

A VERY JEWISH KING

CHARACTERS

Jacob Stern age 66, dominate, charming, patriarch, Yiddish/American actor.

Regina Stern age 63, matriarch, attractive former actress, quietly forceful, humane

Heshie Stern age 60s, Jacob's impish, irreverent brother, retired actor, cab driver

Rose age 35, the Stern's oldest daughter and an actress

Lily age 31, the middle daughter and an actress

Iris age 27, the youngest daughter and an actress

Rabbi Weissage 65, neatly dressed, black hat worn indoors, outspoken

SETTING

SCENE I & II - A midtown Manhattan hotel suite in the theatre district, March 1937.

SCENE III - Same hotel suite, June 1937

SCENE IV A cemetery, November 1937

SCENE V - A decrepit Jewish nursing home, early winter 1939.

SCENE VI - A poor, old synagogue, late Sept. 1939

SCENE VII - An undisclosed location, late Oct. 1939

SCENE VIII - The Staten Island Ferry, March 1940

SCENE ONE

**(AN UPSCALE HOTEL SUITE WITH
WIDE, TALL WINDOWS, ALCOVES
AND A GREAT HISTORICAL FEEL)**

JACOB

Are you sure our daughters are coming today?

REGINA

Yes.

JACOB

I read my obituary and it was dated today, Regina.

(REGINA SIGHS, BUT NOT FOR JACOB)

The paper used to be a lovely thing to read. Darling?

REGINA

Are you talking to me?

JACOB

No, I'm talking to this creature without a job.

REGINA

Your brother is asleep.

JACOB

He's not my brother.

REGINA

Since when?

JACOB

Since I found out that my father was not his father.

REGINA

That's hearsay.

JACOB

Exactly. What I hear is what I say. Wake him up. Please.

REGINA

Heshie doesn't like to be shaken.

JACOB

I didn't ask you to shake the *boychek*. He's not a martini.

REGINA
He doesn't drink.

J

JACOB
Kick him. Slap him. Just wake up the old bastard.

REGINA
He has a weak heart, Jacob.

JACOB
And I don't? Who carries this family?

REGINA
And who will bury this family?
(HANDING HIM SOME OPENED MAIL)
You're getting reams of fan letters crying about your retirement.

JACOB
My agent leaked the news.

REGINA
I can't stand Sol. Always throwing touring jobs at your feet.

JACOB
You know, I am not impressed with this "fancy" Manhattan suite.

REGINA
I did not pick it.

JACOB
You did.

REGINA
Sol Glickman picked it and the Plaza Hotel, it's not.

JACOB
The Plaza doesn't admit Jews.

REGINA
They only let in some Jews who masquerade. Like Sultzberger who owns the *goyisher* New York Times.

JACOB
I will never masquerade. I have the stripes of a tiger and . . .

REGINA

And the mane of a *hemisher* lion. But you won't wear your hat or a *yarmulke* in the lobby.

JACOB

There's little kosher in this *farshinkener* modern world. Am I right or am I wrong?

REGINA

I don't know.

JACOB

For Christsakes, it's Purim!

REGINA

Don't mention Christ in my presence please.

JACOB

Excuse me! You used to like all Jewish young men with beards.

REGINA

Only if they have feminine chins.

JACOB

Christ was very feminine. I don't trust all of our daughters, Regina.

REGINA

Oy, why don't you keep reading to me from the paper?

JACOB

The Times is not the Herald Tribune

REGINA

I'm waiting.

JACOB

It's very important to maintain the proper mood after I just broke wind.

(CAREFULLY FOLDS THE NEWSPAPER)

In Germany, some famous Jewish businesses have closed abruptly.

REGINA

And this doesn't happen in New Jersey?

JACOB

We're talking about the Schneiders and the Kleins and the Steinways.

REGINA

The Steinways make the classy pianos, yes?

JACOB

Grand pianos, yes. Who the hell do you know in New Jersey?

REGINA

Why are you getting so irritable?

JACOB

What?

REGINA

You've three wonderful sons-in-law and you treat them like grocery boys.

JACOB

Not true. Grocery boys I tip. But *mishpucha*? I tease them.

REGINA

You torture them.

JACOB

So?

REGINA

Moishe Kapoyr!

JACOB

I'm not standing on my head.

REGINA

Yet it all comes out backwards.

JACOB

My head is not my ass.

REGINA

Your head is up your ass. And you're too strict to your children.

JACOB

Moishe Kapoyr! You married the wrong Jacob, Regina.
This Jacob will never make you happy enough.

REGINA

And which Jacob would have, my darling?

JACOB

Mr. Jacob Adler, the *first* King of Yiddish Theatre.

REGINA

Jacob Adler's dead ten years . . .

JACOB

Eleven. Yet his star outshines mine.

REGINA

There are big kings and little kings.

JACOB

This *little* king brought you into the limelight.

REGINA

True. But such fame is not happiness.

JACOB

We are happy. Admit it. We laugh. We sing. We *used to dance*. Who doesn't compare us to the Adlers and the Lunts?

REGINA

Which means *bubkes* to me.

JACOB

You have your vanity too. You dye your hair and still own five wigs, while I only have one decrepit toupee from Hong Kong.

(GENTLY LAUGHING)

JACOB

Why did you marry me?

REGINA

My father made me.

JACOB

Your father had issues with me.

REGINA

You think maybe I married you for sex?

JACOB

Of course!

REGINA

We haven't had sex since the Hindenberg crashed.

Not true. JACOB

Oh, it's very true. REGINA

Are you blaming the crash on me? JACOB

Naturally! REGINA

That was last year. JACOB

1937. REGINA

Are you saying perhaps I make love like a zeppelin? JACOB

(SWEETLY)
No, but you pass gas like a dirigible.
(SMILING)
Read from your precious newspaper before company comes. REGINA

(READING)
Hitler is making rancid speeches. JACOB

Gas is gas. REGINA

Kaiser wrote a play called GAS. JACOB

Should I care? It's a distasteful title. And I wish you wouldn't wear that old *schemata*. REGINA

(POINTING TO A SLEEPING HESHIE)
He sleeps like a bear. And you sleep when I'm on stage. JACOB

REGINA

I count my blessings.

JACOB

*“O sleep! O gentle sleep!
Nature’s soft nurse, how have I frightened thee,
That thou no more wilt weigh mine eyelids down
And seep my senses in forgetfulness?”*

REGINA

Henry IV?

JACOB

Very good, Regina. An education this sharp can’t be bought.
(PAUSE)

They’re late! Are you sure our daughters are coming?

REGINA

(SWEETLY)

Yes, or I’ll break their little necks.

JACOB

(AFTER EACH STATEMENT, HESHIE SAYS ‘OY’)

My bad dreams. The Yiddish neon marquis had crumpled. Ash and smoke everywhere. Our daughters in sinful Hollywood films. Skirts exposed their legs. To hell with Louis B. Mayer! Grandchildren forget our names. Our graves destroyed. Each dream makes me *svitz* like a Pollock in the boiler room. Tonight I test God.

HESHIE

(TOPPING ONE ‘OY’)

Oy, Oy, Oy.

REGINA

Does God know?

JACOB

He told me - *sotto voce*.

REGINA

God is your stage manager?

JACOB

When an angel brings *ruggalah* to nosh.
(PAUSE)

God told me not to divide our treasures.

REGINA

Nu?

JACOB

I'm giving away the lands.

REGINA

What land?

JACOB

The land upstate.

REGINA

Oy, Jacob. Not today.

JACOB

And, the second part, our little plot.

REGINA

Our grave at B'nai Jeshurun?

JACOB

No, dear. Our Brooklyn house.

REGINA

Our brownstone?

JACOB

Yes, our brownstone. And, the third part, the farm in Palestine.

(THE NEXT TWO LINES OVERLAP)

The farm is drier than Death Valley.

REGINA

What farm in Palestine?

JACOB

Some say Palestine. Some say *Eretz Yisrael*.

HESHIE

Some say tomato. Some say potato.

JACOB

(NEATLY FOLDS NEWSPAPER)

Goats, olives, and a little citrus - four hours from Jerusalem.

REGINA

We own goats in Palestine?

JACOB

I won the land and the livestock in a poker game.

REGINA

Livestock?

(HESHIE “MOOS” LIKE A COW)

You’re sending one of your daughters to Palestine?

JACOB

Someone has to go from this family. Nothing permanent. Just for ten years.

REGINA

You have rocks in your head, mister.

JACOB

The Holy Land. We say this each Passover, Regina. “Next year in Jerusalem!”

REGINA

Which girl do you have in mind?

JACOB

We’ll draw names from a hat.

REGINA

Are you an actor or a madman, Jacob?

HESHIE

Two for one, a bonus boy!

(HESHIE STIRS AND OPENS HIS EYES. NOW HE IS FULLY INVOLVED IN THE SCENE)

JACOB

I’m a perfect father and husband.

REGINA

You’re a world class fool.

HESHIE

And a champion *putz*.

JACOB

(POINTING TOWARD HESHIE)

He’s the fool in this family.

REGINA

You're not sending any child of mine to Palestine. We'll never see her.

JACOB

Boats come and go like clockwork. Lily loves to travel.

REGINA

Lily?

JACOB

Yes.

REGINA

And where did you get land upstate?

JACOB

I bought it.

REGINA

When?

JACOB

When you were back in Odessa.

REGINA

You waited until I left the country?

HESHIE

(GARBLED, LOUDER THAN HIS FIRST REMARK)

A sheynm dank in pupik (a pretty thanks in the navel!).

JACOB

Who asked you?

HESHIE

You're a fox. That's what they say in Russia about you. Jacob Stern is a fox who plays out the longest death scenes.

JACOB

You're a Pollack, *mishigunah*. You were never in Russia

HESHIE

They love me in Minsk.

REGINA

And you're giving away *our Brooklyn home*?

JACOB
Yes.

REGINA
Without consulting me?

JACOB
These house repairs are costing a fortune.

HESHIE
Why did you ever marry this man? He has coarse hair growing out of his ears.

JACOB
(TO HESHIE)
Don't you have a pressing doctor's visit today?

HESHIE
Yes, but I hate doctors. They're all cruel capitalists.

REGINA
You're not giving away our home, Jacob. I forbid you. Worse, *I'll kill you.*

JACOB
I have made a lot of money in real estate, but you don't know these things. We'll go to Florida, Regina.

REGINA
Florida?

JACOB
Another New York winter will depress me. Living costs are next to nothing.

REGINA
But our family is here, *meshuggunah*. The theatre is here!

JACOB
It's time to renounce the theatre.

HESHIE
A shonda! Has the theatre renounced you?

JACOB
Not now, but it will. The best actors are going to Hollywood. Money talks! And theatre critics today can't put eight smart words together. This is not Jewish theatre any more. It's all bland *goyish* white bread. I can't hear sweet Yiddish on the street.

HESHIE

Blame the diabolical new rabbis of New York!

JACOB

These younger *rebbe*s defend Roosevelt as if he were an honorary Jew.

HESHIE

(PRONOUNCED JEWISH ACCENT)

“Roosevelt” sounds Jewish.

JACOB

Everything is for *goyem* and *goniffs* today. Broadway is not Second Avenue. Ladies and gentlemen, Luther Adler is not Jacob Adler. Odets is not Gordin.

HESHIE

And a salty Jersey knish is not a garlic Brooklyn knish.

REGINA

(IRONIC)

How can you retire at this young age?

JACOB

It’s far better to exit in the height of my powers.

HESHIE

Said the *alta kaker* flea to the junkyard dog.

