window, last night.

NATASHA: Jesus! Are you two spying on me?

GABRIELE: Not at all—I was admiring the church out the window-- and there you were, all dressed up, crossing the square—

NATASHA: I wasn't all dressed up.

GABRIELE: You had heels on.

NATASHA: I always have heels on. *(beat)* I was meeting Stefan. Anita's brother. I told you.

ELIZABETH: Was he nice?

NATASHA: Yes, actually. *(beat)* At first I thought he was sort of ridiculous-- he talked a blue streak in terrible English...

GABRIELE: And then?

NATASHA: And then... *(she stops. She's not going to tell them more)* He told me about the program he's involved with. It helps refugees get access to places and things they've lost.

GABRIELE: Are you *trying* to break up with Max?

NATASHA: *(irritated)* I'm allowed to have a drink with another man!

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GABRIELE: I don't understand. You're the one who said you'd have a baby tomorrow if he wanted one.

NATASHA: But he *doesn't*!

ELIZABETH: So instead you go out with random guys?

NATASHA: I wasn't going out with a random guy, I was organizing a visit to the apartment that got stolen from my family eighty-three years ago! Anyway, it was more fun than another evening with the Wittgenstein Society.

GABRIELE: What a rude thing to say! I'm sorry philosophy bores you so much.

NATASHA: Forget it. Listen, if I fill out some forms, they'll contact the current residents and figure out the rest.

GABRIELE: Why should we want to meet the people who stole our apartment?

NATASHA: The people living there now didn't steal it! They probably weren't even born.

GABRIELE: They must have *some* idea whose house it used to be! Was it their family that took it over? Or did some S.S. Officer give it to them? Maybe they were S.S. themselves! They must have *known* the apartment was stolen! Even now... all these years later... they must *realize* that.

NATASHA: Okay! But we don't have to meet the owners—they leave a key with the concierge at the agreed-upon time.

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GABRIELE: The *conciierge*? Is she related to the one who carted off all our stuff? Look, it's my award ceremony today—could we perhaps focus on *that*?

ELIZABETH: Absolutely. (*to Natasha*) We'll talk about it later.

NATASHA: Have you guys eaten breakfast?

GABRIELE: Your mother was just putting on my shoes. It's quite an ordeal.

NATASHA: I'm starving. And I need some coffee.

ELIZABETH: Shall we go down?

GABRIELE: Wait a minute—I have to get my papers together for the ceremony! Could you hand me my leather bag, (*long-suffering*) if it's not too much trouble?

NATASHA: This?

GABRIELE: And the copy of my book? Over on the desk? Right. Also the manila folder with my translation notes. I'm sure they're going to hate my exploration of whether Wittgenstein saw himself as a Jew!

NATASHA: Is that everything?

GABRIELE: Let alone gay. The philosophy contingent can't stand the thought that he was so obviously in love with men!

ELIZABETH: Do you want the walker?

GABRIELE: Don't rush me! You two always rush me.

ELIZABETH: *(to Natasha, trying to avoid an argument)* Why don't you go down and get started? You could order for us.

NATASHA: Are you sure?

ELIZABETH: It's fine. We'll follow in a minute.

NATASHA: Okay. Thanks. Soft boiled eggs for everyone?

GABRIELE: Yes. Two for me. And a croissant. Unless they finally have prune Danish! *(Natasha leaves. Gabriele turns to Elizabeth, puzzled)*

GABRIELE: How odd. She seemed pleased, didn't she? As if she'd had an interesting adventure.

ELIZABETH: She's so opaque. I never know what she's feeling.

GABRIELE: Sometimes I worry she's not capable of seeing things from someone else's point of view. Being self-involved is a big problem if you want to get married.

ELIZABETH: She's not self-involved!

GABRIELE: Then how do you explain it?

ELIZABETH: *(puzzling it out)* I keep thinking about the day we went to Auschwitz...

GABRIELE: Natasha's love life reminds you of *Auschwitz*?

ELIZABETH: I never told you this story? *(Gabriele shakes her head)* It was the end of that crazy week when I did a puppet workshop in Warsaw. Natasha and Andrew joined me so we could travel ... we took

a bus from Krakow to Auschwitz early in the morning... entered through those horrible gates, and walked into rooms of discarded suitcases and shoes ...

GABRIELE: I'm not interested!

ELIZABETH: Just *listen*. Right away, Natasha started to cry. I mean really *weep*. Which as you know is so unusual for her... I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen her cry. We all kept walking. And she kept crying. And by the time we get to the gas chambers... she's *bawling*. The guide is yelling over her. The whole thing is so loud, it's insane. Finally the whole thing's over ... thank God... and we each go back to our own hotel rooms... and I have no idea what to say when we meet up for dinner...

GABRIELE: Why didn't you just comfort her? At Auschwitz, I mean.

ELIZABETH: I don't know. I didn't want to embarrass her, I guess. I thought it was more respectful somehow.... to let her feel whatever she was feeling. (*beat*) I completely failed her, didn't I? I was the Jewish mother, and I failed to rise to the occasion and protect her.

GABRIELE: How could you have protected her?

ELIZABETH: Your mother protected you.

GABRIELE: That's true. She did. (*pointedly*) You see why I never went to Auschwitz?

