THIS IS *NOT* (!)

… … … HAPPENING(!)

…

By Steven Felicelli

WHY I LIKE IT: ***Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes…*** Wow. I wasn't prepared to go crazy for this play. Full lengths are a tough sell. I can't pretend to understand the synopsis. The character descriptions seemed – unwieldy. If at first glance, you think you're getting into a hot heap of chaos with Steven Felicelli's THIS IS NOT HAPPENING, A Chamber Play in Zero Acts, you simply have to keep reading. Why? Because it's fucking brilliant. This is a play for the ages. If you ever thought that original thought might not survive a pandemic, or for that matter, a certain era (that rhymes with "rump"), or that cancel culture might cancel culture, think again! After you get past the weird intro, you're going to find yourself sucked into the vortex of a dystopian dinner party (circa 2020) in honor of Gil's 50th birthday. His wife, Deb, despises him (incidentally, this is the last night of their marriage). Her best friend Lynda has made a feast worthy of the most insufferable food snobs. Lynda's husband Philip, alternately doting and egomaniacal, won't shut up. Oh, and there's this TECHNICIAN character, a stage manager quite unlike our folksy friend from Thornton Wilder's Our Town but serving just as essential a role in creating a context for the piece along with the iPhone alerts that run through it – both as a distraction and as a focal point. Not that the tech guy's the highest authority in the food-chain; he's on his headset with S.A.M., sort of an IT consciousness that dictates the algorithms in the world of the play. S.A.M. isn't portrayed by an actor but gets a character description and its own pronouns (It/it/its). It's in

this descriptor that Felicelli mentions Beckett for the second time, along with Mark Zuckerberg and Adam Smith as influences, however, THIS IS NOT HAPPENING, A Chamber Play in Zero Acts is uniquely poised as a mutant and progenitor in its own right. There are freeze frames. The sound of a crying gull. Characters with disabilities - one of whom is treated like an overlooked piece of furniture. A POC who doesn't line up with any of the current tropes, but this play could very well create a new one. Brace yourselves. This is going to change the way you look at plays and in the mirror. There is nothing quite like writing that blasts us right into the heart of the bullshit that we might not have noticed because it's already up to our necks. Politically correct? F-ck no! You got trigger issues? Desensitize yourself with this play! Uncensored, armed, and rife with bandwagons for ideological evolution, this is THE SHIT. You saw it here first.

PHILIP

I'm sorry, I…was a rare feast as usual, Lynn, and it *is* wonderful to see you all, really, I'm *not*, it's *not*…just having a hard time with…*the routine*. It all feels so…*foregone*—the evening. That we'll talk because it's time—we've eaten and now we talk and then you go and then off to bed thinking about the talking and what exactly…because…I'm sorry, not sure what I'm…

GIL

Foregone, is it? The evening?

LYNDA

Pip gets dramatic when he's down. His lines start sounding a bit scripted.

Five stars.

(Spacing is playwright's own.)

THIS IS NOT HAPPENING

A Chamber Play in Zero Acts

© Steven Felicelli

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SYNOPSIS

This Is Not Happening is a post-reality chamber play. Within the *trompe l'oeil* walls of this chamber, *guests* run lines into narrative feedback loops in accord with updated algorithms of agency. It is a closed space system increasingly jeopardized by

what's happening *out there* (beyond the chamber walls), where the apocalyptic amber of smoke-screened skies is giving way to a hard rain.

The play is about the illusion of engagement, perspectival chaos of communication and unending anxiety of the way we live now.

PLOT (PLOT?)
A dinner party. All (save GIL) are demoralized and bewildered by the year they're living through. Neither "COVID" nor "Trump" nor "2020" are named but we are still suffering through all three at this point (in the opening up period before the initial spike; people are extending their social circles, schools opening, forest fires are raging). An exception for gathering is made for Gil's 50th birthday. In the next room, Lynda & Philip's son is sleeping. Or rather, there is a child-shaped lump under the covers. It has "night terrors" we are told.

We open with postprandial chit-chat that is immediately escalated by Philip who is having a midlife crisis. His aggressive pontifications upset the dinner party routine (*eats first, confabulation after*) and soon everything begins to feel a bit…*off*. Relations, reason, and even language itself begin to glitch. The system is breaking down. Enter tech support.

The narrative arc is a series of waves. Things rise to a head as if "action" is about to occur, but then Technician comes to quell the impulse and smooth things over. Over the course of the evening, each couple will have an uncomfortably Albee-esque exchange as the power dynamic shifts in each relationship. Adversaries are made and alliances formed in a *first-world* war of *words words words*.

And all night, this back and forth is baselined by Lyle's guttural revving sound which rumbles from the deepest reaches of the system. This thoracic vibrato will gradually rise into his throat like an ascending laugh, sob or scream.

Cast of Characters

GIL: 50th birthday. Deb's husband. British. Conservative. Patriarchal "voice of reason." We don't know if he's full on Trumpian, because one would never disclose as much to other educated human beings (hence the unreliability of polls). He

makes some valid points; he's not a strawman punching bag. He/him/his.

DEB: (35-55) Gil's wife. Deb is the only character that doesn't veer toward caricature. She sees others and herself. She appreciates getting together again and wants everyone to get along. She and Lynda can communicate with looks. She has come to despise Gil over the last four years. This is the last evening of her marriage. She/her/hers.

PROFESSOR PHILIP PITT: (35-45) Lynda's husband. It's dawning on him. The script. The illusion of free will. The hubris of articulated animal sounds. He *could* just shut the fuck up and enjoy the evening, but he's Philip, so he must ruin it for everyone. He is sporadically concerned for Lynda's welfare which snaps him out of his egomaniacal, midlife meltdown now and then. He/him.

LYNDA: (35-45) Philip's wife. Punctuating each lull is an exclamation from Lynda, startling all. There is something very wrong, but she's holding it together. She is anxious about Alex, the son she loves dearly who is asleep in the next room. She has an indulgent affection for Philip which amounts to nostalgia for a lost love. She/her/hers.

MAY: (25-35) Brendan's wife. Millennial. She is not a distractable ditz; she is the Übermensch—the fully realized, multi-tasking transcendent being of the new millennium. She's "listening" but has other urgent matters to attend to on her iPhone. Her divided attention is a kind of noblesse oblige when she deigns to join the conversation. She sees and hears you all, she's just somewhere beyond you. She/her/hers.

BRENDAN: (35-45) May's husband. He and May are "trying" (to conceive), which means trying to save the marriage both are rethinking. He wants a child to start over. To regain some Wordsworthian purity, joy in his life. He still has a capacity for play and is deeply disappointed by adulthood. He is a *terrible* life partner. Does not even attempt to see May. He/him/his.

ELLIS: (25-30) African/Caribbean American. He and Lyle have just returned from a dream trip to Patagonia. He loves, but also resents Lyle. His place in this circle of friends feels somehow conditional. His collar is too tight. He loosens it, but by the next Act it is too tight again. He insists his occasional

shortness of breath is nothing to worry about, but it's unclear whether anyone is actually worrying about it. He/him/his.

LYLE: (30-40) He has an unspecified, neurological difficulty with speech and gesture. He has no control over his limbs and can only read words writ large (literally – a 48 pt. font threshold for comprehension) on highway signs and billboards. Ellis takes him out on road trips and Lyle reads the signs aloud as a kind of speech therapy. He has things he desperately needs to say, but all that comes out are California place names. He has fits in which he tries to scream, but can't (as in a dream). He/him/his.

TECHNICIAN: (25-35) "Invisible hand." There to speed the plough. He is disgusted with flesh, fallibility, ambiguity. He just wants these subjects to register clear, concise signals. He has a soft spot for Lyle, whose struggle to speak elicits his empathy. Lyle represents the last vestige of humanity to him and he's not so heartless as to want to see that die out (but if it must, in the end, it must). He has a beautiful singing voice. He/him/his.

S.A.M.: (no actor needed) Stilled Animation Module. Overseer in Technician's earpiece. He is Mark Zuckerberg/Adam Smith, but also Samuel Beckett. Technology/Late Capitalism = Scripted Play. Actors are fed lines the way factions are fed narratives. The algorithm (/script) dictates what *will* happen this evening, irrespective of each player's volition. It/it/its.

NADIA: (40-50) Person with disability, sits in a wheelchair with her back to the audience and does not speak for the entirety of the evening. Her conspicuous silence will counterpoint the torrents of talk. She is effectively voiceless and invisible to the major players. Her perspective is the audience's. She *is* the audience. She sits there watching people (adults) *pretend* and is paralyzed by this spectatorship. All she can do is sit and watch it happening. She can play no part and sees clearly that there wouldn't be much point in doing so. She drinks too much. She/her/hers.

KEY

…: ellipsis at end of line, a beat then jump in

—: em dash at end of line, try to step on last word of line

// to //: simultaneous/overlap dialogue

How should he tolerate, let alone cultivate, the occasions of fiasco, having once beheld the beatific idols of his cave?

Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*

SCENE

Palo Alto, California. A living room. Chairs, sofa, coffee table, old-fashioned Hi-fi. Stage right is a partitioned, night-lit child's room, with child-shaped lump under covers of the bed. Implied kitchen and bathroom in the wings. On a computer screen will appear "the control room" in which TECHNICIAN monitors the evening's transmission. All five "Inactions" take place in this living room. Outside a storm is alternately raging, relenting.

TIME

The present perfect (in the participial, not Utopian sense).

I.

Enter LYLE & ELLIS, BRENDAN & MAY, GIL & DEB, LYNDA & PHILIP, and NADIA (in a wheelchair) streaming in to the living room after dining. After a few seconds they freeze—then move again. Then freeze and move again (streaming issue). ALL seat themselves, wine glasses in hand (LYLE has a plastic tumbler). NADIA sits with her back to the audience. All action/dialogue should strain toward natural, but inevitably lapse stylized/automated—the tone fluctuating between earnest and arch. After ALL are seated, postprandial sighs, figurative/literal loosening of belts and a few moments of silence.

LYNDA
…So, here we all are again. Can't remember the last time we did this.

PHILIP
Yet we never forget how. Eats first, confabulation after.

ELLIS
Last summer, was it?

BRENDAN
Must have been the fall. We were away all summer.

DEB
New Year's actually. Not long before…
(ALL acknowledge "…")

LYNDA
Well, it's been too long. How *is* everyone?
(WIND throws RAIN against the window.)

ELLIS
Really coming down out there.

DEB
Thank God. Finally get the wildfires out.

PHILIP
If it's raining where the fires are.

MAY
…Lynda, the truffle risotto was just…*amazing.*

DEB
Oh my God, yes. And the black mint quinoa salad…
(ecstatic grunt)

BRENDAN
I know foodies who'd pay good money to attend one of your dinner parties, Lynn. Should open a restaurant.

PHILIP

For *the foodies*. Those eating enthusiasts.

GIL

Best meal I've had since our last visit, Lynda—you're a wonder.

PHILIP

It's unanimous, dear. We are a well-fed group. Compliments to the chef!

(ALL raise their glasses to LYNDA, PHILIP lifting his glass a bit higher as if to the Gods)

And now, having eaten our fill? We talk. An hour or two of talk and then you'll gather your things and go.

(smiles at NADIA)

LYNDA

Say what you're saying, dear. Or is this a parlor game? Small talk charades? Guess what Philip's on about now?

PHILIP

Just telling it like it is. We come into the living room with our *guests*. There's talk and then it's over.

LYNDA

You feeling down, Pipper?

PHILIP

I'm sorry, I…was a rare feast as usual, Lynn, and it *is* wonderful to see you all, really, I'm *not*, it's *not*…just having a hard time with…*the routine*. It all feels so…*foregone*—the evening. That we'll talk because it's time—we've eaten and now we talk and then you go and then off to bed thinking about the talking and what exactly…because…I'm sorry, not sure what I'm…

GIL

Foregone, is it? The evening?

LYNDA

Pip gets dramatic when he's down. His lines start sounding a bit scripted.

ELLIS
(rising, looking at phone for time)
…So Lyle and I better get moving. Sorry, we have that—

PHILIP
Sit down, Ellis, I'm done. I've said my piece…or a piece of it anyway.

ELLIS
Oh no, it's *not*…we have an early—

PHILIP
Is it piece as in *part* or peace like *rest-in*?
(ALL take out phones to investigate)
Well, whatever it is I've said it and will say no more on the subject.

(ELLIS sits back down.)

ALL (except NADIA/PHILIP/LYLE/ELLIS)
(in staggered unison to begin with and finishing in sync)
Speak your piece p-i-e-c-e. Hold your peace p-e-*a*-c-e.
(ALL laugh at semi-simultaneity)

PHILIP
Ah, we're nothing if not *informed* in this brave new…

(Audio cuts out. After a few seconds of silent mouthing, PHILIP realizes this and stops. Sips from glass, clears throat. iPHONE ALERT. All freeze in a tableau. Enter TECHNICIAN wearing gloves, headset, and tool-belt, speaking into mic)

TECHNICIAN
Signal to noise ratio's critical again. Need to scrub the data, or could just mute him until it levels off.
(listens)
Right. *Right.*

(Cuts slice of cheese and places it on cracker. Taps PHILIP's chin which opens his mouth and TECHNICIAN feeds him a cracker like a trainer incentivizing an animal. Brings PHILIP's gesturing hand/arm down to the armrest and combs the crumbs from PHILIP's beard. Places comb in plastic bag for disposal. Steps back to appraise his work. Satisfied, begins to exit, notices PHILIP and LYNDA are holding hands. He tries to disjoin—is unable.)

Can't part the principals. Gets harder each time, we might—

(listens, receiving instructions—takes chisel-like implement from belt, begins to pry hands apart)

Shouldn't need a tool for this, Sam. Be using a billows for breath before long.

(He pries PHILIP's hand out of LYNDA's—it pops loose flopping up and grazing TECHNICIAN's bare arm)

Fucking hell! And his palms are all sweaty!

(CRY OF DISGUST. He sprays arm with disinfectant, takes handkerchief out, wiping his arm furiously, then places handkerchief in plastic bag. Takes off gloves and places them in plastic bag. Exit TECHNICIAN. iPHONE ALERT SOUND. All reanimated.)

DEB

…Hm.

LYNDA

Hm?

DEB

Hm?...Oh, it's nothing. Just feel as if sometimes I've…*come to*? Like I'm suddenly…*here*. And it takes me a moment to place myself. You ever get that?

ELLIS

Yeah, that happens to me on our long drives. Like my mind's on cruise control and then…Lyle will speak up—he reads the signs aloud, part of his speech therapy. He can only comprehend extremely large fonts since the…so we ride the highways and he reads the signs…

(absorbing the insanity of this routine, then snaps back)

…and so anyway, he'll speak up and suddenly *there I am* behind the wheel, speeding off to who knows where. As if I've just… jumpcut to the next scene of my life driving through Arcadia or Chico or wherever…

LYLE

(guttural, strangled utterance)

Ch-Ch-Ch-*Chi-chi…*

LYNDA

(smiles at LYLE?...)

Happens to me all the time. Mind wanders off and then—

LYLE

Chico.

LYNDA

(smiles at LYLE)

…and then comes back to reality—insofar as there's a reality to come back to any more. Everything's so…*unreal* now. Skies are always that weird orange from the forest fires, news is all plague and mayhem and presidential decrees that never stop sounding like put-ons, like we're part of some ongoing practical joke…This cannot be happening I keep thinking and yet it goes on and on and so lately I've started to wonder if maybe it really… *isn't* happening?

PHILIP

Because, of course, it's *not*. Happening to *you*. Mighty white of you to concern yourself with the coverage, but what's actually happening—

(LYNDA fillips PHILIP's ear and he recoils from the sting, then without missing a beat, she goes on)

LYNDA

And so sometimes it feels for all the world like I'm in a dream and I worry I might *do* something…like lately I've been having that dream where you're on a ledge or a cliff or…whatever precarious height your subconscious dreams up and trying not to fall—pretty common, I guess, do you all have this dream?

ALL (except LYLE/NADIA)

(monotone, deadpan, in unison)

Yes.

LYNDA

And I always *jump*, because I can't bear that excruciating effort of…*not* falling—trying to *not* fall…and so I get to that point and think, this dream again and jump to get it over with, but now I worry that I might…risk it from a real height, because I can barely tell the difference and just can't bear that…awful feeling in the pit of your stomach when you're teetering at the edge, trying to keep your balance, trying to…*not*…

(iPHONE alert—a few bars of Rick James' *Superfreak*.)

BRENDAN

Sorry, thought I'd silenced it.

(checks message, groans)

Sorry. Go on, Lynda.

MAY

What is it?

BRENDAN

Bradshaw's on me again. It's nothing, go ahead, Lynn.

MAY

William? He's such a sweetheart, can't imagine him *on* anyone.

ELLIS
Come to a budget meeting. When the numbers don't add up, he and Holmes are like rabid dogs.

GIL
(to DEB, in explanation)
The ongoing war between Creative and Accounting.

BRENDAN
Our number bots think they're the be-all-end-all of the business. Run it by Accounting and it's like trying to turn water into wine. As if a little leeway in the budget would…*break* us. You'd think the whole enterprise were a mathematical—

(PHILIP interrupts with a loud GULL CRY. Then again, GULL CRY.)

PHILIP
What it must sound like. From the outside. Making these sounds at each other like a gaggle of gulls…
(GULL CRY)
As if *the sounds* were somehow…*doing* whatever it is…

LYNDA
Do you need a moment, darling?

GIL
Gaggle is geese, Philip, gulls flock.

MAY
No. Wouldn't have thought there were "gaggles" of anything.
(Giggles. Googles "gaggle.")

BRENDAN
Is this *language* again, professor? Think we're up to speed on that lecture.