JACOB

Our daughters are all married and provided for. Yes? They will have children of their own soon.

REGINA

God willing.

JACOB

Why hover over them like vultures?

REGINA

Exactly. So stop this crazy talk!

JACOB

I have known great happiness.

REGINA

Happiness, we all had.

JACOB
But lately I can't remember my best lines.

HESHIE
That's why I left the stage.

JACOB
Except the soliloquy of Shylock.

HESHIE
Oy, you miss your cue and the critics crucify you!

REGINA
We all paraphrase.

HESHIE
Even Jesus paraphrased:

REGINA
Ganug!

HESHIE
"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" He left out *"Blessed are the heavily invested and the wisely diversified . . ."*

REGINA
I don't want to hear about Christ anymore today!

ROSE
(ENTERS)
I had called from downstairs. Doesn't anyone in this family pick up the phone?

REGINA
I was in the shower.

HESHIE
Your father's superstitious. He never picks up the phone on *Shabbos*.

JACOB
That's not superstition. That's our culture.

HESHIE
That's not an egg. That's a chicken.

JACOB

Why are you so late?

ROSE

My husband's downstairs and he has a question.

HESHIE

And the answer is – That's not a chicken. That's an egg.

ROSE

Mama?

REGINA

What Rose?

ROSE

There's a funny smell in the room.

HESHIE

Why do comics like rubber chickens?

REGINA

It's an old hotel room, *mamala*.

ROSE

So switch rooms. Smells like sardines.

JACOB

I just opened a can an hour ago.

HESHIE

You don't have to *boil* a rubber chicken!

ROSE

How long must you stay here?

REGINA

Until *all* the plumbing repairs are done.

ROSE

Mama, I understand perfectly.

REGINA

Why is you husband downstairs?

ROSE

Don't ask. Why is Uncle Heshie staying with you?

HESHIE

Someone stole my taxi cab. May the thief rot in hell for 99 years!

ROSE

I'm so sorry, Uncle.

JACOB

Heshie left the keys in the car.

HESHIE

I always do, otherwise I lose the keys.

JACOB

What can you expect in New York?

REGINA

What are we going to do for dinner?

ROSE

I can't stay for dinner, Mama.

REGINA

You must. We have everyone coming tonight.

ROSE

Who?

REGINA

Everyone. Who's *everyone* to you?

HESHI

I also had three signed Al Hirschfield drawings in the trunk and a tin of imported caviar.

JACOB

It's Purim tonight, my little Rose.

ROSE

So?

JACOB

We celebrate all the holidays. And now, a little Yiddish vaudeville.

(A CUE TO REGINA AS THEY PERFORM "DER SUFFEREGETSKY"
A VERY BRIEF SUFFRAGE SKIT IN YIDDISH)

REGINA

Hurey far ale vayber un strayk nider mit di mener. Vayber, es iz gekumen undzer tsayt, az mir zoln oykh vern mentshn un nisht mer zayn keyn tshatshkes. Ikn makh a forshpayz!) (Hurray for all women and strike against the men. Women, our time has come. We are now human beings and no longer playthings. I am making an appetizer!)

JACOB

Vos far a forshpayz? Vos bistu in kishn, makhst a forshpayz?
(What kind of appetizer? What are you doing in the kitchen, making an appetizer?)

REGINA

Neyn, neyn, ney. Ikh meyn, ikh makh a farshlog. Azoy vi biz yetst hobn ale vayber gekokht far di mener, azoy zol fun yetst on ale mener opkokhn di vayber un oyb nit veln mir straykn mit di mener. (No, no, no. I mean a proposal. Until now, all wives have cooked for men, so now all men should cook for women. If not, we'll shaft the men)

ROSE

“We'll shaft the men!”

JACOB

Strayk mit di mener? Veln di mener poter vern fun zeyere alte, mise vayber un zikh araynnemen sheyne, yunge schiskas af zeyere pletser. (Shaft the men? And the men will get rid of their old, ugly wives and get pretty young gentile chicks to replace them)

HESHIE

“Rid the ugly wives, and grab the gentile chicks!”

REGINA

Oy gevalt!

JACOB

Ver vet regirn? A toes vos ir meynt. Regirn vet der foter in a bank mit shenk!
(Who will rule? You're screwed up. The father will rule from the tavern!)

REGINA

Ven di tsayt vet kumen, veln mir bashtimen!
(When the time comes, we'll SHUPT UP!)

ROSE/HESHIE

Very funny!

HESHIE

I'll always take Regina's side in the skit.

REGINA

(PATTING HESHIE ON THE HEAD)

Good boy.

HESHIE

Maybe our problem with women all comes down to jokes about the anatomy.

ROSE

Not my anatomy, please uncle.

JACOB

Pity the fool.

HESHIE

Pity the *Shabbos goy*. They have yet to form a labor union.

ROSE

It's strange to celebrate Purim in this sterile hotel, Mama.

JACOB

There are four *mitzvot* which are obligatory on Purim. The reading of *Megillat Esther*, festivity and

HESHIE

You know who I had in my cab last week? Rose, please. Ask me.

ROSE

Whom?

JACOB

. . . rejoicing, *Shalach Manot* - giving a present.

HESHIE

Paul Robeson.

JACOB

He drives a cab without car insurance! So who will read from the Book of Esther?

HESHIE

The famous, very intelligent, colored actor.

(ABOUT TO IMPERSONATE ROBESON)

"Every artist, every scientist must decide, now, where he stands. The battlefield is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear!"

(BACK TO NORMAL VOICE AND GESTURE)

No cab would pick him up, but I stopped. *Epus*. In the pouring rain. I was parked in line by Grand Central and I watched him wait.

JACOB

Lucky you.

HESHIE

I rolled down my window and said: “Dear Mr. Robeson, I would be so honored if you entered and dignified my cab. Please, you must.” So he opened the door and climbed in like a sultan. I drove him cross-town. He talked about Communism, baseball, and O’Neill’s EMPEROR JONES. He was surprised that I knew the script. He gave me a five dollar tip, but I asked only if he would shake my hand.

ROSE

Did he?

HESHIE

Oh, indeed he did. This was the hand of a true hero.

JACOB

You know, Heshela, you told a completely different story about Robeson yesterday.

HESHIE

What?

JACOB

You said you met Robeson at the public library.

REGINA

Jacob, leave him be.

HESHIE

That’s where he wanted to go before we went to the theatre district.

JACOB

And he gave you a two dollar tip.

HESHIE

Yes, he started with two bucks and upped me.

JACOB

You said he was with a young lady.

HESHIE

Well, with Robeson there were *so many* young ladies.

(MIMING ROBESON FLIRTING WITH A LADY PERHAPS
TEN FEET AWAY)

ROSE

Do you have a driver’s license, Uncle?

HESHIE

It expired, but I'm taking the test next month. I carry my old license just in case. And I always tip the cops. You know he wrote down his signature, my dear Mr. Robeson. Here it's in my wallet.

(OPENS HIS WALLET AND FINDS A SLIP OF PAPER WRAPPED
IN SEE-THROUGH PLASTIC)

It says: "To Heshie Stern, from one fine actor to another. Thank you for a very safe car ride. Paul Robeson."

ROSE

Can I see the paper please?

HESHIE

Sure, Rosie.

(HE GIVES HER THE SLIP OF PAPER)

ROSE

It's nearly illegible.

HESHIE

Just a little runny ink. Can't you see the "Robe"?

REGINA

We can make a reservation for nine in the dining room, Jacob, for dinner.

JACOB

Whatever you want.

HESHIE

You realize that the miracle of Purim is through wine – and I don't make one sweet bottle of Manishevitz.

REGINA

We could try room service.

ROSE

No, no, not with this smell.

JACOB

Nonsense. Lily will be here soon. Call room service, Regina. If we can stay here, I can take off these horribly tight shoes.

REGINA

Yes, I'll call right now.

(PICKS UP THE PHONE)

JACOB

And our youngest, Iris.

REGINA

And their two “model” husbands.

HESHIE

If I ever meet Paul Robeson again, I must ask for his photo.

ROSE

My Daniel thinks that the stock market will crash again.

REGINA

Hello, room service?

JACOB

Is that right?

ROSE

Daniel is very smart, Papa.

JACOB

He doesn't look smart.

REGINA

Jacob

(BACK TO PHONE)

Please bring up nine complete *glatt kosher* chicken dinners, four bottles of seltzer, and two bottles of wine, thank you very much. And a small bottle of Pepto Bismol.

JACOB

Does he own stock?

ROSE

No, but he invests for others.

JACOB

All the boys you dated were so morose. Why is that, Rosie?

ROSE

You just don't like Daniel because he's quite tall and a Republican and everyone's short and squat in this family.

JACOB

That's absurd. Who's short in this family?

REGINA

Twenty minutes for room service.

HESHIE

Once I saved Stanislavski's life.

JACOB

Don't *hock* me with Stanislavski!

HESHIE

(A SUCCESSFUL IMPERSONATION OF SLANISLAVSKI)

*"The actor's task, then, begins with the search for the play's **artistic seed**. All artistic action is **organic** action. For the actor, emotion rises in him with **invention!**"*

ROSE

(LAUGHING)

That's very good, Uncle! How did you save his life?

HESHIE

I told Stanislavski to avoid the subway.

(MOCK BOW)

When the Moscow Art Theater came to New York, Jacob Adler insisted on seeing Stanislavski. So his son Luther drove his father to the Russian's hotel.

REGINA

Rose, my darling, your belly's showing. Are you pregnant or just off your diet?

HESHIE

But when the car arrived, Adler was too sick to get out.

ROSE

Yes, I was going to tell you soon.

JACOB

Pregnant?

HESHIE

Luther Adler was about to drive off when Stanislavski came out of the hotel in his slippers and velvet bathrobe. Adler cried a fountain of tears.

REGINA

My God, my little *shaina maidel*.

ROSE

I'm married – what - four years now. What do you expect? Goldfish?

HESHIE

So Stanislavski ordered caviar but wept all night. Who says Russians are sentimental idiots?

ROSE

So I won't audition for any more plays this year.

JACOB

Why not!

HESHIE

1923. When giants walked the earth.

ROSE

My sisters will go on stage for me.

HESHIE

Now pygmies gallivant.

REGINA

I have to sit down.

JACOB

Rosie, you're the most talented of my girls.

ROSE

Papa, what difference does it make? The Stern family name will go on. Lily and Iris have been doing wonderful work with Kaufman and Hart.

JACOB

I'll be the judge of that.

ROSE

We excel at comedy, Papa.

JACOB

The Jewish artist is a tragedian!

HESHIE

He never did like George Kaufman. Why? Because Jacob Stern is - in his heart of hearts - a tragic communist .

JACOB

I'm a socialist, not a communist.

ROSE

You're the wealthiest socialist in the Yiddish theatre, Papa.

JACOB

Look, it all comes down to the joke –who's a *schlemiel* and who's a *schlimazel*?

ROSE

The *schlemiel* spills chicken soup and the *schlimazel* gets it on his lap?

HESHIE

The rich capitalist is the *schlemiel* and the poor worker is the *schlimazel*.

JACOB

Tokhes afn tish! Let's get down to business, please.

ROSE

Business?

REGINA

Papa's obsessed.

JACOB

Tonight after dinner I have something extremely urgent to tell you all.

ROSE

Papa, Daniel has an investment question so I have to ask you for him.

HESHIE

Robeson is a communist and he's not even Jewish!

ROSE

Daniel has an idea that is absolutely brilliant. He needs cash to be able to go ahead.

JACOB

Why doesn't he ask me himself?