Natasha reappears in the room and glares at her mother.

NATASHA: Why are you telling her that story?

ELIZABETH: I was just trying to explain to Grandma—

NATASHA: (*interrupting*) Don't! (*outraged*) You both think you can *solve* everything—but you're *wrong*. You can't even solve your own lives. And still-- you *never stop talking*!

GABRIELE: (*to Elizabeth*) She's right—you should worry about your *own* situation instead of intervening in hers—

ELIZABETH: (*turning on her mother*) How can I worry about my own? My life is over and still I spend my days pretending to follow your arcane academic debates and hearing which famous people are fawning over your latest article—

GABRIELE: (*furious*) So what! Your father and I came to every one of your plays in the early days—when you did *decent* ones -- we were so supportive-- I *never* criticized—

ELIZABETH: How about the time you told me how much better my *Threepenny Opera* would've been if I had only done it in *German*!

GABRIELE: It's true! Brecht's language is untranslatable.

NATASHA: You see why I don't want to have a baby?

ELIZABETH: I'm not like that! I *never* try to make you feel inadequate!

NATASHA: You just make me feel as if I were living on another planet. All we have *ever* talked about since I was two years old is rehearsals and actors and playwrights and critics and who was up and who was down, as if nothing in the world was of any interest except life in the fucking theater!

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ELIZABETH: I only talk about *theater* with you because I don't dare to talk about anything *else*!

NATASHA: Why not?

ELIZABETH: You get mad if I ask questions and mad if I don't, so there's no winning--

NATASHA: You're my *mother*—figure it out--

ELIZABETH: No wonder Max has a hard time living with you--

NATASHA: You think it's *my* fault he's so neurotic?

ELIZABETH: I think you could learn how to *give* a little! Think about someone else for a change! My life is in *crisis*, Natasha!

NATASHA: (*stung, fighting back*) So is mine!

GABRIELE: And I'm about to win a huge award! But with you two, it's only about *you* and your endless problems. I think you should get out of my room! Right now!

ELIZABETH: (*turning towards the door*) Fine!

NATASHA: What?! Where are you going?

ELIZABETH: I don't know. I'll see you at the ceremony.

GABRIELE: (*furious, hurt*) Don't do me any favors!

NATASHA: You can't just storm off!

GABRIELE: We haven't had breakfast! I need to have breakfast.

ELIZABETH: You go. If I have to wait for soft-boiled eggs in that fucking dining room one more time, I'll shoot myself.

GABRIELE: Then go ahead and shoot. I'll eat alone.

ELIZABETH: (*stopping at the door*) Always the martyr!

GABRIELE: You're such spoiled brats. You could be having an incredible adventure, if only you had an ounce of curiosity.

ELIZABETH: We are always expected to feel exactly the way you feel!

GABRIELE: What's wrong with that?

NATASHA: Anyway, we came! We're *here*! What more do you want?

GABRIELE: I want to be left alone. Don't bother to come to the ceremony. Either of you.

ELIZABETH: What?!

GABRIEL: I'll get the award by myself.

ELIZABETH: You can't stop us from coming! We were invited! We have tickets!

NATASHA: Why else did we come here? To eat terrible food and look at old churches? (*she heads for the door*)

GABRIELE: I get it—you hate old things! Where are you going?

NATASHA: To order our eggs!

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ELIZABETH: I'll do it.

GABRIELE: Let Natasha order—she knows what I like!

ELIZABETH: You don't think I know what you like?

GABRIELE: No! You always forget!

ELIZABETH: How can you say that?

GABRIELE: This is my big day, Elizabeth! I'll say whatever I want.

BLACKOUT.

Scene 5

A hallway outside a museum auditorium. In the transition, we hear the sound of Gabriele's voice, giving her acceptance speech in German. Her affect is oddly childlike. The speech ends in big applause. When the lights come up, we discover Elizabeth and Natasha waiting for Gabriele outside the auditorium.

NATASHA: That was incredible.

ELIZABETH: Her face! As soon as she started her speech—she looked like she was seven again.

NATASHA: *(smiling)* I know.

ELIZABETH: It felt like all of Vienna showed up. *(beat)* You think I should go help her?

NATASHA: She told us to wait here. *(Natasha's phone pings. She looks at it)* It's the firm. *(reading a message on her phone)*

ELIZABETH: Oh no. *(beat. Natasha reads)* Please don't say they're firing you. *(Natasha shakes her head and keeps reading)* Are they asking you to ... navigate new horizons?

NATASHA: *(skimming the message, elated)* The ruling came through!

ELIZABETH: What ruling?

NATASHA: The pro bono asylum case I've been working on—we won. All five of my clients! I can't believe it. They're going to be let in.

ELIZABETH: My god.

NATASHA: Sergei and the other two Russians were terrified of being sent back to Moscow – they’d been beaten up so many times. But violence against gays is a hard case to prove—I tried not to get their hopes up. And Laila, the Afghan woman, has a little boy she hasn’t seen in two years—

ELIZABETH: You’re amazing. Don’t you feel proud?

NATASHA: Maybe it’s a sign. Maybe things are going to start getting better. For you too, Mommy. I mean it. Why don’t you bail on the rest of this extravaganza and go see that play tonight? Hang out with some theater people. Make yourself happy.