ELLIS
It's…*talk* you mean, is…problematic, yes Philip, I think we get what you're saying, but what—

GIL

Is it? *Do* we?

LYNDA

Could you be overthinking it, dear?

DEB

What's brought this on, Philip? Why are you so down on…

PHILIP

What's *actually* happening here? Tonight, I mean, what *is* this…when it comes down to it and I don't just mean the conversation and the quinoa, I'm talking about the…track lighting, the furniture and fixtures, the…dress clothes, the whole affair. What is it we think we're actually *doing* here?

DEB

In your living room, at the moment? Or do you mean—

LYNDA

Don't encourage him, Deb. Just nod and smile and let him mansplain it and when the words stop coming, award him with a reflective, *Hm, yes, never thought of it that way*. No use engaging. It's not conversation, Deb, it's voice mail. Just have to let it play out to get to the next message.

(LYLE a choked laugh aggressively, pointedly *at* PHILIP)

PHILIP

Yes, Deb, I mean now, here—*as we speak.* Not waxing philosophical about the meaning of life, I'm simply asking what it *is* we…

BRENDAN

Now and here is nowhere. When you put them together.

(A beat. Puzzled looks.)

Do I need to spell it out for you?…*the words*.

DEB

…*Ha!* You're right. *The words.* Never noticed that.

MAY

…The words *what*?

(BRENDAN takes notepad out of MAY's purse, writes *now-here* on it, shows it to her. MAY looks, smiles indulgently at BRENDAN as a parent might to a child who's done something unremarkable.)

How clever.

(Pats BRENDAN on the shoulder, then takes her phone out for something more interesting to do)

PHILIP

Do you not, with these get-togethers, sometimes feel as if we're *just*…going through the motions of some…like everything we'll say and do is already there for us to say and do…and we're just…following through with—

(LYNDA kisses PHILIP's cheek firmly, squeezing his face with the other hand to silence him)

LYNDA

You've really thought this through, dear, given us all something to consider, but maybe we could get back to…where were we?

MAY

(not looking up from her phone, mock-gravid)

Nowhere.

ELLIS

…Dreams, was it? Lynda? Falling?

LYNDA

…*Not* falling.

(LYNDA withdraws to some height in the mind's eye)

BRENDAN

I get you, Lynda, it's that dream where you're at the top of some…unstable structure and it's starting to give way and you

know you're gonna fall, it's inevitable, it's the whole point of the dream and yet you *can't* fall because it might be to your death and so you try to get your balance and cling to whatever you can hold on to, whatever's there, in the dream, to…

LYNDA

…Cupcakes!

(a beat, LYNDA bounds into the kitchen)

GIL

Cupcakes, is it?

PHILIP

That's right, cupcakes for grown-ups. Fresh from the dessert district. Whole cluster of shops selling sweet treats on University Avenue now—all of them thriving.

MAY

(not looking up from phone)

Sweet shops.

(shakes head in mock disgust)

And so many of them. What's it all coming to?

PHILIP

Valley's become a disposable income outlet for treats, toys and…*accessories*—to *what* exactly it's sometimes difficult to make out. Hard put to find something a human being actually needs in Palo Alto these days. There's actually a shop where you can—

LYLE

(leaning toward PHILIP, sputtering, oddly aggressive)

P-p-pa-lo Allll…P-p-p—

(ELLIS pulls LYLE over a bit too roughly to silence him. Awkward lull. Reenter LYNDA with dessert tray.)

LYNDA

(sing-song, falsetto)

Cup-cakes!

(BLACKOUT)

II.

(Same scene, frozen tableau. Lights up on LYNDA smiling broadly as she holds out the first cupcake to GIL. iPHONE ALERT. ALL reanimated. LYNDA passes out the rest of the cupcakes. They have elaborate, towering frosting with mysteriously synthetic decorations, all over them)

DEB

Oh my god, Lynda, these are *so*…are they…
(aside, to GIL)
edible?

(after a few attempts at starting in on them, none can actually take a bite)

LYNDA

And who wants coffee?

(All raise then lower their hands simultaneously. Instead of going into the kitchen, however, LYNDA goes into the child's room. She gazes lovingly, anxiously at the child-shaped lump under the covers, then up at the ceiling and squints at something—a stain or a spider maybe? She climbs atop the bureau to get a closer look and then just stands there staring up at the ceiling, transfixed. In the living room, MAY has been ignoring others, staring down at her phone. MAY laughs.)

MAY

Look at this.

(shows BRENDAN her phone)

BRENDAN
(sound of disgust)
I don't need to see that. And can you put that thing away, already?
(she ignores him)

ELLIS
What is it?

BRENDAN
He's tweeting again.

(MAY reacts to something on phone, shows BRENDAN)

ELLIS
What's he on now?

DEB
(groans)
Let's *not*.

BRENDAN
(raising voice, over his shoulder to LYNDA)
Constantly repeating your mantra, Lynda: This cannot be happening.

PHILIP
Present company excepted.
(winks at NADIA)

ELLIS
Ever since he came down the escalator, something's been…off. Not just immoral or unjust, but…*off*?

BRENDAN
Yeah. That's it, Ellis, it's almost…atmospheric. Like there's this…smoke blown everywhere now and it's so…*loud* we have to shout over each other—as if everything's…

PHILIP

I'm sure those who bear the brunt of what's happening can *see* and *hear* it all pretty clearly.

GIL

And this is the president's fault? Your shouting? *Your*—

DEB

(looks up to the heavens)

Here we go.

GIL

Someone's got to be the voice of reason.

DEB

Does someone?

GIL

Who or what is it that's *making* you all behave this way? Hm? What is this mysterious force that's *directing* your—

DEB

Let's *NOT*…ruin this lovely evening by turning it into a political—

(LYNDA has lost her balance, now falls off the bureau with a thud. PHILIP rushes to the bedroom.)

PHILIP

(arm around her)

What are you doing in here?

(Lynda lifts her eyes to him. They put their foreheads together.)

Are you…is it happening again?

(He helps her up and into the living room.)

You were doing so well…

LYNDA

(reentering living room, rubbing head)

Bumped my head.

(PHILIP squeezes arm, kisses her head.)

ELLIS

You okay, Lynda? What happened?

PHILIP

(curt, peremptory)

She bumped her head.

LYNDA

So. What did I miss?

BRENDAN

The latest from *Il Douche* on the balcony.

LYNDA

Ah, glad I missed it. Hopefully you've gotten it all out of your systems.

MAY

…*No!* Did you all see this?

(She shows BRENDAN her phone. A beat as she holds it up to his face. He grabs the phone and thrusts it back into her purse, then trying to play it off as a joke.)

Yep. I see it. Now join us, won't you? We're having a little get together. Here at the Pitts', just now.

(MAY looks down at her purse, then back up at BRENDAN whose face evinces dread. MAY takes phone back out.)

MAY

(deadpan, menacing)

Don't take my phone, Bren—don't fucking do that…I'll take that cheese knife and cut your fucking throat, you do that again.

(A beat. MAY bursts out laughing. She gives BRENDAN a marital just kidding nudge. LYNDA, LYLE and DEB laugh with MAY. MAY flashes BRENDAN a

but-seriously look)

LYNDA

You're what my father used to call *a pistol*, May. You really keep us old folks on our toes.

(MAY winks at LYNDA, looks back down at phone. A beat. Reacts to something on her phone.)

PHILIP

…So what should we talk about now? Hm? Politics is off limits and what we're actually doing here—don't want to dampen the mood—so maybe we should get back to the food? I don't think anyone's remarked the fennel consommé yet or the zucchini rolls Lynn made from scratch. Spent hours on those this morning. *Hours.*

MAY

(not looking up from her phone)

Rolls were *so* good, Lynn.

DEB

Consommé was perfect starter. Did you do the Bryant Street farmer's market?

LYNDA

Mountain View. They have those dry farm tomatoes Pippy likes.

(ALL laugh at PHILIP)

PHILIP

I'm sorry, I know, I…not sure why I can't just…I think I *do* need a moment. Excuse me.

(He walks back into the child's room. Stands over the child's bed in contemplation—of himself.)

ELLIS

(trying to keep conversation going in uncomfortable moment)

I think the Bryant Street market *has* dry farm tomatoes.

LYNDA
(snaps)
They're not as good.
(clears throat, smiles at ELLIS)

BRENDAN
(quietly to LYNDA, re: PHILIP)
Is he like this 24/7? Does he ever turn it off?

LYNDA
He just needs a moment now and then. And it's not as if…
(longing look over her shoulder)

BRENDAN
Well, have to say it's a welcome breather from the color commentary on every kerlipzittiffly…klbahhhbmfrguhkikik…
(straining to form nonsense phonemes, clears throat, more nonsense, Jerry Lewis-esque)

GIL
(inquiring after BRENDAN, makes squirrel clicks from the back of his throat)
Chkk-chkk, chkk…*Chkk*.