ROSE

Because when he's within five feet of you he stutters.

JACOB

So he *fonfers*. That's not my fault.

ROSE

He's so much better over the phone.

JACOB

I don't talk about money or theatre over the phone. And never on *shabbos*.

Papa . . .

ROSE

What?

JACOB

Be nice.

ROSE

I am nice.

JACOB

Be nicer.

ROSE

What is his brilliant idea?

JACOB

ROSE

To buy a start-up hotel upstate and bring in Iris's husband to run things.

HESHIE

Oy gevult, do you know what it costs a cab to drive to the Catskills!

JACOB

A hotel? Is that Daniel's specialty. Have him come upstairs to talk to me. You tell him.
Now! This is a *theatre family!*
(LILY ENTERS)

LILY

The hotel concierge won't let me bring up my poodle.

REGINA

I told you not to bring that bag of bones with you.

LILY

If I leave him in the apartment, he pees on everything but the ficus tree, Mama.

(RABBI WEISS ENTERS)

RABBI

And that is, of course, one way in which God speaks to all of us.

JACOB

Good afternoon, Rabbi.

RABBI

And to you, Jacob. The flow of water is the music of life!

LILY

That's why I can't spend the night. Besides, my husband and I are fighting again.

JACOB

I told you Chaim was a chimpanzee.

LILY

We're having problems, but it's not what you think, Papa. Chaim wanted to stay away from New York this week.

REGINA

(TO THE RABBI)

She lives in Boston now.

RABBI

Boston?

JACOB

Lily's acting with the Boston Repertory, yes. A season of Shakespeare led by an arrogant young *fagela* who wears a beret.

RABBI

Too far, young lady.

LILY

Not far enough from my neurotic in-laws.

JACOB

Lily, I never know when you're being ironic.

(LILY SMILES SWEETLY TO JACOB)

ROSE

She's not talking just about her in-laws, Papa.

LILY

(STICKS HER TONGUE AT ROSE)

Did I miss your birthday?

ROSE

Yes, like last year.

LILY

Where's Iris?

REGINA

I don't know. She's usually the first to arrive.

LILY

Her husband's very sick.

REGINA

Is that right?

LILY

I think it's asthma or leukemia or psoriasis.

JACOB

Well, which is it?

REGINA

We shouldn't be gossiping about someone's illness.

RABBI

Better to gossip about FDR.

ROSE

The President?

RABBI

His name used to be Rosenfeld.

JACOB

That's patently untrue.

RABBI

I read it in the Jewish Forward.

JACOB

I rest my case! Next you'll tell me that J.P. Morgan is a Jew.

RABBI

Is he?

HESHIE

J.P. Jewish Philanthropist!

REGINA

FDR can't walk.

How do you know?
RABBI

I know. Believe me, I know.
REGINA

What, Roosevelt can dance but he can't walk?
RABBI

I can tell you something else.
HESHIE

Go ahead.
JACOB

He's not sleeping with Eleanor.
HESHIE

How do you know?
RABBI

Because Mrs. Roosevelt has that peculiar look. Regina knows what I'm talking about.
HESHIE

Mrs. Roosevelt is not happy.
REGINA

See? It's cold under the sheets.
HESHIE

So? He's cheating on Eleanor.
ROSE

Ladies and gentlemen, the President has polio. He cannot *schtup* just any woman!
JACOB

Papa, he doesn't have polio.
ROSE

Migraines?
RABBI

Maybe he does, maybe he doesn't. But does his "plumbing" work?
HESHIE

RABBI

There's indoor plumbing at the White House.

ROSE

He couldn't be a wonderful President if he had polio.

RABBI

Hush, Rose-ala, *ken ayin hora*.

ROSE

Didn't Molly Picon have polio?

LILY

I can't stand Molly Picon.

RABBI

This was once a very fancy hotel, Jacob. But look at the *schmutz* and dust everywhere. You know I would complain to the management.

REGINA

I've seen your office, Rabbi, and you shouldn't really complain about other people's *schmutz*. At least we don't have cockroaches.

LILY

We have roaches in the theatre green room and they *love* opening night.

(IRIS ENTERS, OUT OF BREATH AND LOOKS ILL)

REGINA

Well, finally, all our daughters are present.

IRIS

I'm sorry to be late.

RABBI

What's your opinion on *schmutz*, Iris?

IRIS

What, rabbi?

RABBI

Schmutz?

JACOB

Why are you out of breath?

IRIS

The elevator's not working.

RABBI

It was working ten minutes ago. What do you think about *schmutz* in the elevator?

JACOB

You're very late, young lady.

IRIS

I wasn't going to come, Papa.

JACOB

You look ill.

IRIS

I don't feel well, Papa.

REGINA

She doesn't eat. I told her a bagel a day!

RABBI

One day a magnificent Jewish President will come bless all the bagel stores.

HESHIE

Better he bless the Brooklyn Dodgers!

JACOB

Sit, sit. Regina, bring her something to drink please.

(PAUSE)

How is Yankel?

IRIS

He's been hospitalized.

LILY

What does he have?

IRIS

Tuberculosis.

ROSE

That's very serious.

IRIS

He has a good doctor, Rose. They're running tests.

Yankel is not very orthodox.

RABBI

True, he reads Martin Buber.

IRIS

Buber? That Jewish Buddhist!

(HIS MOUTH SOURS)

RABBI

How did he get tuberculosis?

REGINA

He's hotelier. Maybe from old hotel furniture.

HESHIE

We don't know, Mama.

IRIS

You never know. Does he drink?

REGINA

No!

IRIS

Loch Sheldrake and Ferndale are supposed to be wonderful for TB.

ROSE

Where?

RABBI

In the Catskills

REGINA

Excellent sanatoriums in the mountains . . .

ROSE

. . . where Rip Van Winkle lives.

REGINA

Who?

RABBI

JACOB

Van Winkler shares a palatial house with *Charles Lindbergh*.

Not true. RABBI

One sleeps too much. The other wears goggles in bed. HESHIE

And both *goys* got German gold medals of Honor from Goering. JACOB

America's favorite pilot should go to Hell. RABBI

He suffered plenty after the kidnapping of his baby. REGINA

True. JACOB

Lindbergh's an anti-Semite. RABBI

(TO IRIS)
Rose is pregnant. LILY

Mazel tov! IRIS

Will you be next? LILY

Next for what? IRIS

A lobotomy. LILY

I'm the youngest, you should be next. IRIS

Very diplomatic, Iris. Have a baby! RABBI

Have a *bris!* HESHIE

JACOB

In this family, it pays to be diplomatic.

HESHIE

And hard of hearing.

RABBI

Can you please say that in Yiddish, Jacob?

JACOB

Gey kakin ahfen yon.

(JACOB SAYS AN OBSCENITY IN YIDDISH ABOUT THE OCEAN)

HESHIE

“Go take a crap?”

REGINA

Jacob.

ROSE

“in the ocean?”

JACOB

Pardon me. Let us now elevate our thoughts.

(PAUSE)

Was Shylock the creation of an unkind Shakespeare? Was Shylock self-loathing? Are Wagner operas viable? Does Hitler admire Wagner? Why buy books by Hemmingway? Why care about O’Neill’s plays? He’s not a Jew. How Jewish are Gertrude Stein and Elmer Rice? Is Marc Chagall more French than Jewish? Why aren’t there good, new Yiddish songs on the radio?

HESHIE

And when will someone turn THE DYBBUK into a musical comedy?

LILY

Papa, I thought you liked Chagall’s paintings?

JACOB

I like his flying cows, Lily.

RABBI

Cows should not fly. It’s not photogenic.

HESHIE

It’s certainly not hygienic.

REGINA

What upsets your father, truly, is Sholom Asch's GOD OF VENGEANCE.

ROSE

Because the plot has a Jewish brothel owner?

IRIS

And his daughter's a lesbian?

LILY

And the writing is awful?

JACOB

Everyone is so clever today.

HESHIE

Why are all the Brooklyn librarians lesbians?

JACOB

Are these questions central to Purim?

REGINA

Fifteen years since Sholom Asch died.

HESHIE

The only distinction of a Jewish brothel keeper over his *goyish* counterpart is the "two for one" coupons.

RABBI

Coupons work. Look at Macys!

JACOB

The Book of Esther tells us that she is unaffected by her rare beauty.

ROSE

I doubt that she was.

JACOB

Sha, she is excessively modest.

(PAUSE)

The story of Esther is seeing her ability to discern truth in all the splendor of great palatial riches. What irony that she functions as the Queen of Persia. Could this every happen today?

EVERYONE

No!

JACOB

She has a year to enjoy all the beauty treatments known to royalty. However, Esther declines and in secret she exploits the situation to save the Jewish people outside the Palace.

LILY

I'm just like her, Papa.

JACOB

She keeps kosher by claiming special health needs. She prays behind locked doors and manages to light *Shabbos* candles and bake *challah*. Esther risks her life to ensure her Judaism. She knows when to speak out and when to shut up. Can there be any finer models for a Jewish woman?

(GOES OVER TO KISS REGINA)

Dear family, I have a lasting vision. In this cultured family, art is the reason we endure. But Judaism is the torch which guides our dreams. I never want to lose my dream. I want you to embrace my dream. Doing so we please the angels. I look out this window. What do I see? I see angels.

HESHIE

Is that what you see?

JACOB

Cherubic angels.

HESHIE

Point me in the direction, please.

JACOB

They want to know our hearts. They want our secrets. They want my daughters. So before we should read from the *Megillat*, I have little scripts for each of you.

(HE PRODUCES SEVERAL SCRIPTS AND DISTRIBUTES THEM)

REGINA

Are you mad, Jacob?

JACOB

I adapted a classic, *mamala*. LEAR. These are sections and we will be together on stage with a very Jewish King.

HESHIE

(BEING THE LAST TO GET A SCRIPT)

You want me to play the Fool?

JACOB

We will perform at a charity benefit.

IRIS

I'm Regan?

ROSE

Cordelia?

LILY

Goneril?

ROSE

(LOOKING AT THE PAGES)

This is not Shakespeare.

JACOB

Random casting. Just read the words, dear ones!
And we thank God for letting us assemble today in love.

HESHIE

*"A fox, when one has caught her,
And such a daughter
Should sure to the slaughter,
If my cap would buy a halter;
So the fool follows after."*

(PAUSE)

Is this a Jewish script, *boychik*?
A navel salute is not always from the *pupik*.

(GESTURES WITH A SALUTE FROM HIS BELLY BUTTON)

JACOB

Please read, Rose.

ROSE

*"Sir, I do love you more than gold words can wield the matter.
As much as a child ever loved, or a father has found in time.
Love can trick the mind, but my significance falls to your gaze.
Please reach for me when I do cry, in my pain and in my sadness."*

(BREAKING CHARACTER)

Did you write this, Papa?

JACOB

Of course.

(TO LILY)

I know you like the text. Go, my little flower.

LILY

*“I am made of that self metal as my sister,
And prize me at her worth. You value that truly.
The morning sparrows have their secrets too.
Let me be clear as crystal and greet you anew.”*

JACOB

Good, good. Your cadence, Lily, is perfect. Iris.

IRIS

*“The mysteries of Hecate, and the terrible plight;
By all the operations of the orbs,
From whom we do exist, and cease to be;
Here I renew my filial claim and obligation
I love you most, and will prove it each day.”*

JACOB

Excellent. Now Regina please.