ELIZABETH: (*longingly*) *Phedre*? I haven’t seen a live performance in two years.

NATASHA: Do it.

ELIZABETH: How can I leave Grandma alone?

NATASHA: She’ll feel vindicated. Something positive in Vienna!

ELIZABETH: I don’t speak German...

NATASHA: So what! You know that play by heart. Tell them who you are. Pretend you’re programming your season!

ELIZABETH: Oh God, I wish! To do *Phedre* again—can you imagine?

NATASHA: Think how much fun it would be-- a whole season of “Share the despair”!

Gabriele appears with her walker, all dressed up.

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GABRIELE: Here I am!

ELIZABETH: (*rushing over to her*) Brava, Mutti! You were brilliant.

GABRIELE: The photos took forever, and then so many people wanted to greet me.

ELIZABETH: You must be exhausted. Shall we go back to the hotel? Where are all your flowers?

GABRIELE: Angela has them. I need to sit down. (*she sits*)

ELIZABETH: We cried the whole time.

GABRIELE: I almost cried when I saw how old I looked. I had to stand for so long—that was hard. (*to Natasha*) Were you bored, darling?

NATASHA: Not at all.

ELIZABETH: Listening to you give that speech... I'll never forget it.

GABRIELE: (*smiling*) I'm glad you decided to come.

ELIZABETH: You honestly thought we weren't going to come?!

GABRIELE: Everyone said you were incredibly charming.

NATASHA: We *are* incredibly charming!

GABRIELE: All I kept wondering was, when will it be over? But they kept talking and talking. (*to Elizabeth*) Could you find me some water?

NATASHA: (*quickly*) I'll go. There were bottles by the stage. (*she exits. Elizabeth sits beside her mother*)

ELIZABETH: Weren't you happy? With the ceremony?

GABRIELE: Were you?

ELIZABETH: Given that I couldn't understand most of it—I thought it was beautiful. The speeches—the flowers-- they really tried!

GABRIELE: Even though not one of them had ever read any of my books... that was immediately clear. That sweaty mayor gave me the creeps. And the other bureaucrat who stank of onions...

ELIZABETH: But they said wonderful things about you.

GABRIELE: True! But when they finally gave me my medal? It looked like an Iron Cross!

ELIZABETH: I wondered why you looked so queasy...

GABRIELE: My parents would've been *shocked*. (*beat. Thinking*) It was a wonderful occasion... (*ambivalently*) but at the same time, I felt slightly like their prize pig. "We've come so far, we can now give a famous Jewish critic our biggest honor." They didn't even organize a special *cake!*

ELIZABETH: Yes—that was a serious failure.

Natasha appears with some bottles of water and a bar of Toblerone chocolate.

NATASHA: Look what I found-- water—and Toblerone! In celebration of your triumph. (*she hands a bottle of water and the Toblerone to her grandmother*)

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GABRIELE: (*teasing*) By the way, darling, a boy was waiting to talk to me, after the photos. (*she opens the chocolate and eats some*)

ELIZABETH: Natasha just won a big asylum case! Tell her, darling.

NATASHA: (*her attention piqued*) In a minute! Go on, Grandma.

GABRIELE: (*savoring the chocolate*) Delicious. That's better. (*smiling at Natasha*) He had a strange German accent—I couldn't quite place it—but he wanted to tell me how moved he was by my talk and how little the Austrians understand today about what happened—

ELIZABETH: Really!

GABRIEL: He said his family was Romanian and had lived underground during the war—

NATASHA: (*blushing*) That was Stefan. My colleague's brother.

GABRIELE: So I gathered! You told him about my talk?

NATASHA: He asked me for the details last night and said he was anxious to meet you. I wish you'd texted me! I would've come right away—to introduce the two of you.

GABRIELE: He was perfectly capable of introducing himself.

NATASHA: Guess what he found out this morning? The family who owns your old apartment is away on vacation and has signed off on our entry. So we can access the building anytime!

ELIZABETH: You're kidding.

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NATASHA: I'm meeting him tonight to give him the forms.

ELIZABETH: Tonight?

GABRIELE: Tell me, darling ... might this whole obsession with the apartment just be a convenient *ploy* to keep seeing Stefan? I'm just asking.

NATASHA: It's been fun, getting to know him... (*covering*) It's nice to feel *interesting* for once.

GABRIELE: Who says you're not interesting?

NATASHA: You do! You always describe me as your granddaughter who's highly intelligent but sadly *unliterary*.

GABRIELE: It's true.

ELIZABETH: (*to Gabriele*) But listen -- your highly intelligent and sadly *unliterary* granddaughter just won a major legal victory! Asylum for five refugees.

GABRIELE: Really?

ELIZABETH: (*to Natasha*) Tell her!

NATASHA: Two Afghans and three Russians, to be precise.

GABRIELE: My goodness. Who needs to be literary?

NATASHA: (*blushing*) Well...

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GABRIELE: (*smiling, to Natasha*) Brava, darling. Tonight you can buy us dinner and tell us all about it. But first... I need a nap!