(ELLIS joins in with a solicitous keening sound. DEB/MAY/LYNDA/LYLE trying not to laugh at their struggle to speak. iPHONE ALERT. ALL freeze in living room. PHILIP remains animated in the child's room. Enter TECHNICIAN in long sleeves now, speaking into mic)

TECHNICIAN
User interrupt…
(listens, frowns)
Keep scrubbing the data and there won't be anything left to scrub at some point. Let me see if I can…
(Approaches GIL with little flashlight, looks into ears/eyes/nose. Same to BRENDAN, ELLIS, and then NADIA. Puzzled by something, tilts NADIA's head, then back again. Moves

her arm from armrest to lap. In child's room, PHILIP picks up portrait of mother and child on bureau. Looks at it, then up at the mirror. Opens mouth as if about to deliver a soliloquy. Can't. TECHNICIAN takes glass out of NADIA's hand, shines flashlight on it. Sniffs, swirls in glass, sips, swishes it in his mouth [wine-tasting] spits it onto the floor. Tilts NADIA's head to a new angle, then speaking into her face.)

…find and open voice box…initialize audio…open face…

(TECHNICIAN winces at NADIA's breath. LYLE unfreezes, convulses, stands, and approaches TECHNICIAN from behind, unbeknownst, peering curiously over his shoulder. TECHNICIAN listens.)

Right, so maybe if we put her in a position to *think*? Worth a try.

(TECHNICIAN struggles to curl NADIA's fingers into chin-hold thinker's position *à la* Rodin)

When do we get an upgrade on the gloves? Feel like a caveman trying to manipulate their digits with these…*mitts*. And yet I can still feel a pulse in their throats.

(GROAN of disgust)

They need to be much thinner and yet…more padded. Greater dexterity with reduced sensation. I make a note:

(takes out iPad, fingers it, then goes back to work on NADIA. He finally achieves thinker's pose. LYLE now stands directly behind TECHNICIAN who takes a step back to appraise his work, bumping into LYLE. TECHNICIAN SHRIEKS!!! and nearly jumps out of his skin.)

LYLE

L-l-los G-gatos.

TECHNICIAN

Oh for fuck's sake, sit down!

(roughly drags LYLE back to his seat)

Get with the program, Lyle!

(sighs, softens, LYLE can't help it)

I'm sorry, Lyle, but you can't…while I'm…just sit back and enjoy the evening. Okay, buddy? Pretend I'm not here. Just an invisible hand to guide…the proceedings, to smooth things over. Move things along…

(LYLE settled, to S.A.M.:)

And we need to talk about Lyle at some point, he's not responding to the…

(listens)

No. No, not, *Jesus*, I don't…

(a concerned look at LYLE, then notices NADIA's chin has slipped from her hand, leaving her slumped over. As he resituates her, hears PHILIP returning and rushes out, slipping on the wine he'd spat—quickly dries the floor with his sleeve, then hurriedly crawls out.)

(Reenter PHILIP with ALL except LYLE frozen in tableau. PHILIP baffled by frozen scene, a questioning look at LYLE who looks around the room, then back to PHILIP. LYLE smacks himself in the forehead several times rapidly as if to dislodge something.)

(BLACKOUT)

III.

(Same scene, frozen tableau. After a few seconds, iPHONE ALERT SOUND. ALL reanimated. PHILIP returns to his seat in a fog.)

ELLIS

Okay, really need to get going now, all. Seeing the doctor at 8 A.M. tomorrow.

DEB

You okay to drive home, Ellis? We can give you—

ELLIS

No, no. Lyle's driving.

(ALL try to mask their surprise/concern. How can he drive when he has no control over his limbs? THUNDER.)

BRENDAN

Is he okay to drive…in the rain? It's really coming down out there. Maybe wait out the worst of it?

ELLIS

Have to brave it, getting Lyle up in the early A.M. is—

DEB

Oh, and we haven't even heard about Patagonia.

LYNDA

Patagonia! Yes!

ELLIS

I posted the pics.

(All take out phones and exclaim one by one: *AHHHH* the sound mounting as each joins in until the last to look let's out an orgasmic "Wwwwwow" and then someone else, a post-coital "Oh, *Ellis*." LYNDA and PHILIP walk ELLIS and LYLE to the door.)

LYNDA

Hope we haven't spoiled your evening with all our…*talk*.

ELLIS

Not at all, Lynda. Thank you so much for having us. The meal was superb as usual. Hard to go back to Lyle's cooking after one of your dinner parties.

(LYLE a wide, angry smile with upper lip tremor)

DEB
(back in the conversation pit)
…How are *you*, Nadia? How are you holding up these days?
(genuinely concerned, but comes out patronizing)

(NADIA makes a dismissive hand gesture)

LYNDA
Well, if you really have to go. We still want to hear all about Patagonia. Let us know when you've an evening free.

(ELLIS is having trouble opening the door.)

ELLIS
(awkward laugh)
I'm sorry, can't seem to…

PHILIP
//You have to jiggle it.

LYNDA
Ha! // Our prisoner! Tales of Patagonia at once!

PHILIP
It sticks, Ellis, just jiggle it. And push in.

ELLIS
…It's not, do I need to *unlock*…?

PHILIP
No, no, doorjamb's warped, just have to push in and jiggle, at the same time, 'til the latch catches.

ELLIS
(embarrassed, irritated)
I don't know what I'm…*can you just*…

PHILIP
You know it opens *in*, right? You're not trying to force—

(THUNDER. Rain gets heavier. LYLE makes guttural revving sound, rocks on his heels.)

LYNDA

(peremptory, taking ELLIS by the arm)
Listen to that, coming down cats and dogs, we can't send you out into that.

(begins to lead ELLIS back to his seat)
At least wait til it lets up a bit. Come, sit and tell us all about Patagonia!

(More distant THUNDER. LYLE grabs the doorknob and yanks at it in a kind of convulsion. LYNDA goes to him. ELLIS's hand to his chest, on the verge of coronary?)

DEB

You okay, Ellis?

ELLIS

Yeah, I'm…just a bit…out of breath. Happens sometimes, it's nothing.

(GIL and DEB help him back to his seat.)

LYNDA

Don't want to be caught out in that, Lyle, really. Let's let it die down a bit. Can stay the night if need be. *Our casa es su casa.*

(She leads LYLE back to his seat)

ELLIS

I'm…

(loosens his collar—at each Act break it will retighten and he'll need to loosen it again)
I can't…

DEB

What's happening? Ellis?

(to LYLE)

Is he…I think he might be—

(LYLE moves DEB aside and grips ELLIS's head with both hands, looking him in the eyes, his tremors cease and he goes stone still. Holds the stare for a few seconds. ELLIS finally exhales, inhales, exhales. LYLE falls onto the sofa exhausted.)

DEB

…You okay, Ellis?

(He nods, continues to catch his breath.)

Panic attack?

ELLIS

I don't…maybe. Never been that bad before. Sorry all, I…I'm okay. I'm fine.

(Desperate to deflect attention, smiles as he picks up cupcake and attempts a bite. Fails. MAY reacts to something on her phone, Brendan nudges her. She nudges him back without looking up from her phone. Awkward lull.)

PHILIP

…Sorry boys, need to get that damn door fixed. Lynn, remind me to call a…locksmith or a…trim carpenter? Who does that sort of thing? Doors that don't open?...

LYNDA

I don't know, dear, we'll Google it.

PHILIP

Right, no, I know, but…*what* will we Google?

(MAY bursts out laughing, shows BRENDAN her phone. Moves it closer and closer to his face as lights fade.)

(BLACKOUT.)

IV.

Same scene, frozen tableau. iPHONE ALERT sound. ALL reanimated.

DEB

(under her breath, aside)

And here I am.

LYNDA

Come again?

DEB

Hm? Oh, no, nothing, I…so you never told me, Lynn, how does Alex like his new school?

LYNDA

(waxes earnest, animated)

Loves it. Absolutely loves it, everything's outdoors now and he gets to nap in a tent!

DEB

He still naps?

LYNDA

No, but they do *rest time*. In a tent! And they have chickens! And a llama!

PHILIP

(trying to be sardonic, but LYNDA's enthusiasm is infectious and he can't help beaming at her)

Best school money can buy.

LYNDA

He got to milk a goat yesterday! He was so excited when he came home, he…

(looks around)

Sorry. *Sorry.*

DEB

What on earth for? It's wonderful, Lynda.

(PHILIP takes LYNDA's hand—MAY an aggravated grunt)

BRENDAN

What is it?

MAY

(vaguely menacing, enigmatic)

…Bradshaw's on me again.

(puts her phone away, looks up)

Nothing. It's nothing.

DEB

…Really, Lynda, tell us all about it. Wonderful to see you so…

LYNDA

Just don't want to be one of those women who go on and on about their…it's just, he's *so* happy to be there. With other children. After everything that's…

(emotional, ALL acknowledge "…")

Just feel so lucky, in spite of all the…we're still *so…blessed*.

DEB

Gets so bad you forget how good it is.