REGINA

*“Kill each physician, and the fee bestow
upon the foul disease. Revoke this gift.
It was never heaven sent, that I swear to you.
Yet a still-soliciting eye, and such a broad tongue
Can betray the foibles of a very Jewish King.”*

JACOB

Splendid. We will have a complete script for rehearsal in time for our gala benefit at the Palace Theatre.

(LIGHTS SUGGEST A CHANGE IN TIME. KNOCKING AT THE DOOR)

JACOB

Yes?

VOICE

Room service. Dinner for eight, sir.

JACOB

(A LOW VOICE)

Regina, a few dollars for a tip maybe?

REGINA

Why not?

(SHE OPENS HER PURSE)

JACOB

And please give liberally. Smile to this angel.

RABBI

I'm starving like a cow from Hungary, you have no idea!

(THE DOOR OPENS AND MAGICALLY AN EXTREMELY LONG
TABLE ROLLS IN)

END OF SCENE

SCENE TWO

**(EARLY EVENING IN THE HOTEL
SUITE)**

JACOB

(RECITING KING LEAR act V, scene III)

*"Howl, howl, howl, howl! – O,
ye are men of stones:
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use
Them so
That heaven's vault should crack: – O,
she is gone for ever! –
I know when one is dead, and when one
lives:
She's dead as earth: –Lend me a looking
glass;
If that her breath will mist or stain the
stone,
Why, then she lives."*

(PAUSE)

If Shakespeare's king were a man of true Jewish faith, the girl would certainly come back to life. Why? Because our faith demands us to cherish our children.

(PAUSE. DEEP SIGH)

The world spins faster than we can comprehend. That's science and that's poetry. We rely on family to weather life's storms. Our family has embraced the theatre for all the right reasons. We perform with an open heart and that is the Sterns legacy. And it's quite true that a new generation of art has taken hold of the public's imagination. The

stories are less sentimental. The critics are crying out for “relevance!” What’s so wrong about a good cry? My daughters are thinking about the *goyisher* movies. I forbid the decision. Some families have no children. But we have *mazel*. Three marvelous daughters have defined my kingdom. My wife has given me treasures beyond description. She is my beacon of light, my Regina, and I have land to parcel out and money in the *pischka* too. Land and money because one is not good without the other for a wandering Jew. Since the destruction of the Temple and centuries of blood libel.

(PAUSE)

So my elder daughter, Rose, talk to me.

ROSE

What?

JACOB

Entertain us. What sort of father have I been to you?

ROSE

You have been my tower of illumination.

JACOB

Is that a good thing, darling?

ROSE

Yes, Papa.

JACOB

When you kiss me, what do you feel?

ROSE

I feel lasting sunshine and I feel my truest ancestry.

JACOB

What lessons have I taught you?

ROSE

You’ve taught me that goodness prevails in light and in shadow.

JACOB

And with regard to the stage?

ROSE

You’ve taught me to always study my lines before breakfast.

JACOB

And what lessons in tragedy?

ROSE

Never to cry aloud, never shed a tear, never upstage my scene partner – unless they were not in the union.

JACOB

Dear Rose, it is time for me to divide all the things I do possess with Mama. You're a beautiful, urban woman and your world is tied closely to this fine city.

ROSE

Papa, I love New York.

JACOB

Therefore, I want you to take possession of our Brooklyn house.

ROSE

But where will you and Mama go? How can that be? Mama?

REGINA

I will hold my tongue, Rose.

ROSE

Why now?

JACOB

Because I'm nearly eighty years old and God is speaking testing me.

RABBI

Every gift from an aged parent to a child is precious, Rose. And you must simply accept things as they are.

JACOB

You must address me, *mamala*.

ROSE

You are the greatest and most handsome actor of your generation. From roles as challenging as DAVID AND GOLIATH and Shakespeare's MERCHANT.

JACOB

Thank you.

ROSE

The times you shared the great stage with Jacob Adler were unforgettable . . . and I was only a small child . . .

JACOB

But you were *my* child.

ROSE

Your hands tender. Your eyes so poetic. Your smile compassionate and wise. You have made me free of a lifetime of worry. You have taught me how to see right from wrong. You have given me moral compass. You handed me the best of Jewish culture. You gave me a sweet sense of humor.

JACOB

Ganugg. I can see how much you love me. To you and your husband, I bestow a third of my estate.

RABBI

And, of course, I am your humble witness.

JACOB

My middle daughter, if you please?

LILY

I cannot repeat Rose's performance.

JACOB

I didn't ask you to.

LILY

This audition feels like a "call back".

JACOB

Sing for your supper, *shaina maidel*.

LILY

(TO REGINA)

She will always be Papa's favorite.

JACOB

Not true. I adore you all equally.

LILY

I love you, Papa. Let it be that and only that.

JACOB

Come now. Indulge a Jewish father.

LILY

It's Purim. We celebrate the skill and beauty of Esther who defeated the Persian king. How I want to be like subtle Esther.

JACOB

What is her other name, Lily?

LILY

Haddasah which symbolizes knowledge of Torah.
(SILENCE)

JACOB

Are you finished?

LILY

No, Papa. There's more to say.

HESHIE

Oy vey.

LILY

I was too young to see you share the stage with Jacob Adler, but I did see the many beautiful photographs. The power of your dark eyes in SCHULAMITH. I can imagine your long dramatic walk through the upstage door. These things I do see with my eyes closed. My fingers touch your goodness. My hands know the profound weight of your love. I will visit your grave in *B'nai Jeshurun* and my children will know the indescribable importance of their famous grandfather – *zader* Jacob.

(DEMURE)

Now I am finished and I will smile for Iris.

JACOB

Dear Lily, you will take a cruise and journey to Palestine. See the estate I have chosen to give you. You will consecrate the land, knowing that when you retire from acting you have Israel. I'm not requiring you to end your career, for you have more energy than all of us together.

LILY

Yes, Papa.

JACOB

Good.

REGINA

But she's contracted to finish her three more years with the Boston Repertory.

JACOB

My lawyer will talk to their lawyer. Come, Iris. It is your turn to shine.

IRIS

I cannot shine, darling Papa.

JACOB

You are my flesh and blood, so how can you not shine?

IRIS

My husband is sick and my mind scattered.

REGINA

(TO JACOB IN A QUIET VOICE)

Leave her be.

JACOB

Rabbi, what do you think?

RABBI

I thought the chicken was very well cooked today.

JACOB

I'm not asking about the chicken.

RABBI

I think your youngest daughter has something else to tell you.

JACOB

So do I.

IRIS

Papa, you named your three daughters after lovely bouquets. I hope we have pleased you as only nature would allow.

JACOB

That remains to be seen.

IRIS

I appear redundant as the third flower at the botanist's.

RABBI

A life in the theatre has a degree of repetition.

IRIS

Yes, I accept that. Papa, you've performed in Shakespeare's LEAR and Gordin's version.

JACOB

With dignity, yes.

IRIS

But you haven't learned anything from these plays.

JACOB

On the contrary.

IRIS

Then should a loving father bait his offspring?

JACOB

That is a parent's prerogative.

IRIS

Mama is free of this device.

JACOB

I am unlike Mama, Iris.

IRIS

You've made me read so many writers on the theatre: Diderot, Meyerholdt. I understand the vexing problem of stage glamour. The fake curtain calls. I want nothing of the sort.

JACOB

There is glamour and there is vanity.

IRIS

One and the same thing. Experts strive to define what is stage truth. To me, truth and life are equal. Flashy acting has no truth.

JACOB

And you see me as that sort?

IRIS

Sincerity is free of design.

JACOB

Darling daughter, always know that my heart is sincere.

IRIS

Then why test me?

JACOB

Iris, you've always been feistier than your sisters, but this tone today is wrong.

IRIS

I apologize.

REGINA

Isn't it time that we sing some Yiddish songs? A little *mamaloshen*?

IRIS

I love you, Papa.

JACOB

And I love you, little kitten.

IRIS

I can't pretend any more.

JACOB

Be yourself, what more could a father ask?

IRIS

I want absolutely nothing from you.

JACOB

Because you don't respect my art?

IRIS

Papa, look in the mirror.

JACOB

I hold the deed of a large 50 acre Catskills farm . . . intended for you and your husband. Yankel requires time in a mountain sanatorium. This is more than a prescription for his poor health.

IRIS

Thank you.

RABBI

Good, good. She said thank you, Jacob.

JACOB

I think there is more to say.

IRIS

We are becoming absurd. We know LEAR. You played him and I Cordelia. So why, Papa, do we have to torment ourselves in private?

JACOB

My child, Lear was not a Yid, so we are not playing Shakespeare.

REGINA

She's right, Jacob. Enough already.

JACOB

You'd rather go to Palestine? Is that what you're telling me?

IRIS

No.

JACOB

You'd rather deny me this gift giving on Purim? Your sisters have married very Jewish men and your sisters show grace today. But Yankel is a free-thinker. A fact is a fact. He doesn't put a *tephilin* on each day.

REGINA

Let God judge Yankel. Rabbi?

RABBI

I like Yankel.

IRIS

You can either be a Jewish father or a Jewish tyrant.

JACOB

Tyrant?

IRIS

Look in the mirror, Papa.

JACOB

(HE DOES)

All right. I see myself.

IRIS

The Devil has you in His Hands.

JACOB

Yes, he does. Yes, Iris. Now I see everything clearly.

(RISING VOICE)

I'm giving you nothing, kitten. And that is a good decision. I'm giving you nothing. No land. No money. Not even a torn *schmata*. You want to be independent. Different from your sisters. Shakespeare wrote a tragedy, this is true. But I never blamed Lear for being blind. Lear will always be Lear. Do you understand that? I never blamed Othello for being a Moor. Never faulted Shylock for being a Jew. You may have greater talents than me, but I am the slender figure of sympathy in this room.

(PAUSE)

So I will ask you one last time to make a proper overture.

IRIS

Papa, I love Yankal more than life itself.

JACOB

Therefore you love him more than me?

IRIS

Naturally.

RABBI

Jacob, you know a daughter transfers her heart after a sound Jewish marriage. Let me tell you that I have my own *tsoris* with my oldest who loves money. I'll take your Iris over my boy any day. Iris has a pure soul. Give her a proper inheritance. Do it for me, Jacob, or I'll *hock* you until you bleed from the ears.

JACOB

No.

ROSE

Papa, the evening is turning unpleasant.

LILY

Our husbands should have been invited, Papa.

JACOB

What did they need – embossed invitations?

ROSE

Lily is right, Papa. You signaled them to stay away today.

JACOB

(TO THE RABBI)

I have to blame you for all of this discord today.

RABBI

Me?

JACOB

You have filled Iris's head with irresponsible ideas. You married my three daughters before I gave my consent.

RABBI

Oy, this is ancient history, Jacob!

JACOB

And maybe you feel closer to my children than to your own.

RABBI

All I say to you, Jacob, is we can no longer control children.

JACOB

That's not what you're saying.

RABBI

Then you think nothing of our long friendship.

JACOB

As far as I'm concerned, our friendship might as well end tonight.

IRIS

Papa, be reasonable.

JACOB

No.

IRIS

Please, Papa.

(PAUSE)

Papa, please know how some feelings are impossible to express.

JACOB

Are you speaking as my daughter Iris or as her surrogate - Cordelia?

IRIS

I am Iris. Your Iris. Your little girl. Who loved you so. The Iris who had rheumatic fever and who used to cut your hair. Iris Stern from Brooklyn, New York.

