

## **AUNT RAINI, by Tom Smith**

Characters: Raini Looks 50s-60s  
Katherine 30s, her grand-niece  
Joel 30s, Katherine's boyfriend  
Director Offstage voice, 20s

Time/Place: 2003. Katherine's apartment in New York.

Running time: 100 minutes.

AUNT RAINI is based on the life of Leni Riefenstahl, who spent the early part of her career as the official documentarian of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party.

Raini has come from Germany to visit her grand-niece, Katherine, a successful gallery owner. During dinner she meets Katherine's boyfriend, Joel, a photographer whose work focuses on his Judaism. Katherine does everything in her power to ensure Joel does not find out the true identity of her great-aunt. However, when Raini has a health scare and is admitted into a hospital, Joel discovers all.

Confronted with the truth, Joel grapples with his relationship with Katherine, questioning both her motives and the accusations lodged against Raini. But when a package arrives from Germany containing the original masters of Raini's Nazi propaganda films, both Joel and Katherine are forced to consider whether great art stemming from evil should be judged as significant artwork or evidence of hate crimes.

### **AUNT RAINI**

#### **ACT TWO**

#### **Scene One**

*A week later. Mid-afternoon.*

*A few vases of condolence flowers on the table next to a large pile of unopened mail.*

*Katherine sitting on the couch, reading articles from various newspapers.*

#### **KATHERINE**

Jesus!

*(Throws down the papers.)*

#### **JOEL**

*(Entering with his key and seeing the newspapers.)*

I was hoping you hadn't read those.

KATHERINE

What do they hope to— That isn't even journalism; it's a smear campaign.

JOEL

It will all blow over soon.

KATHERINE

Will it?

JOEL

*(Changing the subject.)*

Good, my flowers came. Huh, they looked bigger online. Did you get my mom's card? Mollie's?

KATHERINE

I'm sure I did.

JOEL

*(Noticing the stack of mail.)*

You haven't opened any of these?

KATHERINE

I stopped.

JOEL

Why?

*(Katherine says nothing.)*

Jesus, people can be so...

KATHERINE

I spoke with Horst. There won't be a public service.

JOEL

I figured.

KATHERINE

I'll see him over the holidays and we'll do something then; just the two of us. She loved him so much.

JOEL

I'm glad he was with her.

KATHERINE

Thanks for checking on me.

JOEL

Katie...

KATHERINE

I'll call you later, ok?

IOEL

Will you? It's already been three days.

KATHERINE

But who's counting?

IOEL

Please don't pull away from me.

KATHERINE

I'm not. I just need some time.

IOEL

Which I've given you. Three days.

*(Beat.)*

I was supposed to move in, K.

KATHERINE

...“Supposed to?”

IOEL

We need to talk about that. We need to talk about a lot of things, actually.

KATHERINE

...I know.

IOEL

I got a call from a reporter.

*(Katherine looks at him, alarmed.)*

He asked me a lot of questions about Raini—

*(Corrects himself.)*

Leni. Who she was. What I knew.

KATHERINE

What did you tell him?

IOEL

I said I didn't know any more than he did.

*(Pointedly.)*

Which is true.

KATHERINE

Why did he call you? It's a family matter.

JOEL

It's hardly that! Leni's death is international news. She was the last major figure of the Third Reich. Everyone wants to know who she was, what she really knew. There are a dozen reporters outside your apartment waiting to talk to you.

KATHERINE

Well, that's not going to happen.

JOEL

They won't just give up.

KATHERINE

They'll have to. They can't print anything if I don't say anything.

JOEL

Of course they can! They'll allude to things, make you out as some kind of conspirator.

KATHERINE

Who cares? I know the truth.

JOEL

Don't you get it? This whole thing could ruin you, Katie. Me! Every artist you represent. Do you really think people will feel comfortable walking into your gallery anymore? They won't be able to look at anything objectively; they'll imprint this... scandal... on every piece they see.

KATHERINE

Like you said, it will all blow over soon.

JOEL

Why didn't you tell me who she was?

KATHERINE

Go home, Joel.

JOEL

Were you ever going to tell me about her propaganda films? Or was that another House Rule?

KATHERINE

I'm not getting into this with you.

JOEL

I studied her films in college.

KATHERINE

So did I: they're masterpieces.

JOEL

That glorify Nazis.

KATHERINE

They do no such thing!

JOEL

The imagery. The extreme close-ups. The obvious adoration of Hitler.