PHILIP

…Well said, Deb. And did I mention how good it is to see you all? Before I started running off at the mouth, I was thinking—

(VERY LOUD THUNDER!!!)

…*Jesus.*

ELLIS

About give me a heart-attack.

DEB

That was *wild*…

(rain gets heavier, more distant THUNDER…)

…Let's go out there! Right now. Let's all of us—

GIL

Please.

DEB

Really, let's just…when's the last time you went running out into the rain?

GIL

Hard pass, dear. You go ahead and—

LYNDA

I'll get my raincoat!

PHILIP

Now you're talkin'!

(Stands. THUNDER, he shakes fist at it)

Rage on you cataracts and hurricanoes!

(BRENDAN gets up and hops around excitedly like a little boy.)

GIL

Have you all lost your senses? It's a bloody *typhoon*—

(iPHONE ALERT SOUND. ALL freeze. Enter TECHNICIAN. He goes to DEB, leans in.)

TECHNICIAN

(quietly, firmly)

But you'll catch your death out there.

(He passes his palm over DEB's face as one shuts the eyes of the dead. Exit TECHNICIAN. iPHONE ALERT—ALL reanimated.)

DEB

(opening eyes, hesitating)

Oh, but I'm in heels, can't really—and this is silk, I…

MAY

Just take it all off! Let's just strip down and—

LYNDA
Think I have an extra pair of rain boots, let me see…

DEB
Oh no, no, Lynda, don't bother yourself, it was just a *crazy*…

(ALL looking at DEB to lead the charge, but she's immobile. MAY is standing, heels in hand.)

MAY
Are we doing this?

(Moment passing, subjunctive mood emerges.)

DEB
…Wouldn't that be wild? Running through the streets like a bunch of crazy kids…til we're soaked through…

BRENDAN
Yeah? Sssso…?

(ALL hesitating now, impetus dissipating)

DEB
…almost worth the pneumonia. Or being struck by lightning.
(defeated smile)
And anyway, the door.

ALL except PHILIP/NADIA/LYLE/BRENDAN
(deflated)
Oh, right.

PHILIP
What?! Have to get the damn door open at *some* point, not as if—and could just go out the window if we had to, *what the hell*—

LYNDA
They're painted shut Philip, just sit down now.

PHILIP

What's the matter with you all? You act as if we're…I'll just take it off the hinges. Toolbox is in the garage, I'll have it off in no—

LYNDA

Philip. Sit down, dear, let's not…

BRENDAN

I'll give you a hand, Phil.

(moves to go with PHILIP)

LYNDA

Boys.

(LYNDA shares a look with DEB who then looks down at her hands—LYNDA takes coat off, hangs it on coat rack)

Sit down now.

(ALL resigned, deflated, reseat themselves. Lull.)

BRENDAN

(glum, like a disappointed child)

…*I do*. Phil. Feel like that sometimes. Like we're just…like now it's my turn to speak and everything I say is just…sound. Cow goes moo, duck goes quack and I go…

(Audio cuts out. iPHONE ALERT. ALL freeze.)

TECHNICIAN

(exhausted sigh, reading off his tablet)

User Error N-2121-J…*yet again*. Remind me why we're still bothering with an interface?

(listens)

No, I know, but…with all the headaches and it's not, strictly speaking, *necessary*, so I'm not sure I…

(listens, rolls eyes)

The network. We can't get a room right, an evening, but let's have a go at every moment of every day at every site in the world.

(volume in earpiece raised so we can hear it, but not make out what S.A.M. is saying)

Okay, *okay*, I'm just…it just feels a bit played out, no?

(He shines little flashlight into each of BRENDAN's eyes. Folds BRENDAN's limbs inward in a centripetal position. Looks over his shoulder at LYLE like a worried mother. Approaches him.)

Listen Lyle, you need to start…improving. At some point, you're gonna have to…just…do your best, okay? Lyle? Try *really* hard. To improve. Okay Buddy?

(LYLE convulses, freezes. TECHNICIAN walks off. iPHONE ALERT. All reanimated.)

DEB

Hm.

GIL

Hm?

(MAY is looking down at her phone. It's initially unclear who she's talking to or what about.)

MAY

So they're *lucid* dreams. You can actually *do* something, knowing it's a dream?

(No answer, looks up from phone at LYNDA.)

LYNDA

…Oh, me, you mean? Yeah I guess so. I *do* have…and that's what I'm worried about, right? Like what if I *did* something in what turns out to *not* be a dream and something happens to me?

GIL

Then you'd know it was real. If you do something and then something happens—that's reality. So maybe act in accord with the laws of physics and you'll be all right. When you say things seem *unreal* to you, I'm not sure I—

PHILIP

Real is whatever your brain tells you is real and *your brain* has an agenda, needs you to…*function.* So it *shapes* what it takes in from the…formless welter of what's *out there*.

(ALL roll eyes, begin to nod off as lecture progresses.)

And so maybe the brain just needs there to be—limitations, *laws*—to manage things and so it…"discovers" them. Could be everything's discord, gibberish and our brains are just rerouting the neurons to placate us. To harvest our genes. How would we know?

(LYNDA tries to hoist him with his own petard by uttering a weary GULL CRY, but there's no stopping him)

I mean, if the brain can *thoroughly* convince someone his wife is a hat or his mother's an impostor or his hand is…someone else's hand,

(ALL start up from their doze, loosen grip on glasses and look at free hand as if ownership thereof has been problematized)

what *can't* the brain convince you of when push comes to shove?

(LYLE bumps ELLIS's elbow with one of his convulsions and glass drops to the carpet. ELLIS pounces and begins wiping up with a napkin.)

ELLIS

Damn it, Lyle.

LYNDA

Oh, leave it, Ellis, it's nothing.

ELLIS

(furiously scrubbing)

Let me see if I can just—

LYNDA

Seriously, Ellis, leave it, we'll let the cleaners—

ELLIS

Not coming out. *Out*, damn it! Do you have any seltzer? If we get it before it sets—

LYNDA

(raises voice)

Leave it.

(Startled, ELLIS leaps back onto the sofa. Awkward lull.)

ELLIS

…I'm sorry, Lynda, just afraid it will stain.

LYNDA

(turns to look at him—deadpan, inscrutable)

…Then it will stain.

(Awkward lull. Wine glasses up to mouths one by one like dominoes, ending with ELLIS taking a sip from his empty glass, re-loosening his collar and staring down with horror *à la Lady Macbeth* at the stain.)

GIL

…the professor's objections duly noted, but if it were *all* subject to…neuropathology, then how would science arrive at complete agreement in test after test of physical laws?

PHILIP

Folie a tout?

GIL

And how account for the direct evidence of…

(again sound cuts out, which does not stop GIL, he continues "speaking" for a bit—resume audio)

…I refute it *thus*.

(He knocks twice on the table. ELLIS coughs and it almost sounds like the bark of a dog when someone's at the door. He recognizes the similarity and reproduces cough to make it clear he has coughed, not barked. LYLE looks hopefully toward the door.)

…There is a rock bottom reality that neither the mind nor technology can override. Regardless of—

PHILIP

Yeah? Bet if I hacked into your Facebook account, I could…

GIL

Oh for the love of…you all need to stop blaming your problems on Zuckerberg or the president or late capitalism. None of this is being done to you. You're not being infantilized by social media or narcotized by inanimate devices for heaven's sake—*you're* doing that. Nobody's making you stew over petty disagreements or piss away hours of your life playing mindless games on your phone or click-shop for rubbish you don't need. *You're* doing that, not some algorithm—it's not the *atmosphere*. If things don't seem real it's because you've…

PHILIP

Things don't *seem* real because they're *not*. Not here at least. *Reality* was never gonna happen *here*.

(poorly reproduced audio of WIND against the window pane)

DEB

How do you mean, Philip?

LYNDA

(groans, to DEB)

Seriously?

PHILIP

What's so 'real' about any of this? It's a *performance*. I do my best Philip, you do Deb, we all…speak our lines and…*curtain*. It's all just so much…*talk*. We, my friends, are *all talk*. Sum and substance. Start to finish. Blah-blah-blah-*dead*. And so we try to post it for posterity, keep a running record of our lives—hey everybody, tried capers with my scrambled eggs this morning, thought you should know!

(MAY looks up from phone, glares at him.)

As if it might…*mark* something.

(LAUGHS)

As if *this* could be more than just…play. All for fun. One and done. Every single…*singular* expression of our…being here.

MAY
(still glaring, sarcasm thinly veiled)
Hm, yes, never thought of it that way.
(back to her phone)

LYNDA
(smiles at MAY, hand on PHILIP's wrist)
That was wonderful, dear. *Tellement tragique*. Is it new?

(BRENDAN and LYLE LAUGH. iPHONE ALERT. Enter TECHNICIAN now wearing a surgical mask. Approaches PHILIP, whacks him upside the head like a vending machine, then puts a handful of nuts in PHILIP's mouth. Leans in.)