END OF SCENE

**SCENE THREE
(THREE MONTHS LATER.
JUNE 1937.
IN THE HOTEL SUITE,
REGINA IS IN A WHEEL
CHAIR, A BLANKET OVER**

**HER LAP. SHE IS IN THE
MIDDLE OF A PHONE CALL)**

REGINA

Miriam, if you really knew what you were talking about . . . I would buy you a dozen long stem roses. But you're sounding like the village idiot. That's right, darling. And an idiot is worse than a moron. And that is not a compliment, Miriam. My husband is not your husband, my *tsoris* is not your *tsoris*.

(PAUSE)

That's right, *mamala*. And I am happy because I'm practical and I know I have good choices and wonderful daughters. And, thank God, I am not on a diet. Yes, my clothes still fits my wonderful *derriere*. And my orthopedic shoes always shine.

(LILY ENTERS. REGINA ACKNOWLEDGES HER BY HAND)

Miriam, all good things must end and so must I hang up. The newspapers are wrong. And you're worse than the newspapers. Goodbye. Goodbye. *Goodbye!*

(PAUSE)

Nu?

LILY

I just stepped outside to have a cigarette.

REGINA

You were going to the bakery, sweetheart.

LILY

Walking three blocks in these killer heels, Mama?

REGINA

I didn't buy those stilettos for you.

LILY

Daddy left you cash?

REGINA

Of course. Millions and millions of dollars!

LILY

Where?

REGINA

In my brassiere. Look at my bust line!

LILY

Where does he put his money?

REGINA

Inside old books and then he forgets. And then there are the gambling debts

LILY

He's not providing enough for you.

REGINA

So?

LILY

I can see how tight you have to be each week he's away. Why is Papa doing this awful tour?

REGINA

So we don't have to fight each night.

LILY

He's too sick to be doing this.

REGINA

I told him so.

LILY

Still, you let him go.

REGINA

Of course.

LILY

And of all plays, *The Golem*?

REGINA

(IRONIC)

He's always identified strongly with the *undead*!

LILY

He might as well play Frankenstein. Yiddish Theatre is dying. He needs to attend to you these days.

REGINA

It's a short tour and I know the food will be lousy.

LILY

Mama, you look very sick today.

REGINA

The renovations in Brooklyn are taking forever and now our miserable neighbor is suing us for damages to our common wall. Marriages are not made in Heaven.

LILY

Certainly not yours, Mama.

REGINA

And is your marriage a pocket full of miracles? Of my three little girls, you are the hardest on Papa.

LILY

You had a stroke.

REGINA

No.

LILY

The doctor said so.

REGINA

Oy, this doctor is melodramatic.

LILY

The doctor is your cousin. Sometimes I think Papa is insane and he scares me.

REGINA

He's not insane, he's just *moody*.

LILY

Right . . . I'm going to be in a Hollywood film and I think I have a big agent.

REGINA

Don't tell, Papa, Lily.

LILY

I will as soon as I see him. Did you approve these money arrangements?

REGINA

What?

LILY

Please stop playing dumb.

REGINA

We're not leaving our Brooklyn home. That was empty talk. He can promise all of you the moon, but reality is in my hands. He cannot cut out Iris from the family estate, not as

long as I'm alive. Or I'll kill him! Lily, Papa is a vulnerable man. He gets depressed. His memory is slipping. So out of human kindness, we bend like a willow.

LILY

Rose told me how Papa used to hit you.

REGINA

Your father never once raised a finger.

LILY

He threw dishes.

REGINA

I threw pots.

LILY

Rose wouldn't lie.

REGINA

Pots don't break

LILY

She said Papa had a drinking problem for years.

REGINA

He did and the rabbi helped him. All actors love *schnapps*.

LILY

Why do you keep protecting him?

REGINA

Because life has been good to me. I am a Jewish mother. Because I love my family. And *I am* the strong one. Do you understand? I had good years on the stage. I had wonderful years with my little girls. I have been loved and I have been honored. Papa's vanity is no worse for wear.

(ROSE, FIVE MONTHS PREGNANT, ENTERS)

ROSE

I just spoke with the doctor. You shouldn't be out of bed! I'm very worried, Mama.

REGINA

Use it on stage like an artist.

ROSE

You had a stroke. And the hospital is concerned about your heart.

REGINA
And you believed the hospital?

ROSE
Stop, Mama!

REGINA
My heart is fine. And my speech is better than the doctor.

ROSE
You can't smile.

LILY
You can't walk.

REGINA
Not true. When I'm alone, I get up, stroll, dance, laugh . . .

ROSE
How could Papa leave the city!

REGINA
Papa is not magic, my dear daughters. Why are you crying, Rose?

ROSE
Because I had a nightmare about our family. And I don't think Lily knows the best way to help you now.

LILY
And you do???

REGINA
Women dream and men scheme, my Mama used to say that to me.

LILY
I think that's only half true.

ROSE
We know you love us more than Papa.

REGINA
Jewish love cannot be measured.

ROSE
You've made incredible sacrifices for us. But Papa simply does what he pleases.

REGINA
Because he is a product of Russia.

LILY
(SCOFFING)
And American men are better?

ROSE
My husband is.

REGINA
American men have better hygiene.

LILY
That's no consolation.

REGINA
You don't know it, but Papa was married before.

ROSE/LILY
What??

REGINA
In Latvia, of all places.

ROSE
You can't be serious, Mama?

REGINA
He was only a boy. No older than 17. The marriage was arranged by the parents.

LILY
What happened?

REGINA
The girl was 15. Rifka. She died from pneumonia after three winters. Papa won't talk about it. They weren't in love, but they had a baby boy. Your father was traveling when Rifka took sick and was pregnant. Because of pogroms, it wasn't safe for him to return.

ROSE
Why are you telling us this now?

REGINA
Rose . . .

ROSE

You're tormenting us.

REGINA

It's the truth and you may understand your father better.

LILY

Now I understand him even less!

REGINA

He feels guilty when he's idle. That's why he likes to tour.

LILY

Do you really think he left a son in Latvia?

REGINA

God knows? The child would not be a *mamzer* (illegitimate).

ROSE

In that case we would have a mystery brother.

LILY

Unbelievable.

ROSE

You mean I'm not the first born!

REGINA

Keep quiet, girls. Understand? That's all Papa needs to hear.

LILY

I'm not quitting Boston Shakespeare, Mama.

ROSE

It's just a job. You can help Mama, until Papa returns.

LILY

I beg your pardon! This is my career!

ROSE

Lily, you're absolutely wrong. You have to try.

LILY

No. Just because you gave up acting . . .

ROSE

We can't trust Papa now that Mama is sick. Iris has said this about Papa too.

LILY
Iris is falling into a severe depression.

REGINA
I'm alive. Stop talking like I'm in the ground.

LILY
Where's Iris, Mama?

REGINA
She was here this morning.

ROSE
Why didn't she stay around?

LILY
Can't she handle family responsibility?

ROSE
I haven't seen her in weeks.

REGINA
She's envious, Rose, about the baby.

ROSE
That's crazy, Mama.

REGINA
She's having trouble getting pregnant. She told me. This all began with her miscarriage a year ago. Smoking doesn't help.

LILY
You have to have sex every day to make a baby. Her Yankel is not that kind of guy.

ROSE
(SARCASTIC AND SHARP)
Every day, Lily?

REGINA
Sha.

LILY
And it has to be real hot sex.
(ROSE GROANS TO MOCK LILY)
The bed has to shake and the chandelier has to chime.

REGINA

In all my years the chandelier has *never chimed*.

(THE PHONE RINGS)

Don't answer it.

ROSE

Why not?

REGINA

It's going to be bad news. I feel it in my bones.

(LILY IGNORES REGINA'S REQUEST AND PICKS UP PHONE)

LILY

Hello?

(PAUSE)

It's Papa and he sounds strange and very scared.

END OF SCENE

**SCENE FOUR
(NOVEMBER 1937.
IN SILHOUETTE WE SEE THE
ENTIRE STERN FAMILY HOLDING
UMBRELLAS – EVERYONE BUT
REGINA. THE SOUND OF A**

**STEADY RAIN FILLS THE SPACE.
THE RABBI'S VOICE RACES
THROUGH THE HEBREW PRAYERS.
WE SEE A SHOVEL IN HESHIE'S
HAND AS HANDS IT TO JACOB.
JACOB PICKS UP SOIL WITH THE
SHOVEL AND GENTLY DROPS
IT OVER THE OPEN GRAVE.)**

END OF SCENE

**SCENE FIVE
(ONE YEAR LATER.
WINTER 1939. JACOB, IN
WHEELCHAIR AND BLANKETS,
MISTAKES THE RABBI AS ONE OF
THE CUSTODIANS OF SOLOMON
SENIORS NURSING HOME)**

JACOB

I dislike strangers. But your voice is as warm as a mother's breast.

RABBI

Every man should begin life breast fed.

(PAUSE)

You look very *fartshadet*.

JACOB

And you look very *ferkleempt*. Are you the manager or the janitor?

RABBI

Neither.

JACOB

I'm the resident crank. The other residents are all imbeciles. You will help me?

RABBI

How?

JACOB
Escape.

RABBI
You ask a stranger such a favor?

JACOB
You have a warm accent.

(PAUSE)

I had this dream. I am wearing dirty work clothes. I am all skin and bones. My teeth have fallen out. I have lice. I am standing in a long line of lost souls. Roll call. I hear my name and answer in a low voice. The commandant points his riding crop. I am forced to step out of line. A rifle hits me in. I fall hard to my knees.

RABBI
Knees are very fragile, old man.

JACOB
I cry for my wife.

RABBI
In the Torah, we hear much about the dreams of Joseph.

JACOB
That's true.

RABBI
And you have had so many dreams about Regina.

JACOB
I cannot see her face. How do you know her name? Who are you?

RABBI
She is with God, Jacob. Accept that. It's been two very difficult years. For you and for me.

JACOB
I used to go to her grave weekly. I am a little boy without her.

RABBI
And you were a little boy with her. Let me please help you.

JACOB
Did Stanislavski die?

RABBI

He died last year.

JACOB

Hitler invaded Poland?

RABBI

War has begun.

JACOB

There's cancer throughout Europe. My crazy Heshie went overseas.

RABBI

He's your only sibling.

JACOB

Something happened to him.

(STILL UNCLEAR ABOUT THE RABBI'S IDENTITY)

In another dream, the Germans kill Heshie. I know you.

RABBI

Hershel is alive and back in New York.

JACOB

Thank God it was just a dream.

(PAUSE)

I can't stand it here. You must help me get away!

RABBI

You chose the Solomon Geriatric Residence . . .

JACOB

(SARDONIC)

Fit for King Solomon!

RABBI

Don't look at me that way.

JACOB

It's a filthy jail. Who put me here!

RABBI

Your daughters.

JACOB

How could they!

RABBI

This place wasn't their first choice. You were in newer facilities, but money became a factor and you had undisclosed debts. Gambling debts, Jacob. And you were pretty tough with the previous nursing staff, Jacob, so they evicted you.

(THE LIGHTS FLICKER AND DIM)

JACOB

Where are my children?

RABBI

In the city. You know that. One is on Broadway.

JACOB

For a janitor, you know quite a lot.

(LONG SILENCE)

You're not a janitor.

RABBI

You know me, Jacob.

JACOB

You've disguised your voice.

RABBI

I have a chest cold and I am coughing up a lot of phlegm. I drink more tea than a boat of Chinamen.

(PAUSE)

I'm the sagacious rabbi you threw out of your life.

JACOB

And you dare to show your face! You're a *mamzer*!

RABBI

Give me your hand.

(RABBI CUPS HIS HANDS OVER JACOB'S HAND)

I let a year go by. I let another year by.

JACOB

That's two years too many.