KATHERINE

They were documentaries.

JOEL

I know that's what she always claimed them to be.

KATHERINE

Aunt Raini filmed political rallies. She captured the events as they happened. That's all.

JOEL

But she shot them in such a way that they transcended documentary.

*(Raini enters. Katherine is unaware of her presence. Joel talks directly to Raini, as if talking to Katherine through Raini.)*

RAINI

All my work was transcendent. That is what made me an artist.

JOEL

She romanticized her subject matter. She expressed her point of view.

KATHERINE

She did not!

JOEL

Take her first film, *Victory of Faith...*

RAINI

That was not a film at all! Hitler asked me to take some footage of a convention. I did not have adequate resources: no lighting, no dolly, no tracks. I had a handheld camera, for God's sake. It was just a series of shots I strung together; I never claimed it was anything more.

IOEL

Ok, fine, then *Triumph of the Will*.

*(It is at this point that, perhaps, some film clips begin to play.)*

Leni filmed it in such a way that she highlighted the power of the Nazis. It reinforced—

RAINI

Of course I filmed them that way. They had power. Not as much as they would eventually have, but enough to get the attention of the country.

IOEL

And her angles: she shot Hitler from below, framing him against the sky. It makes him look monolithic.

KATHERINE

He was. He was the leader of a major political party.

IOEL

But that plays with people's perceptions. It makes him look like a god.

KATHERINE

That's what made her a great artist! Aunt Raini didn't only document events; she documented people's emotions. At that time, to those soldiers, Hitler was a god.

IOEL

But she doesn't allow the viewer to decide what to feel. By choosing to shoot him that way, she's communicating the degree of his power. She's feeding the audience her point of view.

RAINI

He was on a podium. I was shorter than he was! I had to shoot upwards.

IOEL

The soldiers were shot straight on.

RAINI

They were on ground level.

IOEL

So you don't see any connection between what Leni was shooting and how she shot it?

KATHERINE

She was shooting something dryly political. To make it more compelling, more interesting, she shot it from various angles.

RAINI

It was a live convention. I did not get to set up a single shot. I could not start or stop the action, or re-shoot a moment. I only recorded events.

KATHERINE

You assume because she did that skillfully, with innovation, that she was making some kind of statement.

RAINI

I was! I was saying there were better ways to film documentary than the dispassionate way it had been done before. It was an aesthetic statement, not a political one.

JOEL

Bullshit! I know how easy it is to manipulate angle and a lens to—

RAINI

Get the best picture, the most expressive image?

JOEL

To make something say what you want it to say.

KATHERINE

Do you remember voiceovers in her films?

JOEL

No.

RAINI

Because there were none. I abhorred them. A commentator tells the audience what to feel, what to pay attention to.

KATHERINE

So how can you say that she was expressing anything personal?

JOEL

Katie, you've made your reputation selling art: you know words aren't necessary. Leni's beliefs weren't voiced, but they were clearly expressed. Even in her later films, she used models rather than actors because she wanted to show physical perfection. She was obsessed with an idealized world.

RAINI

We should always strive for idealism. Wagner, Shakespeare—all master-artists agree on this.

JOEL

But when you show only perfection you're claiming that one should aspire to it; one should want to be part of some master-race. If that's not Fascism, Nazism, then what is it?

RAINI

Commercialism.

KATHERINE

Look at any magazine—not just American, but Italian, Spanish, French. Models sending the message that if you buy their product you can be perfect. How is that different?

JOEL

Advertisers don't commit genocide on those who are different!

RAINI

There is no question how horrific Nazism was. Which is why I never joined the Party.

JOEL

She's rumored to be Hitler's mistress!

RAINI

And Goebbels's. And most of the leaders of the Party. With all that sex, when would I have had time to film anything?

*(Beat.)*

Many people believe the way you do. They accused me of war crimes. But it was proven in four separate trials that I was not Hitler's mistress, that I never became a Party member, and that I did nothing to contribute to that holocaust.

JOEL

Trials don't prove innocence; only that there isn't enough evidence to convict. And why was Leni was ostracized in Germany if she wasn't guilty?

KATHERINE

It's like falsely accusing someone of being a child molester. Ultimately, the truth doesn't matter—

RAINI/KATHERINE

—the accusation lasts—

RAINI

—forever.

*(If used, the film clips stop. Katherine begins to cry.)*



JOEL

K?

KATHERINE

I shouldn't have to defend her, Joel. Not to you.

JOEL

I'm sorry.