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 6

Morning. The three women are standing in the entryway of Gabriele's childhood apartment. Gabriele is in her wheelchair, pushed by Elizabeth. Her eyes are closed. Natasha holds up a key.

NATASHA: We're in!

ELIZABETH: *(looking around)* I can't believe it.

NATASHA: *(to Gabriele)* Are your eyes still closed? *(Gabriele nods)*

GABRIELE: You sure no one's here?

NATASHA: Positive. It's all ours! Courtesy of the Center for Returning Jews.

GABRIELE: *(tartly)* I would hardly call us *returning Jews!*

ELIZABETH: Let's wheel you to the perfect spot, Mutti—and then you can open your eyes and take a look! *(she commandeers the wheelchair and moves it around)* I wish we'd brought a special cake for the occasion!

GABRIELE: *(to Elizabeth)* It's like an opening night! I should've dressed up.

NATASHA: You've got your Prada sneakers on—that's dressy! *(Elizabeth is positioning Gabriele in the center of the room)* Okay—good. Are you ready, Grandma? Open your eyes! *(Gabriele does so. There is a long pause while she stares at the apartment. The other two women look at her in anticipation. Finally, Elizabeth breaks the silence.)*

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ELIZABETH: Well?

NATASHA: *(eagerly)* Does it look familiar?

GABRIELE: *(bewildered)* No... this can't be our apartment... it can't be...

NATASHA: Why not?

GABRIELE: *(looking around, totally disoriented)* Where are we? Where are the bookshelves? *(beat)* They were built into the walls, across the whole room! *(beat)* We're in the wrong apartment—

ELIZABETH: Maybe these people just don't read.

GABRIELE: There were thousands and thousands of volumes, on beautiful wooden shelves--

ELIZABETH: *(looking at the walls)* We can imagine!

GABRIELE: *(bewildered)* Everything we knew and cherished was kept on those shelves... the first poems I ever learned... the beautiful books on Italian art... *(pointing to a side wall)* That's where the painting was.

NATASHA: Which painting?

ELIZABETH: *(she knows)* Your mother as a little girl!

GABRIELE: *(nodding)* In her beautiful white dress, with a blue ribbon in her hair. My father tore the painting out of the frame the day we left and rolled it up in our luggage--

ELIZABETH: I always wondered what kind of room it had hung in...
(*stunned by the space*) What a magical space. Look at the proportions!
And the light!

NATASHA: And the ceilings! I can see why you loved it so much.

ELIZABETH: (*taking it all in*) Those giant windows...

NATASHA: And your nursery down the hall—

ELIZABETH: Yes! We have to go see the nursery! Shall we, Mutti?

GABRIELE: (*looking around*) I somehow thought it would all be the
same...like a stage set after the curtain falls. (*surveying the apartment*)
What kind of people would destroy a bookcase?

ELIZABETH: (*trying to make a joke*) “Dear old bookcase! Wonderful old
bookcase! I rejoice in your existence!” (*to her mother*) That’s Gayev in
Cherry Orchard ...

GABRIELE: Why don’t you stage Chekhov’s last scene right here? I’ll play
the old butler, Firs, and go die in the corner...

NATASHA: Oh, Grandma! (*wheeling her towards the window*) How
about the views? Have those changed?

GABRIELE: (*staring out*) At least the red tile roofs are still there. And the
chestnut trees. (*smiling, scanning the horizon*) The little park on the
corner where I broke my arm playing hopscotch with Dunde... On the
last day, Walter and I could see into the high school windows...

ELIZABETH: Those—down the street?

GABRIELE: (*nodding*) It was the first time we saw children our age saluting Hitler. That night, I could hear my mother crying in her bedroom. Which was very unusual—she had always been so good-humored.

NATASHA: (*turning Gabriele around*) Their bedroom was down that hall?

GABRIELE: (*pointing at a door*) That's the door we walked out for the last time. You see? On the wall next to it were little pencil markings we'd made of my height and Walter's for every year we lived here. I wanted to put our names there right before we left so people would remember who we were. But there was no time. First my father left, then Walter. Then my mother took my hand and she and I went together. The handle clicked shut. We headed for the stairs—and I realized my mother hadn't even locked the door. There was no point. It wasn't ours anymore.

ELIZABETH: But in spite of all of that... (*taking in the apartment*) ... it feels like something beautiful remains...

GABRIELE: (*sharply*) Why do you say that? What remains? Nothing! Nothing at all!

NATASHA: I know it feels completely different to you—but to us—it's what you always described. It's exactly as I imagined it! I mean, not the hideous wallpaper and tacky furniture, but ... (*beat*) I wish we could get it back.

ELIZABETH: The apartment?

GABRIELE: Why? Why on earth would we want it back?

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NATASHA: It was *yours*.

GABRIELE: Not anymore.

NATASHA: It's *ours*. Our history. Our family.

GABRIELE: It isn't. It's nothing without the *people*—it was the *people* that made it wonderful.

NATASHA: But *we're* the people now!

GABRIELE: We're just the ones who survived.

NATASHA: You don't think the essence of your life is still in the walls... ?

GABRIELE: (*firmly*) On the contrary. It feels like a crime scene. (*beat*) Now I see why my mother killed herself.