RABBI

Let us heal our injury before we both die. You want to remain a boarder in this flophouse?

JACOB

No.

You love your daughters?
RABBI

Yes.
JACOB

Rose and Lily have positioned themselves and their husbands. You made these young men very suspicious of your behavior.
RABBI

My behavior? My girls don't visit. They send no money. I left them a significant fortune..
JACOB

(THE RABBI LOOKS AWAY)
And where is my favorite, my Iris?

I don't know.
RABBI

I don't see her these days.
JACOB

Is she well?
RABBI

Your guess is as good as mine. I know the Talmud tells us not to have favorites among our children.
JACOB

The Talmud says many things.
RABBI

I don't hear her name in the news.
JACOB

I know.
RABBI

Iris must not be acting.
JACOB

I did hear that her husband's condition got worse.
RABBI

JACOB

If God is loving, how do you explain human illness?

RABBI

I *davin*. I cannot explain.

JACOB

How can you give comfort in a world that coddles Adolf Hitler?

RABBI

By praying, by maintaining a strong congregation at my *schul*, by collecting funds for the war effort . . .

JACOB

What if Hitler wins?

RABBI

He will not win.

JACOB

Can you be so sure?

RABBI

No one is sure. Don't forsake God.

JACOB

My eyesight is going. Your face . . .

RABBI

I have an unseemly face, Jacob. Consider yourself lucky.

JACOB

I'm going blind. I need a good attorney.

RABBI

You need a good doctor. I will try to find Iris and her sisters. We'll get you a good doctor, and a nicer residence.

JACOB

And "power of attorney" from my children.

RABBI

I understand.

JACOB

I have to reverse time! The food here is unfit for a dog.

(PULLS OUT CRUMPLED NEWSPAPER FROM HIS SEAT))

In the Times back page, May 12th, a London bulletin -
The Polock Jew Shmuel Ziegelboim, a Jewish Workers representative in the exiled Polish cabinet was found dead in his London home. His wife and child were killed by Germans and he left a suicide letter to the president of Poland.

(PAUSE)

We have choices, Rabbi?

RABBI

We always have other choices, Jacob.

(CHECKS HIS POCKET WATCH)

Oy, it's very late. I have to go.

JACOB

How is it with your son?

RABBI

The same and often worse. He won't get married. I see him every couple of months.

JACOB

He's good looking.

RABBI

He takes after his mother. One day he will have the privilege of burying me in a new suit of clothes.

JACOB

And what do you want him to inscribe on your gravestone?

RABBI

Anything but a poem by T. S. Eliot.

JACOB

You know what I would like on my stone?

RABBI

You're an actor. Top billing!

JACOB

"King of the Subtle Jewish Actors"

RABBI

Jacob, in our little Jewish world, there are no kings and there are no thrones. Let's not tempt fate. The gifts of evolution often skip one generation and take root in our grandchildren.

JACOB

Will I to go to hell for my behavior?

RABBI

You're not going to hell.

JACOB

I had ruined life. I caused my wife's death.

RABBI

Regina died because her body had failed.

JACOB

I took away her health and her happiness, Rabbi. I will live in hell.

RABBI

There is no hell in Jewish eschatology, Jacob. There are just *people from hell* and *bad caterers*.

JACOB

My gut says otherwise.

RABBI

You have to make yourself a well rounded Christian to evoke hell. And then you're stuck with a *ferkakdah* Christmas tree and other *chozzerei*. There's only *this short life* before God's open hands.

(LILY ENTERS)

JACOB

I know that perfume.

RABBI

It's very strong, yes.

JACOB

A botanical garden on two feet.

LILY

Papa, you have scared me so much.

JACOB

Stop. Say no more!

LILY

I am upset with you, dear Papa.

JACOB
Don't come any closer, daughter.

LILY
Mama made everything easy for you. When she died, Rose and I have tried to take over.

JACOB
What do you need?

LILY
Your love. Your trust.

JACOB
I can't hear you.

LILY
You can kiss me on the cheek.

JACOB
I should kiss you?

LILY
Then I will kiss you.

(SHE ATTEMPTS TO GET CLOSER, BUT HE RECOILS)

I know you don't like this residence. We will move you soon. This was temporary. Rose found a nice place near her home which won't ask for references because of your fame. But you must obey the rules, Papa. You are physically dependent now. You can't swear at and humiliate the nursing staff. You have to use the bed pans. You need a walker or a wheel chair at all times.

JACOB
(FEIGNING DEAFNESS)
I can't hear you.

LILY
Are you pretending to be senile, Papa?

JACOB
No.

LILY
Do you want to be part of our family, Papa?

JACOB
Yes.

LILY

Should I believe you?

JACOB

Yes. Damn it.

LILY

All right. I need some information. Please help. What is the name of the Jerusalem attorney who prepared your deed and title report?

JACOB

I don't remember.

LILY

Papa.

JACOB

Isn't his name in the folder?

LILY

No. There's little in the folder you gave us.

JACOB

Well, then. Go talk to the glorious people at the bank.

LILY

Which bank?

JACOB

Any bank in Jerusalem *I'm not signing any more damn papers.*

LILY

Please! I'm running out of patience.

JACOB

I'm going to disappear, Lily. And I can make your life miserable.

LILY

God damn it, Papa!

JACOB

Rabbi, did you hear that?

RABBI

I am off duty.

LILY

I had so many good plans for you, Papa. But things never go right with you and me.

JACOB

I can't see your face, Lily. Come closer.

RABBI

His eyesight is failing.

LILY

Papa has glasses. Why isn't he wearing them?

RABBI

(HE ATTEMPTS TO EXIT)

I don't know, Lily.

JACOB

I look at you, but only see the bare outline of a daughter. Iris told me that you took money that was due her. You've become a *hazar* of miserable deeds.

LILY

How dare you say such a thing?

JACOB

Because you stripped me of my stature and wealth after Mama died. You found how to be cruel and not be caught. You knew I was weak. Now in Europe each Jewish family suffers. What you and Rose are doing is equally monstrous.

LILY

You're becoming delusional.

JACOB

Is it delusional to say you're not spending enough dollars on me?

LILY

Rose and I are budgeting out of necessity.

JACOB

Of course I deserve extravagance. *I am Jacob Stern.*

(ODD SHIFT)

I get loving letters from my loyal fans. Letters in Yiddish, in English. Do you know what they say, Lily? They miss me greatly. They miss my fabulous entrances and grand sweeps. My human sadness and idiosyncratic cadences. Yiddish theatre was better than *schul*. *I am the fabulous Jacob Stern!* No matter what happens, there will never be another *Jacob Stern*.

(ODD SHIFT AGAIN)

So I look at your sparkling, crocodile teeth and I think: is she conspiring alone? Can any Jewish father have daughters so wicked?

LILY

You think it's only Rose and me? You don't mention Iris.

JACOB

I could mention Fanny Brice!

LILY

You make me crazy! Papa, I am not wicked. I have never been unkind.

JACOB

Then kiss me right now. Kiss the Bright Star of Exile!

(SILENCE)

You cannot?

(SHE APPROACHES AND KISSES HIM)

LILY

I cannot speak for Rose, but it must be your mental health which triggered so much unhappiness.

JACOB

My mental health, daughter!

LILY

You had a breakdown, Papa. The doctors have said so! Ask the rabbi!

JACOB

I will fight you in court.

LILY

And you will lose. Look how you are dressed. You're incoherent and filthy.

JACOB

I will fight you, Lily.

LILY

You drove Mama into an early grave.

JACOB

Liar!

LILY

You misunderstood all the Stern women. You withheld support. We were props for the photographers.

(JACOB BEGINS TO COUGH UNCONTROLLABLY)

I had to wear Rose's clothes half the time and her shoes never fit.

JACOB

I bought you beautiful clothes, Lily. Come to my knee and apologize.

LILY

Papa. If you just sign these last papers, I will transfer you to a good hotel on Times Square. No nursing homes. I will pay all your bills. We don't need to consult Rose. And we certainly don't need to talk to a dozen new lawyers.

(JACOB COUGHS UP BLOOD INTO HIS HANKERCHIEF)

I don't want you to die. I do love you in my heart.

JACOB

(HOLDING UP HIS RED STAINED HANKERCHIEF TO THE RABBI)

Look. Look. This is my life now.

END OF SCENE

**SCENE SIX
(HESHIE AND JACOB ARE
INSIDE A POOR NEW YORK
SYNAGOGUE. TWO WEEKS
LATER. THE BUILDING HAS
NO HEAT AND IT'S FREEZING**

INSIDE)

JACOB

We can't sleep here.

HESHIE

Why?

JACOB

This is a synagogue.

HESHIE

I'm an insomniac. I can sleep anywhere.

JACOB

The *shamos* will kick us out onto the streets.

HESHIE

I know the janitor. We'll give him a dollar.

JACOB

How much money do you have?

HESHIE

I sing on the streets, Jacob. Coins fall into my cup.

JACOB

I thought you were dead.

HESHIE

Like a cat, I have nine lives.

JACOB

Iris said she would meet us here.

HESHIE

You heard from her?

JACOB

Yes, I found her phone number.

HESHIE

Iris is your prettiest daughter. She will come even in the snow.

JACOB

She must come.

HESHIE

Maybe?

(PAUSE)

An actor enters from the wings.
An angel exits displaying wings.
One has grand feathers
The other has deep *tsoris*
A wretched pigeon in New York has
Attributes of both actor and angel.
He's perched on a stool.

JACOB

A stool pigeon?

HESHIE

That's right.
Break it in two.
Pigeon . . . and . . . stool.
Bird eats an olive and passes a stool.
Still want fame, *bubbie*?

JACOB

Yes.

HESHIE

Want your name up in lights?

JACOB

Yes!

HESHIE

Change your name to *Exit*. You'll be lit in every theatre.
All successful Jews change their names eventually.

JACOB

You mock me, brother.

HESHIE

This is love, brother.
(PAUSE)
Broken light bulbs – look!
The ceiling leaks rusty water.
This is the poorest *schul*
The rancid toilet doesn't flush
The congregational books are dusty

How can an old man pray?
 When all he can do is sneeze?
 A box of Kleenex, please.
 In all of Brooklyn
 In all of Staten Island
 In all of Queens
 In all of the Bronx
 In all of Manhattan
 We are free to *davin* here
 Each and every dumb *schlub*
 The poorest of the poor.
 The lowest of the low.
 And the world trembles.
 Witness Adolph Hitler
 So the question must be –
 Does God really like Jews?
 Or was it just
 a moment's infatuation?

JACOB

God killed our theatre and laid waste to our temple.

HESHIE

Then why are all the Hollywood moguls Jewish?

JACOB

A paradox.

HESHIE

Winston Churchill will save the Jews.

JACOB

Why should he?

HESHIE

Because Disraeli died in 1881.

JACOB

You're crazy, Heshie.

HESHIE

And you're not?

JACOB

My wife is talking to me.

HESHIE

I don't hear her.

JACOB

She's whispering. When your eyes fail, other senses take hold.

HESHIE

It's colder inside this *schul* than outside. Look at the holes in the wall. I'm freezing my *kishkas*.

JACOB

Take my coat. I had dreams about you, Heshie.

HESHIE

I know.

JACOB

You were dying in a concentration camp and it hadn't rained in 100 days.

HESHIE

At least it wasn't a wet dream.

JACOB

Auschwitz.

HESHIE

Treblinka. Take your pick.

(PAUSE)

They say the violin is comparable to a human voice.
So when I die I want to be buried inside a violin case.
You've become King Lear, Jacob.