KATHERINE

Are you?

JOEL

Of course I am. I didn't come over here to—

*(This time, he stops himself.)*

I don't know, maybe I did.

*(Beat.)*

Why do you defend her?

KATHERINE

Because she told me she did nothing wrong. And Aunt Raini never lied. Even her work: documentary is the most honest form of art there is.

JOEL

So then why did she choose to shoot something political?

RAINI

Because it was an opportunity to create. An artist who does not produce art is just a person. And I could never be happy being just a person.

JOEL

And why, among every other filmmaker in the world, did Hitler choose her, a novice director? Unless he believed she was sympathetic to his cause.

RAINI

Before I was a director, I was an actress and a dancer. Arnold Fanck was looking for an actress who would climb a mountain in his new film. No woman would take the role because it was too dangerous: but I was not most women! I climbed without harnesses, without safety ropes. Without shoes. There are scenes of me scaling heights which would easily kill me if I made the slightest mistake. In one scene, an avalanche fell on me, and I dug myself out and continued to ascend. They used that footage in the final cut. I became known as "The Queen of the Mountains." I received thousands of pieces of fan mail. One, which I did not remember until it was later shown to me, was from a young man named Adolf Hitler. He said I represented what every German should be: powerful. Beautiful. Fearless.

So when he contacted me about his convention at Nuremberg of course I agreed to film it. It was impossible for women to get opportunities like that. There were no female directors before me. Why would I say no?

JOEL

Because he was a madman!

RAINI

Not yet! Everything he was talking about was peace and work; there was no talk about concentration camps or gas chambers. Besides, I am not a political person. I did not understand half of what he was saying; it is evident in my footage!

JOEL

How can you—

RAINI

There are clumsy transitions; speeches edited together very poorly. It is embarrassing.

JOEL

All art is political! How you transition between shots, what you choose to edit out. It wasn't newsreel; it was a film: it was directed. So don't say it wasn't political!

RAINI

You are confusing politics with aesthetics; I was enlarging the confines of documentary. As an actress, I had worked with great directors, so I knew how to tell a story emotionally, with tension and beauty. I chose to document everyone's point of view: the passion of Hitler, the fervor of the officers, the fanaticism of the soldiers. I captured every feeling in that place at that time.

KATHERINE

So because of that, to you, it seems something more than documentary.

JOEL

To most, not just me.

RAINI

Film captures image, not ideology!

JOEL

It captures both!

RAINI

This simplistic view of what art is, what it should and should not do—this is why you are unknown and I am one of the most famous filmmakers of all time!

KATHERINE

Aunt Raini won awards for her films. In Paris, for God's sake!

JOEL

She fooled a lot of people. Even me. But if you really believed her, Katie, you wouldn't have lied to me about who she was. You wouldn't have told *The Times* she worked in a bakery. You would have called her by her real name. Why all that deceit?

RAINI

Yes, Katherine, why?

KATHERINE

Because I deserved more than being "the grand-niece of...". I deserved my own life. I earned it.

*(Raini is surprised by this. She slowly exits the room.)*

...So where are we? You and me?

JOEL

I don't know.

*(Long beat.)*

I was going to propose.

KATHERINE

What!?! When?

JOEL

Before I moved in.

KATHERINE

Joel, we haven't even talked about marriage. Not seriously, at least.

JOEL

I wanted to ask Raini's permission first.

*(Corrects himself.)*

Leni's. Because she was so important to you.

*(Beat.)*

I'm lost now, Katie. I don't know how to feel about...any of this.

KATHERINE

*(Crosses to him slowly. Takes his hand.)*

I get it. And that's ok.

JOEL

We had our life together. My mom helped me pick out a ring...

KATHERINE

We still have a life together. I'm not my aunt.

JOEL

We're all our family, aren't we? In some ways.

*(Beat.)*

How do we get back to where we were before? Now that I know that— How do we do that, K?

KATHERINE

Maybe that's not the goal. Maybe we just move forward. Find a new us.

JOEL

I guess. I want to. I really do...

*(She kisses him, sweetly. He kisses her back, passionately.)*

I've got to get to school. I'll call you when my class is over. Maybe we can get dinner or something.

KATHERINE

I'd like that. I'd really like that.

*(Joel starts to exit.)*

Joel? I'm sorry for... I'm sorry.

*(Joel looks as if he might respond, but instead exits. Katherine stands for a moment, unsure what to do next.)*

*The lights fade to black.*