NATASHA and ELIZABETH: What?! (*staring at her grandmother*) What are you talking about? (*Gabriele is silent*)

ELIZABETH: You always told us Grandma died of heart disease...

GABRIELE: She did. She just hurried it along.

ELIZABETH: That can't be true.

GABRIELE: It is. There's no point pretending--

ELIZABETH: That's enough-- I don't want to hear. I wish we'd never come— (*to Natasha, upset*) Why did you make us do this?

NATASHA: You *wanted* to! We all wanted to!

GABRIELE: *I didn't!* But here we are, so you might as well know. *(they stare at Gabriele)* It was right after we'd moved to California, Daddy and me... It was her birthday, but I couldn't get back to Washington to be with her... so we had a long chat on the phone. She sounded very quiet and a little sad... I wished her a happy birthday... she said "*gute Nacht, liebe Gabriele*"... and then she took a bottle of pills and that was that. *(Elizabeth and Natasha stare at her)* But she was so practical, she arranged to end her life on a Tuesday night so that Wednesday morning when the cleaning lady came, she could be cleared away without a fuss. She even left the plane ticket I'd bought her on the table so we could get a refund for the flight. I found a long note she'd left for me and Walter. Saying that we had been wonderful children and that she was ready to die. *(Beat)* It seems so obvious, in retrospect, that she was struggling... but at the time... I was busy...we're always so busy with our "very important projects", aren't we?

ELIZABETH: *(trying to piece it together)* It was my junior year abroad. You called and... what did you say? Just that grandma had died? I don't remember anything about *pills*.

GABRIELE: *(her understanding about her mother deepening as she speaks)* To have lost everything and have to start all over again was bad enough... but then to get old and sick in a foreign country that you had never really adjusted to, no matter how hard you tried ... and to never be able to go home to the place you had loved... she must've wondered whether any of it had been worth it-- the escape, the learning English, the PhD in Economics from Columbia, all of it. Maybe it would have been better if instead of all that massive upheaval, she'd simply stayed here and died.

NATASHA: *(shocked)* How would that have been better?!

GABRIELE: Was it so much more desirable to live in exile in America? To erase your history? To have your whole culture taken away and to become nothing?

ELIZABETH: They weren't nothing! They were incredible--

GABRIELE: But *broken*. Once we got to America, I can't remember ever hearing my mother laugh.

ELIZABETH: When I was very little and the Bruegels from Vienna came to the National Gallery... I remember Grandma standing frozen in front of each painting, with tears pouring down her cheeks—

GABRIELE: ... as if those crazy dancing peasants were beloved relatives she'd lost in the war! (*beat. Looking around the apartment*) Still. She was so clear-sighted. She knew. She must've known ...

NATASHA: Known what?

GABRIELE: What these people were. If she hadn't, she wouldn't have gotten us out when she did.

ELIZABETH: *She's* the one who got you out?

GABRIELE: Of course my father agreed, but it was her force of will that made it happen. I never could figure out *how*-- she was barely "Jewish", in any sense that we would understand it today. She belonged to no synagogue, she followed no rituals, she spoke no Hebrew. But somewhere, deep inside, she had a clear sense of who we were. And who they were. And who they *thought* we were. And why, after we fled, we should never *ever* come back. We loved it so much, we couldn't conceive of the fact that it didn't love us back. (*distressed*) What fools we were! My parents' friends spent their time going to

concerts and operas-- as if their future were totally secure! What they were *thinking?! The only ones with their antennae out at the time were the Zionists, who knew exactly what was happening and hoped to get to Palestine... but not my family. For us, going to some remote and undeveloped desert without a philharmonic or decent whipped cream was worse than staying in a city that hated us. (beat)* And so in the end, my mother did what had to be done. I hope when my time comes, I'll do exactly the same.

NATASHA: Don't say that!

GABRIELE: No one needs to live forever. When it's over, let it be over. Like your stupid cherry orchard—chop it down!

NATASHA: (*upset*) Let's go.

GABRIELE: Look around you, Natasha! Life isn't always happy.

ELIZABETH: I've never heard you say that. Except maybe when we lived in Philadelphia.

GABRIELE: I'm telling you now... when it comes to the end, it's for me to choose...

ELIZABETH: Stop it, Mutti. You can only say that because you've had such a remarkable life.

GABRIELE: You're just as remarkable.

ELIZABETH: (*bursting out*) I'm *not*! You have to stop saying that! All we ever do in this family is tell each other how remarkable we all are and what a brilliant legacy we have inherited. But the party's over! When

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are you ever going to realize that being compared to you and your amazing family history just makes me feel completely... invisible?

NATASHA: (*amazed at her mother's words*) Wow. (*beat*) I thought I was the only one who felt that way.

GABRIELE: (*genuinely surprised*) Seriously? (*beat*) Why on earth would you two feel that way?

NATASHA: Do you know anyone else who fled for their life and then published a new book every year for thirty years?

GABRIELE: (*shrugging*) I get bored easily...

ELIZABETH: It's impossible to catch up, no matter what we do.

GABRIELE: Catch up to *what*?

NATASHA: You'll never understand.

ELIZABETH: It was bad enough *before* the board fired me! But now...

GABRIELE: Oh stop! (*looking at them*) You want to know the truth?