JACOB

This is the Dover cliffs.

HESHIE

(BANGING THE PODIUM)

This?

JACOB

When Lear finds himself atop the cliffs, he is no worse than a modern Jew.

HESHIE

A French Jew might as well be Alfred Dreyfus. Let me be the first to accuse you of your guilt, Jacob.

JACOB

For fifty years you have railed against me.

HESHIE

Nonsense, I hate trains.

(PAUSE)

They say the French oboe is comparable to a baby dolphin.

JACOB

You never had children . . .

HESHIE

True.

JACOB

. . . and you don't know the pain.

HESHIE

You could have given each daughter a jar of dill pickles.

JACOB

Pickles, you say?

HESHIE

Shhh . . . someone's coming.

JACOB

Can you see who it is?

HESHIE

Of course I can see who it is.

JACOB

Who!

HESHIE

It's your baby, Jacob.

JACOB

Iris?

HESHIE

She's here.

JACOB

God is merciful!

God is full of tricks!

HESHIE

Iris!

JACOB

Give her time. It's a long *finster* walk down that corridor.
(WE HEAR FOOTSTEP)

HESHIE

She's wearing a brown coat over a brown dress and her shoes look very brown. And I look like a *faygeleh* in this red house coat
(WE SEE IRIS COMING OUT OF THE DARKNESS)

Papa.

IRIS

I'm here.

JACOB

He can't see.

HESHIE

Is he blind?

IRIS

Give me your hand.
(SHE IS CLOSE TO JACOB)
I feel your breath.

JACOB

I don't want your hatred, Papa.

IRIS

Why was it so hard to contact you?

JACOB

Don't ask that question.

IRIS

Tell me!

JACOB

I don't know.

IRIS

I tried many times. JACOB

The rabbi found me. How sick and weak you seem. IRIS

There are holes in my pocket. JACOB

But not in his head. HESHIE

Where are you living, Papa? IRIS

On streets and in poor synagogues. JACOB

You're coming home with me today. IRIS

Yes? JACOB

Why did you threaten Lily and Rose? IRIS

They punished me for Mama's death. JACOB

We can forgive you for Mama. IRIS

Yes? JACOB

Yes. IRIS

I won't sign any more documents. JACOB

Krich arein in di bayner. HESHIE

IRIS
“To crawl into one’s bones.”

HESHIE
He will quiet his rage for you.

IRIS
How long have you been with Papa?

HESHIE
A couple of weeks.

IRIS
Talk to me, Papa.

JACOB
I’m afraid to die.

IRIS
You’re not going to die. It’s Purim tonight.

JACOB
Iris, I can hear the night owl over city roofs. That is the final sign. I will perish in Hell.

IRIS
You have my love, Papa.

JACOB
(TO HESHIE)
Is she sincere?

HESHIE
Are you?

JACOB
I am.
(TO IRIS)
Where are you living?

IRIS
We sold the land in the Catskills. Rose and Lily gave title to us. Mama made them do this before she died. We sold everything but the books and the artwork. We could not live so far from the city. There were many good people working for us, Papa. And the air was so clean. It was healthy. God knows, it was a place where we could have children. And the children could milk the cows.

HESHIE

You can *kvell* or you can *kvetch*.

IRIS

I don't hear from Lily. I don't hear from Rose.

JACOB

And you don't contact them?

IRIS

Now I fear them, Papa.

JACOB

Why should you fear them?

IRIS

I'm ashamed to say.

JACOB

Speak.

IRIS

My sisters are possessed. I don't want harm to come to you.

JACOB

You fear that your sisters want to harm me more than they have?

IRIS

Yes.

JACOB

I am already ruined.

IRIS

They made it difficult for me to find you. They say they don't fear you any longer.

JACOB

What have they told you about me?

IRIS

That your mind, Papa, has turned to mush.

JACOB

Nonsense. I have great verses.

(PAUSE)

"... Thus ye live on high, and then

*on the earth ye live again;
And the souls ye left behind you
Teach us, here, the way to find you,
Where your other souls are joying,
Never slumber'd, never cloying.
Here, your earth-born souls still speak
To mortal, of their little week*

Keats?

IRIS

Very good!

HESHIE

They had to make you pitiful.

IRIS

Why?

JACOB

The art of remorse.

IRIS

There is no such art in our family.

JACOB

You must save yourself before they come to get you.

IRIS

Give me your hands, daughter.

JACOB

My hands are cold, Papa.

IRIS

Do as I say.

JACOB

(SHE EXTENDS HER HANDS AND HE HOLDS THEM DEARLY)
How I have missed you!

IRIS

I know.

JACOB

When you were just three years old, I knew exactly the young woman you would become.

IRIS

I love you as much now as I have ever loved you, Papa.

JACOB

Please.

IRIS

What?

JACOB

Say you forgive me.

IRIS

If Mama can forgive you . . .

JACOB

(AS THOUGH NOT HEARING HER)

I'm a twisted man inside, Iris.

HESHIE

A twisted man twists in the wind.

JACOB

What do you expect me to do?

HESHIE

Three things from the heart:
Dem emmes - Tell the truth.
Gib tzedakh - Give charity.
Hab rachmonus – Have compassion.

JACOB

All right, Hershel, all right.

IRIS

I forgive you, Papa.

(SILENCE)

Can't you hear me?

JACOB

Yes. My heart is lighter.

IRIS

Rose knows that you are here in this building. The Rabbi said she'll be here to capture you.

Am I chess piece?
JACOB

A rook or a *snook*?
HESHIE

How is your husband?
JACOB

Don't you know?
(PAUSE)
He died.
IRIS

Gottenyu!
JACOB

The rabbi told you.
IRIS

Maybe he did tell me. When did he die?
JACOB

Two months ago. Yankel was very sick. The doctors gave up.
IRIS

We are both married to ghosts.
JACOB

Yes.
IRIS

Mama is a ghost. I see her housecoat inside my eyes. I hear her late at night. Her hands are ice cold.
JACOB

No, Papa. She cannot be perceived like that.
IRIS

I am telling the truth. I have my wits. The World Fair just opened!
(PAUSE)
Iris, your mother is here as we speak. She's standing like a perfect stature and you can smell her bath oils. Say something, daughter.
JACOB

IRIS
Yes, I smell her sweet ointment.

JACOB
Good.
(PAUSE)
Go over and touch her soft hand.

IRIS
Uncle doesn't see her.

JACOB
He does but he pretends many things.

IRIS
When will you get well, Papa?

JACOB
Soon.

IRIS
I want you to be well. You need clean clothes and a roof over your head and a proper bed. You will live with me.

JACOB
I'm crying inside. You are keeping a big secret from me.

IRIS
Don't be suspicious.

JACOB
Strindberg said that the human race created language to keep secrets.

IRIS
You never liked Strindberg, Papa.

JACOB
Mise meshina! (An ugly fate or curse!)

IRIS
There is no curse on you.

JACOB
Tell me!

IRIS

I knew you were on the streets and I didn't come quick enough.

JACOB

You knew?

IRIS

I was scared to find you.

(PAUSE)

I am carrying a child inside.

JACOB

A child?

(SHE NODS)

You are rail thin.

IRIS

God took away my career.

Marriage had to have priority, Papa.

You were no longer my priority.

Maybe we are suffering from a family curse.

So I pray each day. Each night.

God took away my husband but a mother I will become.

There is warm life stirring inside of me.

Maybe a boy, maybe he will look just like you.

Everything has a reason, Papa. Mama always said this to me.

Everything dies. And yet, life comes back.

The newspapers have followed your sickness. Reporters have asked: "What has happened to the great Jacob Stern?" We are all ashamed by our behavior.

JACOB

And?

IRIS

The Devil has swallowed all of Europe.

JACOB

And Yiddish theatre is in a coffin.

IRIS

Your prediction came true. Your eyes are shining. Is that a good shine?

(RECITING FROM **KING LEAR, act IV scene VII**)

"Had you not been their father,

these white flakes

Had challeng'd pity of them. Was this

a face

To be expos'd against the warring winds?

*To stand against the deep dread-bolted
thunder?
In the most terrible and nimble stroke
Of quick, cross lightning? To watch (poor
perdu!)
With this thin helm? Mine enemy's dog,
Though he had bit me, should have stood
that night
Against my fire; And wast thou fain, poor
Father,"*

JACOB

I'm ready to die.

IRIS

I know. There's more to tell. This child is not Yankel's.

JACOB

You had deceived your husband.

IRIS

No.

JACOB

(IRONIC)

Are you saying that he deceived you?

IRIS

Yankel could not make me pregnant. We tried for a long time. God knows, his illness made things worse. I tried to make him so happy, Papa. I knew that his days were few. When Yankel heard that I was expecting, his face grew so bright and alive. He thought the baby was his. And that made him happy again. So happy, Papa. I created a white lie. I loving lie. I can try to live with that guilt.

JACOB

Who is the father?

IRIS

Please, Papa . . .

JACOB

Who is the father?

IRIS

Yankel is the father.

JACOB

Who did you sleep with?

IRIS

It doesn't matter.

JACOB

Khaloshes . . . (loathsome)

IRIS

Please feel things from inside me, Papa. It's very different if you're a woman.

JACOB

Am I the only person who knows?

IRIS

(ACKNOWLEDGING HESHIE IN THE DISTANCE)

You and uncle.

(LONG SILENCE)

JACOB

What do you want me to say?

IRIS

Say you will live with me. You can't live in this claptrap. There are no beds in a *schul*. I won't let you stay here another minute.

(PAUSE)

Lily is after me. Can I tell you this? Her husband left her, Papa. They were fighting over money. She tried to kill herself with a razor to her wrists. The ambulance got to her in time. She sold the lot in Palestine. She needs more money. She thinks I am in control of your bank accounts. She thinks you have more cash squirreled away. Crazy. Rose is not crazy. But Rose is another problem altogether.

(JACOB WANDERS OFF AND IMAGINES
THAT HE IS SEES REGINA'S GHOST)

JACOB

Why did you do this to me, *mamala*? My hands are arthritic and I cannot touch another human being. I talk to you day after day after day and I know you fault me for my selfishness. But here stands our youngest daughter. Look, Regina! She lost her darling Yankel. Widow and widower. We have a new bond. How can God do such things?

REGINA

God doesn't care about such things.

JACOB

How do you know?

REGINA

God is confused, Jacob.

JACOB

More confused than me?

REGINA

God is distracted, Jacob. God sees what He wants to see.

JACOB

Who has ruined our daughters?

REGINA

I don't like that question.

JACOB

This is a form of torture.

REGINA

You loved them by day and you were tortuous to them by night.

JACOB

One can't be both, Regina.

REGINA

Maybe God should have warned you.

JACOB

I had to work.

REGINA

(SARDONIC)

I know.

JACOB

I began to drink heavily, Regina. Are you listening?

REGINA

Be respectful of Rose.

JACOB

Why?

REGINA

She remembers everything from the crib.

JACOB

When I die, will I be with you?

REGINA

I cannot answer that.

JACOB

You cannot or you will not?

REGINA

You have more years left.

JACOB

I don't believe you.

REGINA

Fix things, Jacob.

JACOB

I don't know how.

REGINA

Our daughters are upset with themselves. They remember your absences. Each daughter is different, my Jacob. They married men very much from you. So? Rose and Lily love to compete with each other. When they were very little, they fought over you. The newspapers enjoy their fights. Gossip feeds gossip. I have a few moments left, Jacob.

JACOB

What else do you know?

REGINA

I'm afraid to say. Iris cannot always tell the truth.

JACOB

What?