TECHNICIAN
Know what we do with a broken record, Philip? Nothing. We get a new one.
(leans in, menacing emphasis on each word)
We don't waste time with major repairs any more.
(goes to NADIA, speaks into her face)
Identify obstructions and clear throat…enable audio and open face…*speak*…
(she belches)
I'm at a loss down here, Sam. I think we may have to—
(listens)
Of course I did. Check the log.
(listens)
Right. And I'm starting to think it's just not…there? Can't find any source code and every time I—
(listens)
…exactly what I said. Sans code, sans signal, sans…everything. The CPU, if there is one, just isn't…operational? Or *not*…I mean, it just *isn't*…there's no terminology for what it…*isn't*.
(listens)
No, because that would mean the system was set up for something and/or nothing, but it's clear now that it doesn't register either end of the binary—that the very meaning of…*meaning* as it pertains to the system is a *mis*—
(listens)

No, not *meaningless*—listen to what I'm saying to you. It would have to be *neither nor*.

(listens)

Tried that, more than once—check the log. We've tried everything, Sam; maybe it's time to cut our losses with—

(listens)

Yes, of course, but we can't just *go on*—

(listens, exhausted groan)

Okay. I make a note.

(fingers tablet then replaces it—listens)

All right, yeah, no, I got it. I know the drill…

(LYLE makes revving sound. TECHNICIAN goes to LYLE, looks into his eyes. He pulls his mask down, rolls up his sleeve, takes his glove off and puts his bare hand on LYLE's forehead like a laying-on of the lame or prelude to a baptismal dunk in the river. The revving dies down. Sound of wind and rain surges. TECHNICIAN walks back to control room in a brown study. Clicks iPHONE ALERT. ALL reanimated, except LYLE who remains frozen.)

GIL

All the world's a stage, is it? What a penetratingly original thought, Philip, but how does it follow that we're *all talk*? We're flesh and blood, not *dramatis personae*—if you prick us, we *do* bleed. Even actors on a stage are subject to *physiological*—

(LYLE GASPS as if emerging from under water, holding his chin up, spouting his drink in a spit-take. ELLIS wipes LYLE's chin and strokes his head. They hold a look at each other. Awkward lull.)

LYNDA

…Was that my phone?!

PHILIP

Your phone is *on* you, Lynn. It's *in* your—

(LYNDA ignores him, leaps up and rushes off into the child's room. Leans over the child's bed like Mary in a manger scene.)

DEB

…Is Lynda all right?

PHILIP

Nobody's *all right* any more, Deb. Lucky to be—

GIL

Is Lynda well, Philip? Is she still having problems with her…
(twirls finger at side of his head)
inner ear…with that, the…*disequilibrium*?

DEB

What did the specialist say?

PHILIP

(sputters disdainfully)
The specialist. She's fine. Just been feeling a bit…out of it lately.

DEB

Haven't we all?

GIL

Have we?

BRENDAN

Do you not find it…upsetting, Gil? Everything that's been happening?

GIL

Everything—all told? As opposed to when and where?

DEB

Gil doesn't take things so hard. He has
(through her teeth)
perspective.

PHILIP

Can I get a ruling on *all told*? T-o-l-d or t-o-l-l-

(NADIA coughs hard, wine down the wrong pipe, DEB pats her on the back and inquires if she's okay. NADIA makes an odd gesture with her hand, bearing an ostensibly penetrating expression on her face which captivates ALL. It's as if they are only now seeing her. ELLIS has been looking down at phone, missing this moment, now looks up.)

ELLIS

T-o-l-d.

PHILIP

…Of course it is.

ELLIS

(sees he's the only one who Googled)

Sorry, thought we were…

BRENDAN

Things are bad, Gil. That's the way it is, not some relative—

GIL

The way it *is* is the way it is, my friend. Conditions and cross purposes. *Bad* is just somebody's version of—

DEB

That's right Gil, we're all *very fine people* at heart, some of us just…

BRENDAN

Nazis, Gil. Straight up *Nazis*—you're not shocked by this wave of…

DEB

Cockroaches out into the light, right, but then we knew what was in the woodwork, didn't we? It's these *sympathizers* with their *see-no-evil*—

(IPHONE ALERT. ALL freeze. Enter TECHNICIAN. He approaches DEB who has a ferocious scowl on her face.)

TECHNICIAN

Come on, Deb, this isn't you. Look at yourself.

(He holds little mirror up to DEB's face—her eyes focus and then roll, though her face remains frozen)

Half afraid you'd bite my hand—if you had your mouth. Don't get so worked up. You were having such a wonderful time, Deb—good friends, good food. *You're having a wonderful time*—don't let something like this spoil the evening. Can always *post* something later.

(He pours her another glass of wine and passes palm over DEB's face as one closes the eyes of the dead. Exit TECHNICIAN. iPHONE ALERT. ALL reanimated.)

DEB

(opens her eyes, sighs)

Ah well, no use in…it *is* what it is.

ELLIS

And yet…would it all have been different, do you think, *if*…

GIL

It *is* different. And *no*.

LYLE

(hostile, in response to GIL's gibe)

F-F-F-F-*Fresno*.

DEB

(smiling and nodding at LYLE)

Right on, Lyle. Go to Fresno, Gil.

LYNDA

…different how, Ellis? You mean if they hadn't…or if we had just…

(LYLE makes a loud, close-mouthed animal sound startling all. ELLIS strokes LYLE's head.)

BRENDAN

Is he all right?

ELLIS

He's okay, just needs a little contact now and then. It's when I'm distracted or in another room, these little fits can get violent. I'll hear this…choked scream—and I'll run in to find him face first pounding and kicking the floor like he's trying to…break through the floorboards…

(emotional, then with a hint of bitterness)

It's why I can't leave him alone. Have to be *by* in case…sorry, I…

(nervously reaches for his cupcake and attempts a bite—fails)

MAY

(not looking up from her phone)

Why do you guys talk about him like he's not here?

(BRENDAN nudges her—she nudges him back.)

LYNDA

It's okay, Ellis. We're all just…doing what we can.

BRENDAN

All we *can* do, you're right, Lynn, and yet it seems to get harder and harder. Every day a fresh hell in the news. In the sky. In the air we breathe. Another day, another rock bottom and yet it's business as usual for the…

(stops suddenly, enigmatically, looks at everyone, crosses legs, leans over to LYNDA)

…Where's the bathroom? Brendan has to make a wee-wee.

MAY

You drunk? How many times you been here and you don't know where the bathroom is?

GIL

I think maybe that's enough wine for the night, eh? Weren't we switching to coffee?

(DEB glares at GIL and holds out glass, which LYNDA refills. BRENDAN has gone off to the bathroom. We see him on the monitor. He pees and then runs the water to wash his hands. He picks up the soap—which is in the shape of a jack with pointy edges—but can't figure out how to soap his hands and so just washes them with water. On his way back to the living room, BRENDAN sneaks into child's room. Simultaneous to the dialogue below: he approaches the child-shape as another pilgrim approaching a shrine. He looms over the bed; a few uncomfortable moments and a dark look that intimates imminent wrongdoing. Listens off to monitor whether he can be heard from living room. Then he turns, scans the room, picks up one of the boy's toys. Sits and begins to play with it. Then with another and another until there are toys scattered all about—during the scene below.)

LYNDA

(after a lull following BRENDAN's exit—jumping out of her seat, exclaims)

Music!

(rushes to Hi-fi, pulls out a crate of albums)

PHILIP

(under his breath, panic)

No.

DEB

Albums? That takes me back.

(TOILET FLUSH. Prior to BRENDAN's entry to child's room.)

LYNDA

What are we in the mood for?

PHILIP

No. It's so…Pavlovian. Listen to this and feel *this*.

LYNDA

When a movie score swells for a dramatic moment, Pip starts yelling at the screen,

(shaking her fist)

"No! It's cheating, you're cheating!"

PHILIP

Feeling should arise from the content, not the presentation of a given—

LYNDA

(flipping through albums, removing one from the sleeve, raises voice like a parent whose had enough guff)

Okay, Philip, you've said your piece, now *shush*. How 'bout a little Motown?

DEB

Yes!

(MAY furrows brow, mouths the word as she Googles "Motown")

PHILIP

Please, Lynda. Please don't.

LYNDA

(wavering, holds album half out of sleeve)

You'll live.

(She places disc on turntable and drops needle. Music begins, the Temptations' *Ain't Too Proud to Beg*. As music plays, PHILIP rises, involuntary. Begins to dance as if someone were puppeteering him. He dances well, if

mechanically, staring mournfully at LYNDA the whole time. ALL others grooving with the music in their seats like a laboredly spontaneous scene from a romantic comedy. BRENDAN bobbing head and moving back and forth as a child might during play.)

DEB
(during the bridge)
Go *Phil*ip! It's your birthday! Go *Phil*ip!

(PHILIP pleading with LYNDA, mouths "It's *not* my birthday." She finally relents, sees he's in agony, wipes needle off disc—RECORD SCRATCH)

LYNDA
Okay, all right, Pipper. Take it easy. Sit down now. *Jesus…* You're such a pill.

PHILIP
I'm sorry, Lynn, I don't…you know I don't *mean* to…

(ELLIS, closest to the child's room, hears BRENDAN drop a toy.)

ELLIS
I think your son may be up.

LYNDA
Is he?
(groans, consternation)

PHILIP
…He has night terrors. Just have to let him thrash and squeal for a bit, no use consoling him. Doesn't even know you're there.

DEB
How awful.

PHILIP

It's a kind of trance. Awake, but not awake and nothing we say or do is the least comfort.

LYNDA

I'm going to check on him.

PHILIP

(groans)

To watch, yes. Can only watch it happening—can't *do* anything, but you go ahead, darling, look in on him.

(LYNDA goes to child's room, cracks the door to see the bed lump, but cannot see BRENDAN who is now frantically gathering the toys he'd played with and putting them away. LYNDA hears this, enters room, sees BRENDAN holding a toy)

LYNDA

(hushed)

Brendan? What are you…?

BRENDAN

Wandered in thinking it was the bathroom—I *am* a bit drunk—and was just looking through the boy's…playthings…Maisie and I are…*trying* and so I guess I…

(exiting room into hallway)

LYNDA

Oh, are you? That's great, Bren.

BRENDAN

Yeah, and…envious of you and Philip, to be honest. We're not sure we…*can*.

LYNDA

Ah, it can be difficult.

BRENDAN

Oh, was it for you and Philip?

LYNDA

Almost two years trying. Month after month of that coordinated effort, those *mandatory*…

(blushes, raises eyebrow)

BRENDAN

No, right, I know, it's…

LYNDA

And it was quite…*restful* after. Not to have to…and *then* there doesn't seem to be any *point* and so…*sorry*, you don't want to hear this, Brendan…

(squeezes his arm, an encouraging smile)

I'm sure it'll happen for you too.

(REENTER LYNDA & BRENDAN where the rest of the party has been wondering about this exchange they can't quite hear.)

MAY

You okay, Brendo?

BRENDAN

Yeah, I'm…

(deep breath, spent exhale from exertion)

I'm good.

(Sound of wind and rain. Another ripple of wine glasses to mouths. Lull.)

LYLE

(perfectly pronounced, savant-like, parroting a tour guide, Chilean or generic Spanish accent as his body goes quiet)

In the extreme south of Patagonia, the prevailing winds are westerly, and the westward slope has a m-m-m-m-m-

(punches himself in the chest)

much heavier precipitation than the eastern in a
(rolls 'r' deftly)
rainshadow effect.

ELLIS
(excited/encouraged by this, arm around him)
Yes! That's *good*, Lyle. Good. What else did the guide say?
(LYLE turns and stares vacantly at ELLIS.)
About the rain? Do you remember? Do you remember what he said about the rain? About the…storm systems? In the west? Lyle?...

(LYLE continues to stare vacantly at ELLIS. Sound of rain fades. TECHNICIAN is dozing off in the control room. Lights fade to BLACKOUT.)

V.

In Control Room, we hear S.A.M.'s raised voice in TECHNICIAN's earpiece and he starts awake. Clicks iPHONE ALERT. Lights come up gradually. STORM SOUNDS increase in volume. Same scene. LYLE still staring blankly at ELLIS.

ELLIS
That first day *when it*—remember? And we couldn't get the umbrella unfolded, so we had to…
(remembers where he is, turns from LYLE to address others)
Right, so anyway…that first day we were in, what was it…?

LYLE
(smoothly, wistfully)
Ushuaia.
(oo-shoo-why-uh)

ELLIS
(also wistful, melodic, smiling at LYLE)
Ushuaia.

ALL others except NADIA
(marveling at the sound)
Ushuaia?

ELLIS
And it rained so hard that first day, we…

(LYNDA goes to refill NADIA's glass)

GIL
Lynda.
(clears throat, under his breath—stern)
Come on now.

(Irritated by GIL's paternal rebuke, DEB glares at him and begins to speak, but she's actually addressing LYNDA.)

DEB
Because it's worse than falling, right?
(turns to face LYNDA—monitoring GIL's reactions with sidelong glances)
The *not* falling. Trying to *not* fall. The effort itself is…

LYNDA
It's too much, right?

DEB
Yes—I can see how it *would be*.

GIL
It being?

DEB
And so you want to just *jump*. Before you even know where you are; before you can determine what's *actually*—

GIL
Why? Why would you not make an *informed* decision when it's life or death? How does that make sense?

DEB
(looking into LYNDA's eyes)
Because it becomes unbearable—is what I think Lynda means. That no amount of information could…*settle* the *real*—

GIL
I don't know what to say to that. I don't know how to…respond to you when you make these…*irrational*—
(iPHONE ALERT. ALL freeze. iPHONE ALERT. ALL reanimate. He's lost his train of thought)
…I don't…because you…what was I just…?

ELLIS
Is it me or is *something*…tonight I mean, as if something's not quite…right? Philip? Is *that* what you—

GIL
It's *you*, Ellis. Nothing intrinsically wrong…*here*, if that's what you mean. It's not the evening, the *atmosphere* that's off, it's *you* who—

DEB
(VERY LOUD GROAN, hands to her head, to LYNDA)
…Do you have any Advil?

MAY
(reaches into purse, eyes on phone)
Have some in my purse. How many?
(without looking down at what she's doing)

DEB
Two?...Twelve?

(MAY deftly removes three from bottle with one hand, eyes on phone, then hands over to DEB who downs them with wine. NADIA touches LYNDA's wrist. LYNDA turns to pour for her, but NADIA waves her off, nods toward the hallway)

LYNDA
…oh, yes, right. Not going to be sick, are you?

(LYNDA wheels NADIA into the wings/bathroom.)

MAY
(eyes on phone)
…Our friend Nadia's had a few too many.

GIL
Of course she has. And good friends that we are we'll keep filling her glass and go on *pretending*—

DEB
(looking over her shoulder to make sure NADIA's out of earshot)
Just…need to give her some time to work through this. How would any of *us* react if we lost the use of our legs?

PHILIP
Haven't we?

DEB
Philip. Don't be—

PHILIP
And really, I'm sorry, but…what exactly is her…diagnosis?

BRENDAN
What is it you're asking, Philip? Do you need a doctor's note saying she can't walk?

PHILIP
No, but I mean, how do you *know*…never mind.

BRENDAN
What? What are you trying to say, Philip?

PHILIP
Just that…any condition is…*conditional*. Part what's going in your nervous system and part what's going on in the environment

and so a capacity that…mysteriously goes away might mysteriously come back in the right…like if the room were on fire, say, she might find her get up and go.

DEB

Philip!

(gasps, general sounds of outrage)

BRENDAN

You go too far, Philip. I'm sorry you're having a…mid-life meltdown, but you can't just say *whatever* you…

(MAY nudges him, eyes on phone, to warn of LYNDA & NADIA reentry.)

LYNDA

…What did we miss?

ALL (in unison, dismissive)

Nothing.

BRENDAN

Just Philip doing Philip.

(LYNDA glares at PHILIP who hangs his head like a guilty child.)

GIL

…At any rate, Ellis, perhaps you and the Professor should worry less about getting to the bottom of things and mind what's happening at the surface. If you're *so*—

DEB

And *yes*, Philip, *yes*…

(glaring at GIL, spoiling for a fight)

…*all talk*, I hear you…the whole thing really, right? The whole business is just so much…talk. Back and forth, round and round… like real *people*.

(laughs at this notion of "people")

Like we're this special sort of animal…with these given names to tell each other apart—look at me, I'm a *person*—I'm *Deb*!

(winks conspiratorially at NADIA)
And it's me saying what I'm saying, making these people sounds that have no *actual*…that are just…modulated cries.
(mournful GULL SOUND at GIL, who stares at her, mouth wide open, speechless)
And acting as if it's all…what it *is*—until it's over. Yes, Philip, it *is* hard, hard *not to*—

GIL
What in the wide world are you going on about, woman? Speak the King's English already! We're not cryptologists for Christ's sake, you all need to just say what you're trying to say so we can have a *reasonable*…
(exhales, shakes his head, throws his hands)

ELLIS
…Maybe this *should* be the last bottle. I think we've all—

(LYNDA begins to SING *Happy Birthday* with a big smile. ALL stop to listen, baffled. ELLIS begins to join in, then realizes no one else is and stops. Gets to name line: Happy Birthday dear *Gilbert*—and all recall why they're there this evening.)

GIL
…Oh for heaven's sake, it's my birthday.

LYNDA
What did you think the cupcakes were for?

(Exit LYNDA to kitchen)

PHILIP
Ha! Blanked on the reason we're here. *Too* right.
(to GIL, raises glass, no hard feelings)
Happy birthday, old man!

BRENDAN
To the birthday boy!

ELLIS

The big five-oh. Many happy returns, Gil!

(LYNDA brings out a party hat, straps it on to GIL's head, kisses his cheek, then stands back and blows a noisemaker.)

LYNDA

Happy birthday, Gilbert!

MAY

(marveling)

…*Half a century*.

GIL

Doesn't seem possible.

DEB

And what have you done with it? The half century? *Speech!*

LYNDA

Deborah.

(they exchange a deep-breath look)

GIL

Thank you so much, Lynda—and Philip. Too good of you to have us here to celebrate. To our hosts!

(GIL raises glass and guests follow suit. GIL leans in and whispers something to DEB as he puts his arm around her—she pulls free, downs the rest of her wine and glares into the middle distance.)

MAY

(speech beginning to slur)

Hit me again, Lynda. This Nargacha, gar…nacha is…*glorious*.

(generous pour from LYNDA)

GIL

Okay Lynda, I think that's enough wine now. Some of us *do* have to get behind the wheel at some point.

(GIL takes party hat off, gets up, grabs bottle off the table and brings it into the kitchen, returning a few moments later. While he's gone, LYNDA pulls out another bottle from under the coffee table, hands it to DEB who pops the cork, fills her own glass and LYNDA's glass, then places it on the table. While GIL is in the kitchen—appearing on monitor—he notices a bizarre talismanic object on the counter. He stares at it for about thirty seconds then lifts it up to his face to get a closer look. It is a teaspoon. He quietly articulates the word "spoon" then snaps out of it and returns to the living room. He notices the new bottle, gives up.)

LYNDA

And if you don't feel up to driving home, you're *all* welcome to stay the night. Plenty of room. *Our casa es su casa.*

ELLIS

Oh, thanks Lynda, but we really *do* need to get home at some point tonight. In fact—

LYNDA

Oh nonsense, Ellis, we'll set you and Lyle up in the den. We have—

ELLIS

(firm, raises voice which suddenly has more bass in it)

Nope. Thank you, but we have to go now…*it's time for us to go.* Can you get the door, Philip? It's been a wonderful evening, Lynda, thank you so much for—

(MAY, showing BRENDAN her phone, holding it up close to his face as a direct challenge.)

MAY

D'jou see *this*?

(he looks, then looks at her—puzzled)

BRENDAN

What about it?

MAY

(rolls eyes)

What we've been talking about? You think I don't listen, Bren, but I *do*—I'm *listening*. *I can do two thinks at once.* That's where we're different.

(moves phone very close to his face—BRENDAN glances at it, a beat)

BRENDAN

What?

MAY

Whatchya mean *what*?

(wiggles phone in his face)

BRENDAN

Oh, I see.

(he doesn't, pushes phone away from his face)

MAY

(sees he doesn't, rolls eyes)

They're lookin' out for you, Lynn.

LYNDA

Hm?

MAY

(reads from phone)

The Highway and Transtorpa- Transtor- Trans-por-ta-tion District has completed construction on a Suicide Deterrent Net System on Golden Gate Bridge. They have placed marine grade stainless steel netting attached to structural steel net supports placed 20 feet below the sidewalks and extending out 20 feet over the

water. The recent increase of suicides—142 over the last eighteen months…*142!?*

(looks up with a *that's-crazy* look)

had prompted a response from the district *et cetera et cetera*.

LYNDA

I don't…May, *I'm not*…

(she is, she thinks about it—ALL are thinking about it now)

MAY

(notes tension, sees they don't understand)

If you thought you were dreaming—and jumped.

(ALL react, tension released)

LYNDA

Ha! Good to know…Haven't been up to the bridge in ages, Pipper. Let's go up tomorrow morning! Make a day of it—we can picnic in the park. Alex has never been on the carousel!

(LYLE covers his mouth, retches. ELLIS puts arm around him, sees his forehead is sweating, dabs at it with a napkin)

PHILIP

(indignant, still digesting this "net")

…It's not right. They have no *right* to do something like that. What business is it of *the district's* if…someone…

GIL

It's hazardous waste, Philip. Guys in the hazmat suits have to paddle out and fish the—

DEB

O-kay. Enough. *Really.*

(LYLE is seriously unwell, his revving sound begins to rise in pitch, between labored breaths)

BRENDAN

…Is it letting up out there?

GIL
Hope the main roads haven't flooded.

ELLIS
Oh…yeah, we should probably get while the getting is—

BRENDAN
Right behind you, Ellis. May? Shall we?

(MAY relieved to exit, puts her phone away.)

PHILIP
Gimme a minute…I'll take it off the hinges. Bren, give me a hand?

(EXIT PHILIP and BRENDAN. A lull, all smiling, waiting for the first to rise)

GIL/ELLIS/MAY
(ALL three slap both hands on thighs, rising)
Well, it's been…

(ALL laugh at simultaneity. They gather their things, put on their coats. Strident SOUND of old-fashioned telephone RINGING from the child's room—LYNDA rushes in. LYLE revs louder and louder toward crescendo—careful to not quite drown out dialogue. iPHONE *ALARM*. TECHNICIAN rushes in.)

TECHNICIAN
(listening)
Reverting to previous commit? Is that even…what do I do?
(goes to LYLE, leads him back to seat, mops his brow, motherly. NADIA's wheelchair begins to shake. TECHNICIAN goes to her, steadies wheelchair, listens)
…no, it's like she's trying to…?
(NADIA jerks violently and TECHNICIAN puts

the brake on and straps her down into chair.)

Gonna hurt yourself, Nadia, stop it now. That's *enough*.

(TECHNICIAN swipes on his tablet. VARIOUS iPHONE ALERT SOUNDS. BRENDAN/MAY/GIL/PHILIP/DEB/ELLIS take out phones and stare down into them, tapping and swiping. LYLE's anguished revving continues to rise in pitch between labored breaths, like a pressure cooker. Simultaneous to above LYNDA has been stroking the bed-lump. RINGING continues. PHILIP comes in to check on LYNDA. Puts arm around her, tries to pull her away.)

PHILIP

Just let it ring, Lynn. You know you can't answer it and you're only making yourself—

(LYNDA pulls away then pulls back the covers to reveal an outsized doll whose head is a rotary phone.)

Don't answer it, Lynn. *Lynda.* He could get violent.

(She lifts the receiver from the cradle of the phone. RINGING stops.)

LYNDA

Alex? Sweetheart? *It's mommy,* Alex...*Alex?*

PHILIP

Lynda, please. He can't hear you, he doesn't even know you're there—that's not even…*him*.

LYNDA

(She taps for dial tone.)

Operator? Can you put me through? It's an emergency.

(taps for dial tone)

Operator?

(she dials hurriedly, then bares her breast and begins to rub her nipple against the mouthpiece.)

Open up, come on now, Alex, mommy's here.

(PHILIP looks on in astonished pity. ALEX was weaned long ago—he's a big boy now.)

TECHNICIAN

(simultaneous to the above)

Nothing to be done. Have to restart before we lose the whole—

(listens, then a grave look at LYLE)

Right. No, I know, *you're right*.

(He approaches LYLE, on the verge of tears)

Lyle, listen to me, you've…*disimproved* again and now I'm afraid we really do have to…I'm so sorry, Lyle.

(he strokes LYLE's head, pulls LYLE's face to his chest, then presses index finger against LYLE's temple and holds it there)

Disable motor response…*sleep*.

(He begins to sing with great emotion.)

HUSH-A-BYE,DON'T YOU CRY
GO TO SLEEP YOU LITTLE BABY
WHEN YOU WAKE, YOU WILL HAVE CAKE
AND ALL THE PRETTY LITTLE HORSES…

(LYLE's choked scream, close-mouthed, as if dreaming and unable to scream.)

LYNDA

(still trying to get the phone to take the nipple)

Open up, sweetheart, come on now. Open up for mommy.

(LYLE finally opens his mouth wide and screams at the top of his lungs.)
(BLACKOUT.)

EPILOGUE

(Lights up on initial tableau of the play. LYLE and NADIA are no longer there. TECHNICIAN stares at blank screen in control room. Presses button. Screen comes

awake. He quietly croons "And all the pretty little horses." as he double clicks iPHONE ALERT. ALL reanimated.)

DEB

Hm.

LYNDA

Hm?

(BLACKOUT. End of Play.)

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *This Is Not Happening is a post-reality chamber play. It is about the gradual disembodiment of the species and destruction of the planet amidst tragi-comic evil and rampant plague. Inspired by Karl Marx, Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, Jordan Peele, Beckett/Ionesco/Pinter and the interminable anxiety of the way we live now.*

AUTHOR BIO: Steven Felicelli is the author of three novels (*Notes Toward a Monograph of the Moment*/Six Gallery Press, *White*/Purgatorio Press, [Title]/Sublunary Editions forthcoming Dec. 2021) and reviews/essays appearing in/at The San Francisco Chronicle, The Rumpus, The Millions, The Collagist, 3AM Magazine, Necessary Fiction, Minor Literature(s), Rain Taxi, Berfrois and The Critical Flame. He was born in Chicago and currently lives in the Bay Area (via St. Louis, Santa Fe, Seattle).