NATASHA: What?

GABRIELE: I feel like a traitor saying this inside my parent's beloved apartment, but so what. (*beat*) We weren't so remarkable. Not even here in Vienna. That's just a myth.

NATASHA: No, it's not!

GABRIELE: First of all, every success the family achieved during those last Vienna years, every book or love affair or new job—it was a *surprise* because we were the enemy, so nothing was expected. You see? My father knew he'd never be allowed to be a professor, so he was content to be a lawyer who spent his evenings talking philosophy with friends. It was the same with me in America—no one expected a thing, so my work made a stir. And then-- most of our relatives weren't such geniuses! They were totally clueless about what was going on in the world. It was only the Anschluss and the escape that suddenly made them interesting!

NATASHA: That can't be right.

GABRIELE: It's absolutely right! Grandmamma made fun of her sisters for being so fatuous. And she herself may have been brilliant but she wrote awful things in her diary—she was so pleased to be *blonde*—she was delighted she didn't really *look* Jewish...

ELIZABETH: Oh, come on!

GABRIELE: People are surprising. The whole Vienna obsession was a fantasy... like the sisters' dreams about Moscow... Moscow... Moscow!

ELIZABETH: (*outraged*) What are you talking about? It wasn't a fantasy! Your childhood here... the beauty... the cakes... the art... everything you brought with you to America... it's our *religion*! The only religion we've ever had. It's what I was raised on.

GABRIELE: That's not my fault! Family myths are always fiction.

ELIZABETH: Then what was the point? All those stories and photos and family memories—it's like being told that a relationship we always thought was beautiful was actually completely toxic.

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GABRIELE: It *was* beautiful. And now it's over.

NATASHA: That's crazy.

ELIZABETH: Why are you suddenly making such a left turn?

GABRIELE: Why are you two letting let the past be such a noose around your neck? (*firmly, trying to explain*) You've got it all wrong. Both of you. In some ways I had a hard life... yes, but in other ways it was easier than it is for you two. I see that now. You have so many more options than we did—there are so many expectations—so much has been invested in you—it *is* impossible to live up to it all!

NATASHA: That's right!

ELIZABETH: So what do you suggest we do?

GABRIELE: You'll figure it out.

ELIZABETH: You think so?

GABRIELE: I have complete faith. Why else did the rest of us survive? For you! (*smiling, surveying them both*) We survived for you. (*We hear knocking on the door*) Here we go! It's always the same with these people. They invite you into their homes—and then in the end, they kick you out. (*yelling in German*) *Lass uns in Ruhe! Wir haben den Schlüssel!* ("Leave us alone. We have the key!")

NATASHA: (*laughing*) You tell them, Grandma!

GABRIELE: What creeps!

Another knock, and then a voice in German calls out "GUTEN MORGEN! BIST DU FAST FERTIG?" ("Good morning! Are you almost done?")

GABRIELE: *Wir sind mehr als Fertig! ("We're more than done!")*

NATASHA: What are you saying?

ELIZABETH: We better go, before they throw us out on the street.

NATASHA: Shall we at least take a picture? Of the three of us?

GABRIELE: No. We don't need pictures. This time, we leave of our own free will! Ready? Who's pushing?

NATASHA: Me! *(crossing to the wheelchair)*

GABRIELE: Excellent. Come on, ladies! *(calling out)* Auf wiedersehen!
Let's get out of here.

Natasha wheels Gabriele towards the door.

SCENE 7-- DEPARTURE

The next morning. Gabriele, Elizabeth and Natasha stand with their suitcases in front of the hotel.

ELIZABETH: Okay. I think that's everything.

GABRIELE: Yes.

ELIZABETH: The taxi will be here in five minutes. *(beat)* Maybe we should sit on our luggage. Like Russians do before a trip.

GABRIELE: I'll sit on my walker instead... *(she opens the seat on her walker and sits. Beat)*

NATASHA: Why do Russians sit on their luggage before a trip?

GABRIELE: To drink vodka and hope for the best.

ELIZABETH: Especially in Chekhov-- travel was so fraught then... they needed a ritual... *(beat)* At the end of Andrei Serban's *Cherry Orchard*, the cast sat on their luggage for so long the audience went home... they thought the play was over!

GABRIELE: Or that it was a Beckett play...

NATASHA: Clearly they weren't using roller bags... *(she sits on the curb. Pulls out a bag)* Okay! I got something for you both. Look!

GABRIELE: *(excited)* A present! Finally, a present!

NATASHA: From Demel's. *(handing her grandmother a little white box)* Sachertorte for you... *(and one for her mother)* And a perfect chocolate hedgehog for you!

GABRIELE: Demel's! My favorite café! How wonderful. *(opening the box, entranced)* Can I have a bite?

NATASHA: You can eat the whole thing! That's what it's for.

GABRIELE: *(like a little girl)* Now?

ELIZABETH: It's not even 8 a.m., Mutti! You'll get sick. *(beat)* I'll save mine for the plane. *(to Natasha)* What did you get for yourself?

NATASHA: A *krapfen*! Just so I could say the word.

GABRIELE: *(elated)* Thank you darling! I was hoping to get back to Demel's but there was no time.