REGINA

Goodbye, Jacob.

JACOB

Regina . . .

REGINA

It's a warm kiss on the cheek. Can you feel me?

A little.

JACOB

That's the best that I can do.

REGINA

(REGINA WALKS AWAY SLOWLY, SADLY.)

Papa . . .

IRIS

Yes.

JACOB

She's here.

IRIS

Who is here?

JACOB

Rose. Her words will harm you.

IRIS

Let her approach.

JACOB

(ROSE APPROACHES)

Hello Papa.

ROSE

Hello Rose.

JACOB

Are you feeling all right?

ROSE

No.

JACOB

You abandoned the Solomon Residence.

ROSE

Why this hatred?

JACOB

ROSE

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

JACOB

Look at me.

ROSE

I know hatred.

JACOB

Did you encourage Lily to be vicious?

ROSE

No.

JACOB

Did she encourage you? Is this how you honor your mother and your father?

ROSE

I honor and love you both.

JACOB

Your mother told me to respect you.

ROSE

Good.

JACOB

How did you know I was here?

ROSE

The police contacted me. You broke into this building illegally.

JACOB

I'll go home with Iris.

ROSE

Fine. Iris lives, at times, in fantasy.

JACOB

Why does Iris fear you and your sister?

ROSE

I don't know, Papa.

JACOB

I'll talk to an attorney.

ROSE

Fine.

JACOB

What do you want?

ROSE

I just want you in a safe place with a bed, Papa.

JACOB

You want my money.

ROSE

You have no money. You've squandered your money after Mama had her stroke.

JACOB

We had a little bad luck.

ROSE

And we've searched high and low for you. Remember when we were in Maurice Schwartz's SHYLOCK AND HIS DAUGHTER?

JACOB

I do.

ROSE

We had a better relationship on stage than in real life.

JACOB

That's the magic of theatre.

ROSE

Sense the pain in my soul, Papa. I think there are insidious demons in our world I had a healthy baby boy, Papa. I named him Chaim – your father's name. I have charity in my heart, Papa, and I need you to come back to your senses. My anger has subsided. Tell Iris that she is delusional. Please. Neither Lily nor I have ever threatened her. I swear on Mama's grave.

JACOB

I need you all and that's my pain.

END OF SCENE

**SCENE SEVEN
 (ONE MONTH LATER.
 AN UNDISCLOSED LOCATION,
 TWO PIN SPOTS ARE ON
 JACOB AND HESHIE. BOTH
 MEN ARE SITTING IN
 WHEELCHAIRS)**

JACOB

I have nothing else to say.
 When Jacob Adler died – it was *Pasach* – March 31, 1926
 You and I were not talking back then.
 There were eulogies from all the big newspapers, Heshie.
 The Times stated that with Adler’s death, the golden age of Yiddish theatre had perished.
 His body lay in state at the Hebrew Actors Club on East Seventh Street.
 There were fancy portraits here and there, but God dressed this fallen actor.
 A plain *yarmulke* on his skull and *tallith tefillim* over his white body.
 The next day, the procession of mourners overtook the building.
 By April 2, fifty thousand people filled the streets of the Lower East Side.
 From Fourth Street to Houston, from the Bowery to Grand Street,
 And thousands more watched from the tenement roofs along Delancey.
 The Williamsburg Bridge was a human sculpture of desperate onlookers as the hearse
 rode by to the burial grounds at Mount Carmel. There are kings, but there are no kings of
 kings. No *Melekh Ham ’lokhim*.

(PAUSE. JACOB PUTS HIS HAND OVER HESHIE’S)

Heshie?

(HESHIE DOES NOT RESPOND. HE HAS DIED)

Heshie?

(JACOB SEES THAT THE VERY BREATH HAS LEFT HIS
 BROTHER)

Oy, Gotenyu!

END OF SCENE

**SCENE EIGHT
(SIX MONTHS LATER.
JACOB AND IRIS ARE ON
THE DECK OF THE STATEN
ISLAND FERRY. WE HEAR A
A FOG HORN AND SEAGULLS.
EVENING STARS ARE OUT.)**

IRIS

Yankal loved ferries. He felt freedom on the water and he said the price made him feel wonderful too.

(PAUSE)

I talk to him just after we leave Staten Island. I imagine that he's flying with the seagulls.

(PAUSE)

He said that I would marry again. He liked to tease me, Papa. He had a sense of humor that became sharper after his illness.

(PAUSE)

He was a good *eydem*. He should have been your favorite son-in-law.

(PAUSE)

Are you cold?

JACOB

No.

IRIS

I brought a shawl.

JACOB

That's for you.

IRIS

No, Papa.

JACOB

I have peanuts in my pocket.

(PRODUCES LITTLE PAPER BAG WITH PEANUTS)

IRIS

Thank you.

JACOB

Your welcome.

IRIS

Do you miss Uncle Heshie?

JACOB

I do.

IRIS

It's just the two of us, Papa.

JACOB

And the baby.

IRIS

When the baby is born.

JACOB

I think that is as it should be.

IRIS

Good.

JACOB

I cry in the morning.

IRIS

Do you?

JACOB

Heavy chest. I cry. You don't hear.

IRIS

Do you believe in reincarnation?

JACOB

Gilgul?

IRIS

Is that how you say it?

JACOB

I just see the ocean. We come from the ocean. And the ocean is never the same. All life from there. If I had the courage to violate law, I would have not laid your mother's body to rest in the ground. Her spirit should have turned to ash. And on the sea, we could have tossed the ashes to the wind. I would have played the violin on this boat.

IRIS

You never played music for me.

JACOB

My fingers are knotted but I will play.

IRIS

You can see a little more, can't you?

JACOB

Outdoors, yes. My eyes are better.

IRIS

Is it a good feeling?

JACOB

Yes.

IRIS

Do you still like New York, Papa?

JACOB

Yes.

IRIS

I do too.

JACOB

The theatre will always live. All big emotions come from the Yiddish stage. And the Yiddish tongue. And between the two is the timeless Yiddish soul. This is why the Jewish people carry such sorrow and such ecstasy. Yiddish character is human contradiction. In my old age, I am that impossibility.

(PAUSE)

When your mother deems it so, she talks to me now. I still carry her favorite jewelry.

(FINGERS A NECKLACE)

I mourn her more each day.

IRIS

Papa.

JACOB

I paid dearly for this vision. It's no sin to me. She's by my side.

(SILENCE)

My childhood and my dotage. I'm now your dependent, Iris. I excelled in my childishness. A diaper on my bottom and a diaper on my head. I see a red balloon and I call it mine.

IRIS

I'll buy you a red balloon, Papa.

JACOB

With a very long string perhaps?

IRIS

Yes.

JACOB

I ask for nothing more.

(PAUSE)

Iris.

(SHE TURNS TO LOOK AT HIM)

You were good to my brother and you made his life sweeter. You know that he passed away in his sleep.

IRIS

I know.

JACOB

He feared death. This is his handkerchief. I told him I would say *Kaddish*. And always light the *yahrzeit* candles for him.

IRIS

"The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord . . ."

JACOB

From the book of Proverbs. You know, the Zoroastrian beliefs included a special veneration for fire. The dead were thought to cross a bridge spanning hell, which narrowed for the truly evil until they fell into the burning chasm.

(THROWS THE HANKERCHIEF INTO THE SEA)

The bridge, however, would widen for the righteous ones as they headed to the welcoming light from above. All of our loved ones will make the journey, my darling I Iris.

(PAUSE)

And soon when it comes my turn, I will walk in trepidation. But I will walk knowing that you are my remaining light.

END OF PLAY

YIDDISH (AND HEBREW) GLOSSARY

Alta Kaker . . . old fart, literally old crapper

Bubkes . . . nose snot, worthless goods or payment

Bubbie . . . affectionate boon companion
 Bentshn . . . to bless
 Challah . . . special fluffy bread with a knotty roll exterior
 Davin . . . to pray with body and soul
 Eretz Yisrael . . . Land of Israel
 Epes . . . the everything word – “something, a little, a somebody, perhaps, debatable”
 Eydem . . . son-in-law
 Farshtinkener . . . stinky, malodorous
 Farthshadet . . . dopey, punchy, in a daze
 Ferkakdah . . . crappy, junk-like
 Ferklempt . . . choked up, overwhelmed
 Finster . . . dark, dimly lit
 Fonfers . . . stammers (speech)
 Ganugg . . . enough!
 Glatt Kosher . . . strict Jewish dietary laws
 Gilgul . . . a reincarnation
 Gonif . . . thief, clever schemer, shady businessman
 Gottenyu . . . an exclamation and an appeal to God
 Goy (goyem) . . . non-Jew, Christian (Christians)
 Goyisher . . . gentile-like
 Haddasah . . . charity
 Haimisher . . . in the manner of something Jewish and comforting
 Hock . . . to bother and harass
 Kaddish . . . Hebrew prayer for the dead in the immediate family
 Khaloshes . . . revolting, disgusting thing
 Ken ayin hora . . . without the evil eye, not to jinx something just complimented
 Kishkas . . . inners, guts
 Kvell . . . a parent’s relishing act for something brilliant from their offspring
 Kvetch . . . to complain, to bitch
 Luftmentsh . . . impractical fellow, head in the clouds
 Mamala . . . “mother” said dearly
 Mamaloshen . . . Yiddish language (mother tongue)
 Mamzer . . . illegitimate child
 Mazel tov . . . good luck
 Megillat . . . Hebrew religious scroll
 Mise meshina . . . ugly or unfortunate fate or death
 Mise meshune . . . ugly or unfortunate fate or death
 Mishugunah . . . crazy person
 Mitzvoth . . . commandment
 Moische Kopoyr . . . a person (an act) who (which) does everything upside down
 Narishkayt . . . nonsense
 Nu? . . . Yes? So? What’s new? Well?
 Oy gevult . . . a cry of help, fear, astonishment
 Oy vey . . . woe is me
 Pesach . . . Passover holiday
 Pisha paysha . . . a card game played by two, one of whom is usually a child

Plotz . . . to explode, to split,
 Putz . . . a penis, a prick
 Rebbe . . . rabbi
 Sha . . . quiet
 Shaina maidel . . . pretty girl from a family vantage point
 Schmata . . . rag worn for clothing as a last resort
 Schlub . . . member of the loser's club
 Schlemiel . . . member of the loser's club
 Schlimazel . . . member of the loser's club
 Schmaltz . . . chicken fat, sentimentality
 Schnops . . . liquor
 Schul . . . synagogue
 Scwartzas . . . Blacks
 Shabbos . . . Sabbath
 Shabbos goy . . . gentile who works on Sabbath in the synagogue
 Shonda . . . shame
 Seykhl . . . wisdom
 Tattala . . . dear one, sweetie in addressing a little boy or girl
 Tephilin . . . prayer phylacteries worn on hand, arm and head
 Tsores . . . woes, troubles
 Yahrzeit . . . anniversary of someone's death
 Zader . . . elder patriarch in the family

YIDDISH PHRASES

Vez iz mir, gottenyu . . . woe is me, Dear God!
 Sheynm dank in pupik . . . “a pretty thanks in the belly button” – thanks for nothing
 Tokles afn tish . . . “ass on the table” – literally. Put up or shut up.
 Gey kain cumen trig . . . “go take a crap and don't come back”
 Krich arein in di bayner . . . to crawl into one's bones, to shrink
 Ich bin dir moykhl . . . don't do me any favors
 Dem emmes . . . tell the truth
 Gib tzedakah . . . give charity
 Hab rachmonus . . . have compassion