NATASHA: Stefan got them for me. We ordered them last night and he had them delivered to the hotel this morning.

GABRIELE: Just one bite...

Elizabeth looks at her daughter. Gabriele is absorbed in her cake.

ELIZABETH: So. Are you glad we came?

NATASHA: To Vienna? Are you?

ELIZABETH: *(surprised at herself)* Yes, actually.

GABRIELE: *(eating)* You were heroic to put up with it—both of you.

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ELIZABETH: And now it's time to go home ...

NATASHA: What's going to happen?

ELIZABETH: We'll see. *(she smiles)*

NATASHA: Have a napkin. *(she gives napkins to her mother and grandmother)*

GABRIELE: *(eyeing Elizabeth curiously)* What are you smiling about?

ELIZABETH: *(covering)* Nothing. *(beat)* I got an amazing email this morning—

GABRIELE: Don't tell me-- the nasty red-head wrote and apologized?!

ELIZABETH: Fat chance. *(beat)* It was from that theater where I saw *Phedre* last night—

NATASHA: What did they say?

ELIZABETH: I had chatted to some of the actors afterwards... just thoughts about the play and my own experience with it-- and they wrote to say they were totally exhilarated by our conversation. They'd *googled* me! Can you imagine?

NATASHA: I should hope so!

ELIZABETH: They're trying to start some international collaborations and wondered if we could brainstorm...

GABRIELE: Well well... maybe you haven't lost your touch after all...

NATASHA: (*teasing*) What a shame you don't have a *single* idea to give them...

ELIZABETH: (*enthusiastically*) I told them the first thing I would do if I were them is to create a young company... their actors are brilliant but they're way too old for the parts they're playing...

NATASHA: Says the woman who complains constantly about age discrimination...

ELIZABETH: (*suddenly doubting herself*) Oh God, I hope I didn't insult them. Do you think...? I mean, it was just a thought—I have a million proposals for them!

GABRIELE: Don't tell me you'd actually come back here?

ELIZABETH: It's not like they made me a job offer or anything, it was just a conversation... (*beat*) But yes. If it really turns out that there's nothing left for me at home... and if they asked me... I'd love to come help them.

GABRIELE: Even if you don't speak German?

ELIZABETH: They speak perfect English. (*conceding*) Okay... I could learn a little German... why not? I'm not dead yet...

GABRIELE: That's what I keep telling you. You have so much imagination. From now on, you should do exactly what you want.

ELIZABETH: Meaning what?

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GABRIELE: We'll fly home and get me settled. And then—enough's enough. Who wants to spend the best years of their life putting on their mother's socks?

ELIZABETH: But... who will take care of you? *(beat)* How are you going to lace those Prada sneakers?

GABRIELE: *(shrugging. Maybe covering her anxiety)* I'll wear slippers. *(beat)* You should stage some radical Chekhov while you can.

NATASHA: *(to her mother)* I agree!

ELIZABETH: You do? *(torn)* What about you?

NATASHA: Stefan cried when we said goodbye last night. He doesn't want me to leave.

ELIZABETH: But you have to.

NATASHA: Who says I have to?

ELIZABETH: What do you mean? You have a life—and work—and a new apartment to furnish--

NATASHA: Save the notes for your actors. *(smiling)* Stefan wants to take me to Hohenems—

GABRIELE *(startled)*: Hohenems!

ELIZABETH: What's Hohenems?

GABRIELE: The town where my mother's grandfather came from!

ELIZABETH: Why? *(beat. Insistently)* Why, darling?

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NATASHA: (*evading*) I'm going to eat my *krapfen* now.

GABRIELE: How did Stefan even know about Hohenems?

NATASHA: Mmmmmmm! (*getting sugar all over her face*) He read your memoir.

GABRIELE: I *knew* he was a nice boy.

NATASHA: He wants me to see the roots of our family, as far back as we can go. (*licking the sugar*) Oh my God... it's so sweet!

GABRIELE: Who *is* this person?

NATASHA: He is obsessed with everyone who was lost—the whole Jewish diaspora during the Hapsburg Empire—so of course he's read all your books —that's why he wanted to meet me to begin with.

ELIZABETH: And we thought it was your adorable cheeks and winning personality!

NATASHA: That too. First he thought I should go to Brno and see where your Grandfather was born...

GABRIELE: Incredible. Who would've thought!

NATASHA: But Brno is too far. So we settled on Hohenems. (*beat*) I'm staying a few extra days. In Austria.

ELIZABETH: (*shocked*) You changed your flight?

NATASHA: It was easy. I'm a rich lawyer. Don't look so shocked.

GABRIELE: Oh my goodness! I can't believe it. *(reaching for Natasha)* You have sugar all over your face, darling—let me clean you up--
(Natasha crosses to her grandmother, who wipes the sugar off her cheeks. While she does so, Gabriele explains to Elizabeth) Hohenems is deep in the Rhine Valley at the foot of the mountains-- with a beautiful town square and a Renaissance palace--

ELIZABETH: *(referring to Stefan)* Are you sure?

GABRIELE: Of course I'm sure. I could tell you exactly which building was grandpapa's birthplace.

NATASHA: *(smiling at her grandmother)* When you read about things like this in books, it seems ridiculous. But when it happens to you...
(looking at her mother) He said I light up his world.

ELIZABETH: *(nervous)* My goodness.

NATASHA: You think I'm out of my mind, don't you? I probably am. It will be such a disaster with Max if I— *(she stops)*

GABRIELE: Don't even think about it.

NATASHA: Oh God, maybe I'm losing my mind. *(to her mother)* Am I making a terrible mistake? What's going to happen when I get home? Am I going to regret this forever?

ELIZABETH: I have no idea, sweetheart.

NATASHA: Tell me. Are we doing the right thing? Any of us?

ELIZABETH: If only we knew.

NATASHA: You must know! You're the director.

ELIZABETH: I don't even know what's going to happen when I eat that hedgehog...

GABRIELE: *(impulsively)* Then do it and find out.

ELIZABETH: *(startled)* What?

GABRIELE: Life is short. We must eat our hedgehogs while we can.

NATASHA: She's right, mommy. What do you have to lose? Eat it. For me. *(Elizabeth hesitates, confused. Gabriele smiles)*

ELIZABETH: Now? *(Elizabeth carefully takes the cake out of the bag. She takes a small bite. It's incredible. Beyond incredible. The other two watch her)* Oh my God!

GABRIELE: I knew it! People used to travel for days across the whole Austro-Hungarian Empire just for the chance to eat a Demel's hedgehog.

ELIZABETH: *(nodding, her mouth full)* Incredible...

GABRIELE: *(watching her savor the cake)* Isn't it a transcendent experience? It will change your life! *(to Natasha)* As for you, Natasha... you'll feel right at home in Hohenems. All the women in the family looked exactly like you. Same cheeks! Same hair! My mother would have been so thrilled to know that you were going there with a nice young man ...

NATASHA: *(smiling, watching her mother eat cake)* Is it changing your life?

ELIZABETH: Definitely. *(she stops eating for a moment)* You sure you'll be okay with Stefan? You hardly know him.

NATASHA: Oh Mother! It's just my luck—to meet someone I could love in this most useless and heartless of cities. Doesn't it strike you as funny? All night he made me laugh—and when the dawn came up over that beautiful Baroque church spire, he kissed me and I felt like I was inside one of your Russian plays.

ELIZABETH: *(staring with admiration at her daughter)* Except in this version, Irina actually fulfills her fantasy. What a rewrite!

NATASHA: So... Stefan and I will go to Hohenems... *(to her grandmother)* ... you'll go home with your big award... and by the time mommy finishes her chocolate hedgehog...

ELIZABETH: *(taking another bite of hedgehog)* My life will be completely transformed!

GABRIELE: *(smiling at her granddaughter)* You're honestly not coming to the airport with us?

NATASHA: Honestly.

ELIZABETH: *(looking at the cake)* Should I eat his little espresso eyes?

GABRIELE: Of course! The eyes are the best part!

NATASHA: Go on! *(Elizabeth recklessly finishes her cake)*

GABRIELE: Brava! *(They applaud. Elizabeth licks her lips. Takes a deep, satisfied breath)*

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ELIZABETH: I did it.

GABRIELE: Good for you.

ELIZABETH: It's like the best sex you ever had. *(beat. She looks at her mother and daughter, smiling)* Look at us!

NATASHA: What? *(Gabriele and Natasha quickly feel their cheeks to see if they're still covered with chocolate and sugar)*

ELIZABETH: We're like a bizarre inversion of *Three Sisters*, covered in chocolate! *(beat)* Remember the way the women huddle together after their men are gone? *(imagining)* They listen to the band play... *(eyeing her daughter)* Irina insists she'll go on working and working, no matter what happens...

NATASHA: *(nodding—she gets that)* Uh huh ...

GABRIELE: *(picking up the thread—she knows this story)* ... and they realize that soon they'll be gone too... and that people will forget what they looked like and what their voices sounded like... but that someday, their suffering will turn to joy for the people who live after them... who will remember them with pleasure.

ELIZABETH: Right. And somewhere in the background, the doctor's singing: *(softly)* Ta-ra-ra boom-de-ay! It's gonna rain today...

NATASHA: That sounds so sad.

ELIZABETH: Maybe. But maybe not! Maybe all of a sudden they're feeling strangely... free.

GABRIELE: Says the director...

ELIZABETH: *(slowly... thinking aloud)* If down the road I ever *do* get to stage *Three Sisters*... here's how I'd love it to end ... *(looking at her mother and daughter)* When all the passion has been spent, and the luggage has been packed, and the arguments are over... the three sisters will relieve their sorrow by devouring a perfect chocolate cake ... down to the last crumb.

GABRIELE: What a novel interpretation!

NATASHA: *That* I would come to see.

ELIZABETH: An ending and a beginning.

GABRIELE: *(nodding)* Their lives aren't over yet.

ELIZABETH: They can finally stop pretending that they'll ever go back to Moscow.

GABRIELE: Thank God. No more Vienna, Vienna, Vienna...

NATASHA: So... they might as well eat cake and try to imagine the future.

ELIZABETH: What could be more hopeful than that?

Sound of a taxi horn. The women look up and wave. They stand. Sound of a car pulling up.

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY.