

THE THREE TIMES SHE KNOCKED

A play by A.D. Penedo

[performance script - Manhattan Theater Source '11]

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## CHARACTERS

ERIC                   Narrator, middle-management at PR firm,  
                          early 40s.

ROBIN                  Newcomer to Eric's firm, attractive, late  
                          20s.

## SETTING

Eric's office.

## TIME

The present.

The Three Times She Knocked  
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SCENE ONE

Enter ERIC in blank  
space.

ERIC

(To audience)

The first time she knocked was a Tuesday afternoon at 3:48.

Tara's knock is heard.

I knew right away it was a new knock, a different knock...

Tara's knock is heard again.

...lighter, softer, certainly female, two swift taps, then a brief pause, then two more softer swifter ones, then a briefer pause, then one last faint tap. Only once before had there been a knock that didn't jar me, infuriate me as if the person had committed some grave offense. But somehow, like the one before her, this new knocktress knew how to hit it just right. A demure knock, a sweet knock, a downright beckoning knock, a knock that echoes in my heart, my soul, my spirit... to this day... which will echo there until the day I die and forever thereafter...

All the same, that day, demure and sweet and beckoning or not, I assumed it was a temp, a new person in the mail room, some other random drone, certainly not Tara of all people. And so the entrancing effect of the knock quickly vanished and I became irritated all the same, perhaps even more so by the incongruity between the fact of the knock and the effect of the knock.

ERIC

(At closed door)

Yesss?! Come in?!

(Pause)

HELLO?!!

TARA sticks her head in.

TARA

Sorry... Never mind...

ERIC

(To audience)

And right then I said to myself, 'Why on earth would such a magnificent creature to whom I rarely speak, and then only when cornered, and then only perfunctorily if not downright curtly, whom I attempt to avoid at all costs, who has nothing whatsoever to do with my work, all of a sudden on this desultory Tuesday afternoon decide to knock on my door? Why in HELL is she doing this to me?'

(To Tara, feigning work)

Don't mean to be rude. It's just this... I'm very busy these days.

TARA

Really? I thought your department was slow.

ERIC

Not since we landed Triad.

TARA

Yeah but I thought we weren't supposed to work on that yet.

ERIC

I need to get a head start.

TARA

Oh. Okay. Never mind then... I guess.

ERIC

(To audience)

And I said to myself, 'Man is she beautiful, of a magnitude my brain cannot process and retain in its memory, such that each time I see her it shocks my system'. Then I realized, 'That's it! Each time I see her it's like another jolt of electroshock therapy. Assuming one doesn't get used to that either.'

(To Tara, feigning work)

Is there something specific you wanted, Terry?

TARA

"Tara."

ERIC

Tara, that's right. Please accept my apologies.

TARA

It's ok.

ERIC

I can't do names to save my life.

TARA

Really?

ERIC

It's very embarrassing.

TARA

But Raj and them keep talking about what an amazing memory you have.

ERIC

They do? Huh...

TARA

Yeah like you could meet somebody once at a party and remember the names of their kids like two years later.

ERIC

Oh those guys and their hyperbole...

TARA

They're super cool I think.

ERIC

They're tolerable in small doses I guess.

TARA

Really? Cuz they say the four of you are best buddies going back like 15 years.

ERIC

(To audience)

These were treacherous waters. I'd only had one conversation with her, very briefly, four months before at the little wine and cheese reception when she joined the firm: the usual banal prattle about where she went to school, where she and her hubby, who no doubt kicks my ass in every category imaginable, went on their lavish honeymoon and where they had broken ground on one of those grotesque McMansions with which her generation loves to

defile the planet - all of which lasted less than five minutes. I cut her off in mid-sentence, right as I was about to learn what underground sprinkler system they had settled on.

(To Tara, returning to feigned work)  
Is there something specific you wanted, Terr.. Tara?

TARA  
Oh I'm sorry it's just that -

ERIC  
I need to get back to this.

TARA  
Do you like your chair?

ERIC  
(Gesturing to his office chair)  
This one?

TARA  
Yeah.

ERIC  
Why?

TARA  
I'm thinkin' about getting one for myself.

ERIC  
It's a chair.

TARA  
Isn't that one of those funky new ergonomic ones?

ERIC  
I don't know maybe, my wife picked it out.

TARA  
Do you like it?

ERIC  
I don't know - ask Marty, he has the same one.

TARA  
He's out this week.

ERIC

So ask him when he gets back.

TARA

I need to decide by Thursday.

ERIC

So call him.

TARA

He's on a safari in Botswana.

ERIC

His cell might work there.

TARA

Interrupt my brand new boss on his safari to ask him about a chair?

ERIC

(To audience)

Was it her beauty that slew me? Or something more - some sublime blend of earth and heaven, now and eternal, finite and infinite, which leaves even beauty in the dust? Is beauty an adequate enough word? Is any word adequate? Is it like the Tao, that which shall remain unnamed, diminished the moment it is named?

(To Tara)

The chair seems perfectly fine to me, but I'm not picky about such things.

TARA

Really?

ERIC

Yes.

TARA

Raj and them say it took you like three weeks to make up your mind which one to get.

ERIC

(To audience)

Was she truly beautiful, universally speaking? Or only to me? I never asked anyone else, so I'll never know. And I suppose it isn't relevant except as it bears on my self-esteem

(To Tara)

The chair seems fine. All right?

TARA

Ok, but...

ERIC

What?

TARA

Can I try it? Just for a second? Please?

ERIC

Beg your pardon?

TARA

I'd like to try the chair before I order it, that's all.

Pause.

ERIC

Try Marty's, I'm sure he wouldn't mind.

TARA

His door's locked.

ERIC

(To audience)

You would think I would've plotted each day to maximize my encounters with her... bask in her presence. But the truth was, I only looked at her when I couldn't help it - when she surprised me coming around the corner of a hallway, jumping on an elevator at the last second, walking into an office, conference room, the kitchen or wherever when I was already there, etc., etc. It was all part of the O-T-A-I (Omnibus Tara Avoidance Initiative, pronounced oh-tie).

(To Tara)

Tara...

TARA

What's wrong Eric? Do I have cooties or something?

ERIC

It would hardly be appropriate for the two of us to play musical chairs alone together in my office.

TARA

What are you talking about?

ERIC

What I'm talking about is that it would not be a prudent personal interaction in light of our relative positions in the firm and our respective, you know...

TARA

Our respective what Eric?

ERIC

You know... *genders*?

TARA

Oh my God. I wanna sit in your *chair* not on your f... never mind...

ERIC

(To audience)

That there was not good for the OTAI.

(To Tara)

Tara, I don't know how they talked to each other at RDI, but I'd advise you not to employ such tawdry innuendo here.

TARA

Why not? Raj and them say you're really cool about that kind of stuff.

ERIC

Obviously you shouldn't be listening to what "Raj and them" tell you about me.

TARA

I guess not. I mean, they say you're really funny. Like *super* funny.

ERIC

There is a time and a place for joviality in an office setting, this happens not to be one of them.

TARA

Why is that - am I different for some reason?

ERIC

Different than what?

TARA

Everyone else. I mean Raj and them say you're always joking around like *always*, even around the staff and clients, and I gotta tell you Eric I'm not seeing it. And lately I'm thinking, 'What, does this guy *hate* me or something?' Cuz I mean now oh my God you won't even let me try your *chair* for one second, which is ridiculous and verging on *creepy*. I'm not gonna report you to HR Eric just cuz I tried your *chair*.

ERIC

Don't even joke about that. I have a wife and children to feed whom I happen to care for very deeply.

TARA

Okay, roll the stupid chair out into the hall so you'll have witnesses if that would be more a more "prudent personal interaction."

ERIC

Are you finished, I need to get back to this budget.

TARA

That's what you're doing for Triad?

ERIC

Yes.

TARA

How can you do that when we don't even know the scope of work yet?

ERIC

I'm doing it based on reasonable estimates derived from past experience.

TARA

What good is that?

ERIC

Tara. I am your superior at this firm and this is not even your department - you really want to challenge me on such matters?

TARA

Okay I'm sorry, but...

ERIC

Close the door behind you please.

TARA

(While closing the door in front of  
her)

No. You know what, I'm not leaving till you tell me what's going on.

ERIC

"What's going on"?

TARA

Why you have such a big problem with me.

ERIC

I have no idea what you're -

TARA

Oh yes you do! I want to feel comfortable being at this place and hanging out with Raj and them, but I can't do that as long as you're treating me this way and talking to me so freaky like it's 1810 and you have a stick up your butt. You don't talk to anyone else like that, and you know all you need to do these days is make someone feel uncomfortable for it to be harassment, and you have most definitely made me feel uncomfortable.

ERIC

Are you threatening me?

TARA

I just wanna get to the bottom of this and get it over with and I don't know why it has to be so hard. You don't even *know* me. How could you possibly hate me this much after barely introducing yourself at a reception?

ERIC

I honestly have... absolutely... no idea wh-

TARA

Don't give me THAT! Every time you're supposed to go to lunch with Raj and them and then you find out I'm coming too, all of a sudden something magically comes up you get some new deadline or your kid busted his knee open or something. I mean the first two or three times yeah maybe but at a certain point, you know?

ERIC

Tara, that's -

TARA

And every time I'm walking down the hall and you're coming the other way you magically have to duck into someone's office or turn around and go back the other way until I pass. And every time you're having a conversation with Raj or Stacey or Trey in the kitchen and I try to join in all of a sudden you magically have to bolt for some reason. And every time there's a firm function or we take someone out for something if I'm there you don't even show your face. And I know you didn't used to be that way. You used to go to those things and be the life of the party.

ERIC

Now you're -

TARA

From everything everybody else tells me - everything - it's like since I came here you've become this recluse or something. Is that just a total coincidence? I don't get it. Do I have terrible B.O. or something? What is it Eric?

ERIC

Don't take it so personally, Tara, it's just because I've been jammed with work lately.

TARA

I thought you guys have been slow.

ERIC

Mostly, but not me, not by a long shot.

TARA

What have you been working on? We didn't land Triad till last week.

ERIC

Nothing major, just a lot of odds and ends that keep piling up.

TARA

So when it slows down a little, you'll go back to your old self?

Pause.

ERIC

I don't have anymore time for this. I'm sorry. Please close the door behind you.

TARA

(Tearing up)

I'll take that as a "no."

ERIC

What's wrong now?

TARA

I just... hate when... people hate me, that's all... I try to be a...

ERIC

This is ridiculous, Tara, I have no idea what you're -

TARA

YES YOU DO!!

ERIC

Want a tissue?

TARA

No! No THANK you!! I don't want a TISSUE!!! I want the TRUTH, ERIC!!!!

ERIC

The truth is quite simple and straightforward. It's really no big deal.

TARA

Then why can't you tell me?

ERIC

Because - it's none of your business.

TARA

You constantly making me... *uncomfortable* is none of my business? I think I'll go to HR for a second opinion on that one.

ERIC

You wouldn't do that...

Long pause.

First off, I want to reiterate that I don't hate you.

TARA

Yeah right.

ERIC

Tara, take a deep breath, I'm going to explain everything to you, all right? I don't hate you, I don't even know you, you seem like a perfectly nice person, there are people getting to know you who seem to like you and I like them, so... I have no reason... no basis whatsoever... to think anything other than that you're a perfectly likable person and I will assume that you are until proven otherwise and that's the truth.

TARA

Then how come you -

ERIC

The reason I don't interact with you socially is merely because you're a young newlywed who is new here and my junior in another department and I don't think at this early point in time it's a prudent direction for either of us to be headed in.

TARA

You're so 90's Eric, get over yourself. And... Hey, wait a minute, Stacey and Margo are younger than me and they're as hot as it gets and I see you with them all the time. That's BS Eric. Sorry.

ERIC

Don't you put words in my mouth - I never said you were "hot," I merely said you were young and newly married.

TARA

Wow. Thank you for the clarification. But too bad for you Margo came here after me and *she* got married two months ago...

ERIC

I'd strongly advise you not to press this matter any further.

TARA  
Are you threatening me?

ERIC  
Yes.

TARA  
As long as you promise to give me a second chance and start treating me like you do everyone else. That's all I'm asking.

ERIC  
I can't do that.

TARA  
Why not?

ERIC  
Nothing good can come of this Tara.

TARA  
Why? You can't say anything to me that makes me feel any worse than your little 5<sup>th</sup> grade silent treatment.

ERIC  
Just end it. Now.

TARA  
Not gonna happen.

ERIC  
Please. I'm asking you please.  
(Pause)  
All right... Do you have time for this now?

TARA  
My boss is in a jungle on the other side of the planet so...

ERIC  
Have a seat then.

TARA  
(While indicating his chair)  
Can I sit in that chair?

ERIC

No!

(Picks up phone, dials)

Hold all my calls please, I have to put a fire out. Thank you.

(To Tara)

Now. I appreciate your concerns about the peculiar way I behave towards you Tara - as I have said, I have no ill will towards you, but the hard cold fact is I can't treat you any other way for very private personal reasons.

TARA

That's ridiculous why can't you t -

ERIC

Tara please.

TARA

I'm sorry go ahead.

ERIC

You have backed me into a position now, probably unwittingly, where you can force me down a road I dread with all my being. If you choose to do so, there will no turning back. Do you still wish to do so?

TARA

Oh my God just tell me Eric.

ERIC

The truth is... I can't tell you the truth as it applies to me.

TARA

Eric! Tell me already!

ERIC

Tara, we didn't just meet in a karaoke bar or at the organic cheese counter at Whole Foods or in body sculpting class, you know...

TARA

So?

ERIC

So... there are certain things we can't say to each other... right?

TARA

Okay...

ERIC

Particularly certain things *I* can't say to you... because of, well, like I said before, our respective positions in the firm... and our respective... *genders*...? Right?

TARA

I guess... but I still don't see what -

ERIC

But. But Tara... I *can* tell you about my... friend. Aaron. Who's at a different firm...

TARA

You're not seriously going to do this.

ERIC

Tara. Please. You've gotta work with me here.

TARA

Go ahead Eric...

ERIC

And so this thing I'm going tell you is about Aaron and it has absolutely nothing whatsoever, remotely, faintly, indirectly, tangentially or in any other way, to do with *you* or *me*. Nothing at all.

TARA

This really is fifth grade.

ERIC

So we're clear on that point? It's very important.

TARA

Sure.

ERIC

Good. And the other thing you need to know is that what I'm going to tell you about Aaron is something very personal, very intimate, embarrassing actually, humiliating in fact, something that will render him vulnerable to you, probably more vulnerable than any other man has ever been. And so, you have to promise me from the bottom of your heart Tara, no crosses count or anything like that, that

you will never ever tell anyone, not even Danielle after two appletinis at happy hour, not even your husband in the afterglow of volcanic lovemaking, not even if we do truly end up hating each other, not even if I pull strings to get you fired out of petty spite, not even if I burglarize your apartment and strangle your new no-doubt spastic little inbred puppy or turn out to be an axe murderer, what I'm about to tell you about my friend Aaron.

TARA

You really are funny!

ERIC

Can you promise me that Tara?

TARA

Yes. I want you to tell me. I promise.

ERIC

You see, there's this image the guys in Aaron's firm have painted of him to their new colleagues... This sort of mister happy-go-lucky always-good-for-a-joke slap-you-on-the-back never-let-anything-get-him-down kinda guy.

TARA

Okay.

ERIC

But that's all a bunch of bullshit Tara. That's just a façade, a charade, a defense mechanism, a shield, whatever, to protect who Aaron really is from the brutal world out there. You with me so far?

TARA

Who are you then? I mean "who is he?"

ERIC

That's a very good question. He's not sure... never figured that one out... Still working on it, I suppose. Or maybe he's given up... I don't know...

TARA

Has he tried thera -

ERIC

But I can tell you this much about him for certain - he's very sensitive, like a living breathing tuning fork,

he's... delicate, even... fragile... very fragile... he's a freakin' walking talking antique china doll, Tara, who's been glued together precariously, tenuously on a number of occasions... One in particular... And he's very very... very... I don't know, Tara...

TARA

You have to tell me now. You have to.

ERIC

Passionate.

TARA

Okay then... Time for me to get nervous?

ERIC

Tara. I told you... this has nothing to do with you or me, only with Aaron. It's not your problem, so relax, all right?

TARA

I'll try...

ERIC

So yeah... so... this real Aaron is this pathetic passionate mess, but usually... Usually... the very formidable defense mechanisms, shields, survival techniques, whatever... these mechanisms by and large protect the real Aaron, enough at least so that he can function in the world... at the place in which he works... such that he can earn a living for his wife and children... whom he cares for very deeply... Are you with me so far?

TARA

I'm trying to be...

ERIC

Is there something that needs to be clarified before we go on?

TARA

That's okay... Do you have to be so intense though? It's a little creepy.

ERIC

I'll try to tone it down. Now... what happens is, and this is the important part Tara, so I really need you to focus here, all right?

TARA

Okay...

ERIC

And it has nothing to do with you or me, this part in particular. Nothing whatsoever. All right?

TARA

All right already.

ERIC

Do you believe me? I'm not going to continue unless you tell me you believe me.

TARA

I believe you.

ERIC

Right... So... what happens is, once every, say eleven years or so, along comes this woman...

TARA

Okay a woman...

ERIC

And... Tara... He can't... he has no... She cuts right through... Right through everything... to the core... It's awful... He has no defenses... None... I'm not talking about this post-modern superficial 'hooking up' bullshit of your generation, I'm not talking about some base animalistic urge for a quick pit-stop along the way, Tara, I'm talking about depthless, boundless, timeless PASSION, like I've- *he's* stepped into this... this black bottomless chasm which he will hurtle down hopelessly, helplessly, for the rest of time, I'm talking about PASSION, Tara, of epic, mythological proportions, PASSION, Tara, that makes Romeo and Juliet look like two preschoolers playing Candyland, do you understand what I'm saying?

TARA

So much for toning it down...

ERIC

I apologize, I thought it was.

TARA

God this is so... Even if he doesn't even know her?

ERIC

It doesn't matter... When she comes along... it's irrelevant... It happens... the very first time... he talks to her... takes that first long look into her astonishing...

TARA

What?

ERIC

..and then he's fucked... Utterly fucked... It's awful... It's hell on earth, Tara... I can't even describe it...

TARA

But he cares for his wife very deeply, right?

ERIC

It doesn't matter... Nothing matters... when she comes along... She comes at him from a different plane... There are no shields... no... defenses... He is helpless before her...

TARA

Hooh boy... Eric... Come on seriously, this is...

ERIC

And he cannot... CANNOT... ever... go through that again Tara. It's too painful... It's unbearable... Do you understand me? Please say you understand me...

TARA

God...

ERIC

Do you understand me, Tara?

TARA

I'm so... Eric... I'm sorry... I didn't... I didn't mean to...

ERIC

Now I need to reiterate something very important, Tara - this has nothing whatsoever to do with *you* or *me*, which is why I have chosen, at this particular juncture, to tell *you* and *only you* this terrible humiliating secret about my dear friend Aaron which I have never ever told anyone else in my whole life, to make him this vulnerable to you even though he must keep his job to support his wife and his children whom he cares for very deeply and I don't even know you. Do you understand me?

TARA

Oh... I don't... I mean...

ERIC

I'm sorry, Tara, that's all I can say about it. It's no one's fault, certainly not yours. I don't understand it either or pretend to. It is what it is. But I don't hate you, you've done nothing wrong, you seem very nice, and that second thing I told you has nothing at all to do with you or me. Right?

TARA

Okay.

Exit Tara, shaken.

## SCENE TWO

ERIC

(To audience)

Then one Friday morning, at 10:14, it came without warning  
a second time...

Tara's knock is heard.

...that knock, which slew me on the spot and dissolved all  
the progress we had worked so diligently to achieve.

(At closed door)

Come in...

Tara sticks her head in.

TARA

Sorry... Never mind...

ERIC

No no. It's okay.

TARA

You want me to go away don't you. Forever...

ERIC

It's fine... Have a seat...

TARA

No... I can tell...

ERIC

Tara... Either have a seat or don't. Please.

Enter Tara, in tight blouse,  
closes door.

TARA

You're right... I'm sorry... I don't know... Maybe this  
is stupid...

ERIC

Then maybe you should drop it.

TARA

No... I... Okay, I'll just say it - why doesn't your friend... Aaron just get to know her? You know... as a person?

ERIC

Get to know whom?

TARA

You know... her... that girl who tortures him.

ERIC

Oh yeah... her...

TARA

Seriously Eric, no girl could be that perfect to be worth all he's putting himself through. He's obviously idealizing her, trust me. I mean what if he found out the real reason she wears so much makeup is cuz she has all these disgusting little zits, or that she's bowlegged from taking too much ballet as a kid or like has these panic attacks for no reason or always thinks everybody hates her or has these lame food allergies that makes it a real pain to go out to dinner or has this gross birthmark on her hip or she's always interrupting people or something...

ERIC

You are completely -

TARA

So why doesn't he hang out with her a while, get to know her as a person. I bet you anything this problem of his'll go away magically - go 'poof' into the air. No more problem. Gone. He probably won't even like her - so have him at least try it Eric - it's worth a shot don't you think?

ERIC

Is there a point where I will be allowed to speak? Just curious because -

TARA

Oh God. I'm so... I'm such a bitch... But see...? What'd I tell you? See Eric? That's exactly what I mean! SEE?!

ERIC

Can I now?

TARA

Yes... I'm sorry... Go ahead...

ERIC

I thought we'd already been through this, Tara, but obviously you still have no comprehension of what we're dealing with here. I saw your résumé so I know how smart you are but, with all due respect, on this particular matter you are nothing less than a... well, let's just say you're a little slow.

(To audience)

And that was the first objective sign that I was starting to lose it again - I had called a new junior in a different department, a young lady who was already on the verge of reporting me to HR no less, a little slow.

TARA

Eric, I think that's a bit -

ERIC

(To Tara)

I have no doubt that the corporeal projection of his new tormentress into this earthly plane has its share of superficial imperfections...

TARA

What?

ERIC

(Continuous)

...but that manifestation is nothing more than an ephemeral illusion, after all, and has no bearing on the plane where she reaches him, conquers him, rules him, and always has...

TARA

Come on, this is... -

ERIC

On that plane, the plane of the eternal, his new tormentress is the most beautiful, the most lovely, the most miraculous realization of the feminine ideal ever wrought by The Master Sculptor.

TARA

Wha...?

ERIC

(Continuous)

To attempt to resist her is folly. The only hope is...  
was... to strive to avoid her at all c -

TARA

Wait wait, back up a second - the "eternal plane?" The  
"Master Sculptor?" The "MASTER SCULPTOR, ERIC?" Really?!  
Please tell me you're joking.

ERIC

I wish that it were so.

TARA

God... Have you totally lost it?!

ERIC

Yes.

TARA

You need some serious help, you know that?

ERIC

Yes.

TARA

(Getting up to go)

And I need to keep my butt as far away from you as  
possible.

ERIC

That would be prudent. For both of us.

TARA

Yeah, and I'm also thinking it would be prudent to warn HR  
they've got a psycho pervert on the loose.

ERIC

Oh that's right, I forgot - in your generation, one's word  
means nothing.

Pause.

TARA

That's not true with me, it really isn't, I just...  
Obviously I had no idea it was going to be this freaky.

ERIC

All I can do to address the situation is tell Aaron to redouble his efforts to avoid her. Maybe his VP will even let him start telecommuting from home most days.

TARA

That's ridiculous. This whole thing is...

ERIC

I know Tara. Believe me...

TARA

Why can't you at least try? You're really going to change your whole life - maybe even get yourself fired - cuz you think some girl you hardly ever see is cute?

ERIC

Aaron can handle "cute" Tara. Please stop denigrating his feelings like that.

TARA

Whatever Eric. Why can't Aaron just try to get to know her for a little while, group lunches and stuff. He's idealizing her - Just have him get to know her... PLEASE?

ERIC

It won't work.

TARA

How do you know?!

ERIC

It didn't last time.

TARA

You mean that girl eleven years ago?

ERIC

He didn't avoid her at all, got to know her real well. Those characteristics of his new... *tormentress* that you think might bring her down a notch or two in his eyes, make her more human, more tolerable for him? Those are nothing compared to the superficial irritations the other one brought to the table.

TARA

Like what?

ERIC

(To audience)

Was I really going to drive down the most treacherous road of all - tell a new junior about my Steph after so many years of careful silence? In truth, it wasn't my choice to make - I wasn't steering anymore.

TARA

Like what, Eric?

ERIC

(To Tara)

Like her harsh, raspy, Midwestern drawl - 'Eeeear-on'... 'I ceeean't Eeeer-on... Shut the fuck up Eeeer-on, you eeeeshole, I'm talking now, you douche beeeag.' And like her endless petty two-faced gossiping, her endless whining and complaining about trivial bullshit going on here or with her no-worse-than-average in-laws, the way she berated him constantly for not watching chick flicks and sit-coms and puerile melodramas about spoiled telegenic little twerps from southern California and for not keeping up with whatever tawdry celebrity shenanigans happened to be clogging up the synapses of the masses at the time and for the *gall* of me to read real literature and serious nonfiction and watch documentaries and care about things in the world that really matter like wars and starving suffering people and scientific advancements and striving for philosophical clarity and spiritual betterment... And the way she was always mocking the concepts of love and romance like they don't exist and talking about sex in the most crude demeaning way as if making love, as if even making love to HER no less, was a mere animalistic biological function no different than picking your nose or taking a leak.

TARA

Okay, wow...

ERIC

(Continuous)

But, Tara, I kid you not, she could carp about those things with that grating Midwestern drawl of hers and insult him till the cows came home with that transcendent mouth of hers for the rest of eternity and he'd be in otherworldly bliss listening to it, I kid you not. He'd sit there the whole time thinking, 'Please, I beg of you, never let this

barrage of banal twaddle end, I don't know what I'll do with myself when it does'. And then there was -

TARA

(Laughing)

I'm sorry Eric, but that's just a little bit hilarious, don't you think?

ERIC

Forget it... You'll never under -

TARA

No. I'm sorry. Don't stop. I've never heard anything like this, that's all. I won't laugh anymore, I promise. Please?

ERIC

I don't know...

TARA

Eric come on don't do this to me.

ERIC

The gum.

TARA

The gum?

ERIC

Aaron *hates* when people chew gum, much less with their mouths open, much less make that awful clicking noise, it makes him want to fucking kill them. With her, she used to always be working on a stale grey wad of smelly sugarless Dentyne, chewing it endlessly, with her mouth open, rolling it around on that big flat tongue of hers... clicking it... endlessly... She knew how to work it just so...

TARA

"Just so?" How so?

ERIC

With this sensuous rhythm... her transcendent mouth which I - he - worshiped... worship... open... Thin lips lightly moistened... It would... especially when she'd do that occasional flip of her mousy brown hair back... like a virtuoso solo percussion performance... mesmerize him... render him useless... excuse my French, but... almost...

and he's serious about this, Tara, so please don't tease him about it as easy a target as it will make him... you know... after a while... finish him off right there on the spot.

Tara lets out a big snort.

ERIC

(To audience)

I'm sure the sound of Aphrodite herself in the throes of orgasmic ecstasy could not have exhilarated me more than that snort.

TARA

Eric! Come on... you have to admit... I mean... hearing her crack her gum almost made him...

ERIC

(Blank stare)

TARA

That's just a little bit funny... I mean... it's funny Eric... admit it...

ERIC

(Continues to stare)

TARA

Say something? Please? I'm sorry. Don't stop. Please.

ERIC

(To audience)

And that's around when I knew I was done for sure... a goner... Her pleas in my office with the door closed... It was game over at that point... Time to declare OTAI an official debacle and throw in the towel.

(To Tara)

Funny? Do you still think it would be funny... Tara... if the sound of someone cracking her gum... haunted your dreams...

TARA

You dream about her gum? Still?

ERIC

(Nods, then continues)

...if the echoes of it... constantly made you forget what you were doing such that... you kept getting beamed in the back yard with your son's baseball... such that you started rear-ending cars on such a regular basis your insurance was canceled... such that you couldn't... you couldn't even... never mind...

TARA

No. You can't stop now, Eric. I already told you all those embarrassing things about her. You have to keep going.

ERIC

Such that...you couldn't even perform your... marital obligations... or even... or even sneak in a quicky with yourself, one of life's simple pleasures, without thinking of it... that infernal gum of hers clicking away...

TARA

(Almost snorts again, but catches herself)

You're not kidding... are you...

ERIC

I wish it were so...

TARA

God...

ERIC

You have no idea, simply could not comprehend, trust me, how much... how much I wish it were so...

TARA

How does he know... I mean, for sure?

ERIC

How does he know what?

TARA

That this new girl is... you know... one like that? I mean how does he know it's not some little office crush that we all get and manage to get over every now and then, you know cuz we're all human so it's no big deal?

ERIC  
He knows.

TARA  
How? HOW ERIC?!

ERIC  
You don't want to go here Tara.

TARA  
Don't tell me where I want to go. How Eric?

ERIC  
I can't, I'm sorry.

TARA  
You're going to pull out on me now? I'd be shocked if Aaron would do that to this girl, you know, being her "slave" and all. You must be exaggerating about the whole thing.

ERIC  
That's not fair.

TARA  
Then tell me how Aaron knows. How he knows this isn't just some harmless office crush.

ERIC  
(Picks up phone, pushes button)  
Hold all my calls please, I have to put a fire out. Thank you.

(To Tara)  
His fantasies... That's how.

TARA  
His fantasies about *her*?

ERIC  
Of what he'd do to her, if she were with him... If she were willing... If she wanted him...

TARA  
They're different?

ERIC  
Very... But the same as... you know... before...

TARA

You mean eleven years ago?

ERIC

Yes.

TARA

What are they like kinky or something?

ERIC

You don't want to know this Tara.

TARA

Are you really telling me what I want again?

ERIC

(Pauses to consider)

I think to fully appreciate his fantasies of her you'd have to know some background, about certain aspects of her, how he feels about them, how they affect him, what they mean to him.

TARA

Oh... God... Okay... My staff meeting's not till noon.

ERIC

(To audience)

This was way past where I ever let myself go with Steph... Deep dark uncharted waters... Off the map - here there be monsters...

(To Tara)

First her eyes...

TARA

What about them?

ERIC

They're astonishing, so astonishing. Big, bright and green with long lashes. He wants to get lost in them, Tara, disappear into them forever...

TARA

That's um... Wow, I'll have to try to remember that one.

ERIC

Then, her mouth...

TARA

Her mouth?

ERIC

(Continuous)

She has these luscious lips, particularly the lower one, always coated with some sort of thick glossy shit that's bound to taste god-awful.

TARA

That's only cuz she -

ERIC

Tara how DARE you keep interrupting me! This is sacred what I'm telling you, confessing to you from the recesses of my heart and soul, don't you understand anything?!

TARA

Okay Eric... God... I -

ERIC

Just don't do it again. Anyway, her somewhat horsey teeth, of course, in light of her privileged upbringing, are perfectly straight and a bit on the unnaturally white side. She allows him, tauntingly, teasingly, the rare precious glimpse of her fat little moist pink tongue peaking out through those teeth... oh man... Tara... the most lovely tongue of all time... or maybe tied for first...

TARA

The one from eleven years ago?

ERIC

Yes... Then her voice.

TARA

Her... v -

ERIC

Yes her voice Tara. On the high side but not too squeaky, a mezzo-soprano I'd say... It's always soft and sweet and incredibly seductive, even when she's exercised about something such that she's firing off words faster than an AK-47. And when she whispers... which she does often... it would shame the rustling of aspens in the breeze...

TARA

Oh... now that's...

(Shifting to a whisper)

That's beautiful Eric...

ERIC

Angelic, Tara... Downright angelic...

TARA

So her voice sounds like it's much better than the one from eleven years ago.

ERIC

That may well be, but of course it's irrelevant in the final analysis, the effect is the same.

TARA

Okay fine.

ERIC

(To audience)

What a strange strange species we are.

(To Tara)

And when her eyes and mouth and voice operate in unison, when she speaks to him while gazing into his red slitty insomniac eyes, Tara, it's like she's giving his soul, his very spiritual eternal essence, the most perfect... the most erotic... I don't know...

TARA

Oh but you do and you will tell me.

ERIC

...felatio in history...

Tara gasps, not entirely displeased or surprised.

...like she knows inside-out, intuitively, like she owns, Tara, his inner-most workings, his soul, is in complete command of exactly how to tease it... what it wants and when it wants it and how much of it it wants. Phone book, Tara? She could read freakin' James Joyce's tortuously tedious fucking Ulysses out loud from cover to cover and he'd be in Paradise, utter rapture the entire time, that's what I'm talking about here.

TARA

Oh my God Eric that's -

ERIC

Please Tara.

TARA

I'm sorry...

ERIC

And so, as the conversations with her have progressed, no matter what they discuss, she gradually, expertly brings his soul to such heights of splendor, almost unbearable, that by the time they part it's like he's mainlined an overdose of pure, uncut soul-heroin straight into his spiritual essence - soul-smack, such that he's floating on a cloud of bliss, disoriented, left useless for at least the rest of the day, or more candidly, at least the rest of the month. As it was before... Just as it was before...

TARA

Hooo... wow... That's intense... *really* intense...

ERIC

All right, so now that you have that background, are you still sure you want to know his fantasies.

TARA

Wait, that's it?

ERIC

That's not enough?

TARA

I just - the way you talk about her so... It's kind of... I don't know... Tell me one more thing about her that gets you off - Aaron off - and then you can go on.

ERIC

You still don't understand, do you...

TARA

Guess not... I mean -

ERIC

Tara, I'm not saying she isn't attractive in other earthbound ways that may be useful to her in garnering

attention from other men, it's just that those other ways are not related to what I'm talking about *here*, the eternal plane with which we are dealing *here*. Her eyes and her mouth and her voice, those are the portals through which she reaches out and seizes him, through which she slays him, renders him helpless... renders his soul a slave to hers... Do you understand better now what I'm saying?

TARA

I'm not sure. But I don't want you to stop.

ERIC

All right... So... he'd start by ever so gently placing his hands on her top of her head, over her sandy blond slightly curly hair, made unpleasantly stiff and perhaps not smelling all that great with all its product and whatnot, and run his hands worshipfully down along it to where it tapers off at the shoulders, careful not to hit a snag, as to cause her the slightest discomfort would be to *kill* him, all the while gazing into her astonishing green eyes with his red slitty insomniac ones, letting her know without speaking but without any question how much he adores her without condition, how she is the only thing that matters to him in the whole world or anywhere else or ever will at any time past, present or future... He'd probably do that three or four times, maybe even five, each time more ardently... more insistently... That's how he'd start...

TARA

That... sounds like a... like an interesting start...

ERIC

I think so too.

TARA

What would he... do next...?

ERIC

Assuming he somehow survived that exercise? He'd cup his right hand behind her head, firmly, but lovingly...

TARA

Why?

ERIC

To brace it... so he could kiss her...

TARA

That sounds logical... How would he... kiss her...?

ERIC

On the forehead first... gently, lovingly, worshipfully... you know, that sort of thing... Yeah... at least six or seven times on the forehead, each in a slightly different place, each time more ardently... more insistently...

TARA

That sounds nice.

ERIC

More than nice, Tara... the highlight of his life thus far...

TARA

I meant for her, at least, you know, I mean, no one's ever kissed her like that before probably, but that would be my best guess... that she'd like that...

ERIC

You have no idea how reassuring that would be for him, to know that'd you'd think that she'd like that.

TARA

That's good... Then where...

ERIC

Down to her carefully manicured sandy-blond eyebrows... he'd devote quite a bit of time to those, as they so superbly help to frame those astonishing green eyes of hers which he reveres, and also as they become impossibly endearing when they scrunch all up when she feels insecure or contrite.

TARA

I see... that sounds... mmmm... I'm pretty sure she'd like that one... Where next...?

ERIC

Her eyelids, which perform the most hallowed function of guarding and protecting those precious green orbs of hers... he'd do so ever so gently, so worshipfully... quite a few times... He'd likely not survive it though...

TARA

But if he did?

ERIC

I don't think he would Tara...

TARA

Let's just assume hypothetically that he did though.

ERIC

Nose... cheeks... chin... a lot of emphasis on her chin... it's so lovely... as well as the fetching little dale which separates her chin from her luscious lower lip which haunts him... even in his dreams...

TARA

And then?

ERIC

Her lips themselves of course...

TARA

Of course...

ERIC

(Continuous)

...despite that glossy shit smeared all over them that probably doesn't taste that great... particularly the luscious lower one, lightly... tenderly... numerous times... many many many times... assuming he didn't pass out...

TARA

And assuming he didn't...

ERIC

Well... these kisses on her lips...?

TARA

Yes...?

ERIC

They'd gradually become ever the more fervent, more penetrating... you know... such that her mouth, her transcendent mouth would begin to open to him...

TARA

I suppose she wouldn't be able to help responding in that way... at that point...

ERIC

And *I* suppose, around then, to gain the requisite leverage, he'd have to place his other hand firmly but lovingly on the small of her back... you know... and draw her closer to him... All such maneuvers being quite difficult for him at this point, of course, he'd be so overwhelmed by her...

TARA

I think... at that point... she'd understand his difficulty... as she might at that point be experiencing similar difficulties...

ERIC

That's comforting to know that you think she'd be so understanding.

TARA

Then where?

ERIC

Then where? Tara, have you listened to anything I've told you? Her mouth, her unnaturally white slightly horsey teeth, that little fat pink tongue of hers, her holier than holy water saliva, the angelic breath and voice that emanate through it, the whole of it being even greater than the sum of its parts... He would dwell within that mouth of hers with his unworthy one for as long as time would allow, eternity being too short a time.

TARA

Okay I hear you but... you mean... that's *it*...? He'd stop *there*?!

ERIC

To have the privilege of kissing her would be the greatest gift that could ever be bestowed upon him. But to go any further would be to demean her, to despoil her - it would be unthinkable.

TARA

Eric he obviously doesn't understand women half as well as he thinks he does.

ERIC

Uh... I never said -

TARA

He can't stop there and leave that poor girl like that after all those incredible things he just did to her. What is he thinking?!

ERIC

That's what makes these fantasies different, Tara. He always stops there... just like eleven years ago.

TARA

No Eric, he can't stop right there - he just can't!

ERIC

They're *his* fantasies, Tara, he'll stop wherever he feels like.

TARA

(A pause as she considers)

What if she told him he *had* to go further, what would he do then?

ERIC

Tara... they're *his* fantasies. In *his* fantasies she doesn't do that, so it's not an issue.

TARA

Okay... but... I'm just curious anyway... What if she did?

ERIC

Please don't put me through this. Please?

TARA

Sorry I want to know.

ERIC

I... What... sort of further thing would she tell him to do?

TARA

(Pause, thinking)

Hmmm... let's see, for starters he'd have to at least move over and kiss her neck - come on how bad could that be? I mean is that really going to "despoil" her? I doubt it very

seriously. I suspect her eternal splendor would survive such a... a... *debasement*.

ERIC

How?

TARA

How what?

ERIC

How would she want him to kiss her neck? I mean kissing her neck would be like snow with the Inuits, there would be at least a hundred different ways.

TARA

God... Eric... you're so...

ERIC

What?

TARA

You're different, let's just say that.

ERIC

No... I'm the same as all of them, the same vile disgusting pig you're used to. It's just that something very different has happened to me... to Aaron... for the second time in his life... Something he didn't will upon himself and wouldn't will upon his worst enemy...

TARA

Don't be such a party-pooper - can we go back to her neck now?

ERIC

If that's what she wants.

TARA

It is. So back to her neck... I think maybe not so much a kiss but a nibble... yeah... a nibble... with a touch of a little slurp at the end of it... Ooh yummy Eric I'd bet she'd like that one... Whadaya think about that one?

ERIC

Would that make her happy you think?

TARA

Oh I'm only speculating, of course, but I think so, very much so.

ERIC

Her happiness is the only thing he cares about in the world... so... if that would make her happy... it would be tough for him but... I guess so... I guess he would do that for her...

TARA

That is so big of him to make such a terrible sacrifice - he's such a brave and valiant soldier!

ERIC

Please don't tease me about this... you still don't...

TARA

Oh God... I'm sorry...

ERIC

It's okay...

TARA

Hey... What if I told you *she* might wanna kiss *him* on the neck? Would that make you feel better?

ERIC

He wouldn't ever allow her do anything like that... Only him giving her pleasure... No work on her part... No concerns about him at all... Ever...

TARA

That's ridiculous!

ERIC

It is what it is.

TARA

No it is not! If he wants to give *her* pleasure, then he has to let her give *him* pleasure because giving him pleasure gives her the most pleasure of all. You think he's not being selfish, being the only one who gets to give pleasure but actually... Oh my God if only Vaughn were a fly on the wall and got some pointers from you.

ERIC

Who's Vaughn?

TARA

You don't know who Vau... How could y... Never mind don't worry about it - it was stupid.

ERIC

What's he, her husband or something?

TARA

That's not fair to you - to Aaron... I'm sorry...

ERIC

Why's that?

TARA

Doesn't it bother him? You know... I mean the way he feels and everything? To know that... you know...

ERIC

You mean, to know that she's married?

TARA

Yeah...

ERIC

I don't get your point.

TARA

Come on. You know.

ERIC

You mean does it bother him to know that she's wed to a man who no doubt kicks his ass in every category imaginable, whom she presumably loves and who presumably loves her, who *makes* love to her on a regular basis which presumably gives them both a great deal of earthly gratification?

TARA

Eric... I'm sorry... Try not to think about -

ERIC

You still don't grasp it after all this time.

TARA

Guess not...

ERIC

Tara, why would he have any problem with the thought of someone else making her happy on this ephemeral plane which bears no relation to the eternal plane where she reaches him and overwhelms him?

TARA

Oh come on Er -

ERIC

Or that he engages in some activity with her which I am certain Aaron could never manage to do with her anyway and doesn't even dream of doing. God bless Vaughn, I'm sure he's a great guy. Aaron would certainly consider him a lucky one and would wish him nothing but the best.

TARA

Eric... ER-IC... You can tell *me*... He's not just a little jealous? It's okay if he is - I think she could very well be a little bit jealous of that girl from eleven years ago if she thought about it.

ERIC

No. Just plain no.

TARA

What about that other girl? Was she married?

ERIC

Yes and he was a great guy and a great husband and Aaron was quite fond of him actually and happy for her that she had him. Not jealous in the least.

TARA

Sorry not buyin' it.

ERIC

I've told you the truth about everything else, why would I lie about that? And, frankly, with all due respect to this new one's husband, it's inconceivable that his feelings for her could hold a candle to Aaron's.

TARA

How can you say that? You don't know that!

ERIC

Never mind, I didn't mean to...

TARA

Don't "never mind" me. You stepped into this!

ERIC

It's nothing to get upset about, Tara, the point is -

TARA

Don't tell me not to -

ERIC

The *point is*, as their interactions occur on a different plane, Aaron's feelings for her do not conflict with Vaughn's - that her husband makes her happy makes Aaron happy, but that as a more specific matter Vaughn satisfies her in a carnal way is as irrelevant to Aaron as if he screws in a light bulb the way she likes it.

TARA

That's gross.

ERIC

I didn't mean it that way, it was an unfortunate analogy...  
I apol -

TARA

And a stupid one. It's a little different, don't you think?

ERIC

Let me put it this way - Vaughn loves the temporal her, Aaron loves the eternal her. Vaughn loves the mere mortal disposable vessel through which Aaron's immortal irreplaceable tormentress reaches him. In essence they are smitten by two entirely different creatures, albeit both quite lovely.

TARA

How do you know that?

ERIC

Know what?

TARA

That Vaughn doesn't love her in that way?

ERIC

Because he is able to live with her, to travel with her, to share meals with her, to sit on a sofa next to her, to converse with her on a regular basis. These are not things Aaron could possibly do, his passion for her is so strong, I would suspect the mere thought of it would tax his heart. I am certain it would be overwhelmed and fail within a matter of hours.

TARA

Oh come on it's just that he's *used* to m... to her... that's all.

ERIC

Is his love for her unconditional?

TARA

It better be. She's his wife.

ERIC

Oh yeah? What if he found out that she ran a kiddy porn ring or bombed a daycare center or serviced his best man and every usher at least twice during their wedding weekend on her knees while in her white wedding gown?

TARA

That's ridiculous.

ERIC

All the same... what if?

TARA

Well... I guess that would mean she wasn't the woman he thought he loved right?

ERIC

Which means his love for her is conditioned on her being a certain kind of woman. Aaron wouldn't give a hill of beans if she did any of those things. *His* passion for her is fixed, Tara, eternal, unmovable, no matter what happens, no matter what she does, he will feel this way about her until the day he dies and forever thereafter.

TARA

Phew... Wow... That's... That's quite something...

ERIC

It is quite something... It's not of this world... It terrifies him...

TARA

Oh Eric...

ERIC

(To audience)

How far out of bounds we had carried this ball... How close to the verge of catastrophe we had swept each other. In a desperate way that called for desperate measures. I went for the only angle I could think of at the moment, my mental functioning, already buried deep in the haze of her soul-smack, now further muddled by full-out panic.

(To Tara)

Tara, I hate to pull rank on you after all we've been through together, but you shouldn't be wearing that shirt to work, it's not appropriate for the office.

TARA

(Pause)

Are you fucking kidding me.

ERIC

I'm sorry, Tara. No matter what Aaron may feel for this other woman, there's still a certain degree of professional decorum that needs to be observed at an institution of this caliber. And that shirt crosses the line.

TARA

Eric, I'm going to tell you something about *me* now. And it has absolutely nothing whatsoever, remotely, faintly, indirectly, tangentially or in any other way, to do with *you*. Nothing at all to do with *you*, only with *me*. Do you understand what I'm saying, Eric? It's extremely critical that you understand this point.

ERIC

(To audience)

She was mocking me, just like Steph used to do... and it had the same mesmerizing effect, to hear my own words emitted by such a goddess.

(To Tara)

Sure. Shoot.

TARA

This shirt, Eric, that you find so "inappropriate"...? To have "crossed the line" Eric...? ISN'T SUPPOSED TO LOOK LIKE THIS WHILE I'M AT THE OFFICE ERIC...!!! And it has... absolutely nothing whatsoever to... do with you, do you... hear what I'm saying to you?!

ERIC

I won't report it.

Exit TARA.

ERIC

(To audience)

I was long gone after that one. And it was like it had been eleven years before - the worsening insomnia, the dreams only of her when I did sleep, the shaving nicks, the clumsiness at even simple physical maneuvers, the failure to stay with conversations, the memory lapses, the slippage in work quantity and quality and collegiality, the sexual dysfunction, the lost sense of humor and fun, the irritability, the - speaking quite frankly - inability to enjoy, think about or even care about anything other than Tara... Yes, just like before, except that I had gone so far as to confess my feelings and fantasies to Tara. And she had irrefutably responded to them!

As for Tara, she re-implemented OTAI with a vengeance such that, starting a couple of weeks after our second little meeting, seven straight workdays went by without me seeing a trace of her. And not only that, through the grapevine I was finding out that she had not been herself lately and had been taking quite a few sick days. Then, on the eighth workday, while I was rounding a corner of a hallway, there she was right there, heading the other way. As her astonishing green eyes met my red slitty ones, they became horribly troubled, nay, downright petrified. She gasped, temporarily frozen in her steps, then looked down and sped away.

I hadn't thought it possible that Tara, or Steph before her for that matter, could feel anything at all for me, much less the same tidal wave of sheer terror that washed over me at the mere thought of them. But, unlike with Steph to whom I was never anything more than a temporarily entertaining little hamster, it was unmistakable in Tara's eyes - I had infected her with my insidious disease, which

it had never occurred to me could be contagious, and it was ruining her life. Yes, misery loves company... Yes, the thought of such a goddess having such feelings for me was perversely flattering... But, being at heart a man of considerable moral fiber and conscience, I couldn't help feeling awful about the whole thing... about having sent a wrecking ball from a whole other plane into that lovely young lady's life, and her no-doubt wonderful husband's happy hopeful world, right through the skylighted cathedral ceiling of that new McFamily Room of theirs. So I was conflicted.

## SCENE THREE

ERIC

(To audience)

Then seven workdays later, a Wednesday afternoon at 2:06,  
it came without warning a third time...

Tara's knock is heard.

(At closed door)

Come in...

Tara sticks her head in. She  
has made the effort to look  
put together, but there are  
hints that she's not.

TARA

Hi...

ERIC

Have a seat...

TARA

Thanks.

Enter Tara, closes the door.  
sits.

TARA (CONTD)

Eric... Oh God... I don't know if I can...

ERIC

Then spare us both Tara.

TARA

No, okay... Okay I'll just say it - what if I really did  
start feeling jealous... you know to the point -

ERIC

Are you referring to the woman in Aaron's firm?

TARA

I can't play that game anymore - I just can't.

ERIC

Of whom are you jealous?

TARA

You know... that girl from eleven years ago.

ERIC

That doesn't make any s -

TARA

Seriously, it's to the point where it's driving me crazy. I mean I can't believe you could feel the same way about her - that's what doesn't make any sense. That other girl, she had this annoying Midwestern twang and gossiped all the time and whined and complained about her in-laws and got on your case all the time for not watching stupid sitcoms and nighttime soaps and keeping up with celebrities and she clicked her stale sugarless Dentyne all the time and said crude things about sex and all those things really irritated you right?

ERIC

That's quite a memory you have.

TARA

I remember everything you say, whether I want to or not. And she did all those things that irritated you and I don't do any of them, not even one and you haven't even seen that other girl in eleven years, so you have to have more passion for me. You have to.

ERIC

(To audience)

I felt bad for her - I would never sell out my Steph that way, my eternal love Steph, not even To Tara... The truth is that Steph and Tara are merely different manifestations of the same eternal essence which will merge as one spirit and possess me utterly when I leave this earthly plane. Try explaining that one to a jealous woman...

(To Tara)

Tara, I think you're missing -

TARA

And you were like really good friends with her husband and thought he was a great guy and you haven't even *met* Vaughn so there's a lot less to feel guilty about this time right?

ERIC

Perhaps, but -

TARA

And you never even told that other girl how you felt about her and she and everybody else always thought you were just friends right?

ERIC

That may be true, but -

TARA

So you never had a conversation anywhere near as intense as the ones we've had.

ERIC

But -

TARA

That other girl *never* shared any sort of intimacy with you like we have.

ERIC

Despite the accuracy of the superficial details and distinctions you point out, I could never feel passion more overwhelming than I felt - and still feel - for her. Apparently I am able to feel as much for you, which I would have never thought possible... but not more. Never more. I'm sorry Tara.

TARA

But... Did she really drive you insane like you say she did?

ERIC

Stark raving.

TARA

God... And you never told her?

ERIC

Nope.

TARA

You never told anyone? Not even Danielle or Trey?

ERIC

Nope. Not a soul ever... except you.

TARA

But then how were you able to spend time with her?

ERIC

My strategy with her was to be cordial, her buddy, hoping that to get to know her as a person with all her inevitable superficial flaws and irritating habits would gradually abate the... the intensity...

TARA

What happened instead?

ERIC

It only made it worse and worse and worse... But... there was nothing I could do Tara... I was powerless... Unhinged... That *voice* going on and on and on and that *gum* rolling around on that flat moist tongue of hers and clicking and cracking with that sensuous rhythm and... and... it was just...

TARA

Oh Eric... I'm sorry. I am.

ERIC

It's okay... It's good to finally be able tell someone... You have no idea, Tara...

TARA

You can tell me anything Eric... Anything...

ERIC

Thank you...

TARA

So how did you get her out of your life? Did she just leave the firm or something?

ERIC

Yes... but she never really has -

TARA

She like quit or got fired or something?

ERIC

Something like that...

TARA

So you sort of lucked out - I mean in a way I bet you were glad to be rid of her.

ERIC

At first yeah, I was relieved in a sense, you know, thought it would help but it didn't help... To this day she still...

Eric breaks, Tara follows soon thereafter.

TARA

Oh Eric...

Tara stands up, stumbles around Eric's desk to where he is sitting, bends over and cups her hand around his ear and whispers into it.

TARA (CONT'D)

I loved our time together Eric... I really did... Never... forget that... Ever...

Exit Tara.

ERIC

(To audience)

And right as she left, three police officers burst in, one yelling, "Stand up and put your hands on the desk! I said stand up and put your hands on the desk!!" And as I did so, one of them scurried over behind me, smashed my head down onto my desk, yanked my hands behind my back and, while cuffing me, said "You're under arrest for the murder of Stephanie Carson. You have the right to blah blah blah blah blah..." Asshole...

## SCENE FOUR

ERIC

(To audience)

The food's been better since they moved me to the psyche ward, I'll say that much for it. Beds are a bit more comfortable too. My neighbors, however, I could do without, me being the sort who would rather be knifed or gang-raped than sucked down into the quicksand of their collective lunacy. Or am I already at the bottom? I guess at this point I've sort of lost my credibility about those sorts of judgments...

Apparently, the cops had always suspected me, but couldn't find a motive since Steph and I were just occasional lunch buddies who worked in different departments and I'd never come remotely close to even flirting with her. My colleagues had defended me as the last guy in the world who would ever harm a flea, and they didn't want to mortify a good family man and all-around jovial fellow like me by telling me what the cops were up to. Even her husband, a genuinely good soul who spent those eleven years in prison for my crime, wouldn't even entertain the notion that it was me.

But I guess the first and second times Tara knocked I let slip too many details which coincided with the details Danielle and Trey were leaking to her about Steph. They had adored her too, in their own limited earthbound way... She was quite the character after all. The only thing the cops needed Tara to do was wear the wire the third time she knocked and induce me into giving a ballpark matching ID of the victim and a clear motive. It must have killed her to have to go through that, the poor sweet brave thing...

I guess it should be the stunned looks on the faces of Trey, Raj, Stacey and... Danielle as the police escorted me out of the office - that ashen "I'll never know what to really think about anything or anyone ever again" look - which haunts me day and night, but it's not... It's the sound of Steph's gum... that endless sensuous rhythmic clicking... and of Tara's whisper...

Three months ago, I received a visitation request for the first time in many moons, and from someone other than my doddering mother for the first time ever. A woman I'd

never heard of by the name of Karen Winters who claimed to be my second cousin. I figured she must hail from one of the many estranged branches of the family. But by then I was grateful for any visitor, even from an enemy camp.

We hear a jingle of heavy keys then a heavy iron door open as lights go up on Tara. Set suggests she is sitting behind a thick pane of bullet-proof glass. She is engulfed in a big trench coat, head covered in a scarf pulled down to her eyebrows, most of her pale face masked by large dark sunglasses.

ERIC (CONT'D)

Ike cuffed me, brought me into the visiting room and sat me down.

Eric sits across from Tara. We hear a jingle of heavy keys.

ERIC (CONT'D)

"You've got ten minutes."

We hear the iron door slam shut. Tara takes off her sunglasses. She looks like hell.

ERIC (CONT'D)

Prolonged pause, their gazes congeal with one another.

ERIC (CONT'D)

(To Tara)

Are you happy?

TARA

About *this*?

ERIC

Who cares about *this*? I mean are *you* happy?

TARA

I don't know Eric.

ERIC

Well, it's the only thing I care about and I have the feeling that I upset you.

TARA

"Upset" me? "UPSET" ME?!

ERIC

Don't yell Tara, they'll make you leave.

TARA

Are you crazy?!

ERIC

I'm a convicted murderer in the psyche ward of a maximum security prison, heavily medicated, strapped down nightly to a table in my padded isolation cell if that's any indication one way or the other.

TARA

Okay. But still...

ERIC

Why did you whisper that in my ear? You had to know what it would do to me.

TARA

So the wire wouldn't pick it up - they told me whispers wouldn't be picked up... And also... I guess I knew it would be our only moment... I mean the only time I would ever be able to give you pleasure...

ERIC

That's not true, Tara. You're giving me pleasure right now, the greatest pleasure any man has ever known.

TARA

Oh come on Eric.

ERIC

You're so beautiful, Tara. So incredibly beautiful...

TARA

Please don't do this... You have no idea what -

ERIC

But you are, Tara... You're astonishing...

TARA

Eric... Please... That's not why I...

ERIC

Why did you?

TARA

I have to try to find some sort of closure.

ERIC

There's no closure for this... Ever...

TARA

Stop saying things like that.

ERIC

I'm sorry.

TARA

Would you have killed me like you killed her?

ERIC

Nah...

TARA

Really?

ERIC

I would have used an ice pick on you.

TARA

(Pause)

ERIC!! THAT'S NOT FUNNY!

ERIC

Shhhh.... keep it down. Of course I wouldn't've killed you.

TARA

How do you know that? You said I was just like her.

ERIC

I told you already - it didn't work with her. Once she had infiltrated my innermost workings, it was too late to purge

her from my soul and so... it was all a waste of energy... of a life... But I learned my lesson, so by the second time you knocked you were in the clear... Maybe not so much before that, but by the second knock I promise you, Tara...

TARA

Do you hate me?

ERIC

Do I hate you? Did you never listen to a single thing I said, Tara? I adore you, absolutely and unconditionally, until the end of time.

TARA

Really Eric? Do you?

ERIC

Absolutely.

TARA

But I betrayed you, right?

ERIC

You betrayed m -

TARA

I promised I wouldn't tell anyone anything no matter what and then...

ERIC

Yeah, but when I said, "...even if I turned out to be an axe murderer," you thought I was a harmless domesticated white-collar guy using a common figure of speech.

TARA

But you drugged her then you smothered her, right? No axe.

ERIC

It was just a -

TARA

Why did you *do* it that way? That's so... creepy...

ERIC

Her mouth, Tara...

TARA

The gum?

ERIC

That... Her voice... Her breath... Everything... I had to stop it directly... not just as a secondary consequence...

TARA

That's so -

ERIC

(Continuous)

...but I couldn't hurt her - to hurt her would have been to kill me...

We again hear the jingle of keys and the iron door open.

ERIC (CONT'D)

(To audience)

Ike stuck his big bald pock-marked head in. "Two minutes."

TARA

Tell me something beautiful Eric.

ERIC

What?

TARA

You know... something beautiful... like you did before... about how I look... how I make you feel... you know... what you'd do to me...

ERIC

Tara, you are my angel... my goddess... the only thing that matters in the world... the only thing that has ever mattered or will ever matter ...

TARA

But what about the other girl...

ERIC

You're still stuck on that? Seriously?

TARA

I can't help it.

ERIC

She's seen better days, Tara, I don't think you -

TARA

I - CAN'T - HELP IT.

ERIC

You're wasting our time on a foolish tangent. Don't worry about it, all right?

TARA

I'll try.

ERIC

Would you like me to tell you about your eyes? How astonishing they are? How they affect me? How I'd kiss them?

TARA

(Whispering)

No do the whisper one.

We again hear the jingle of keys and the iron door open.

ERIC

All right.... Tara, your whisper would shame the rustling of - "That's it, times up." He yanked me up like a rag doll.

TARA

What Eric?! You have to finish it!

We again hear the jingle of keys.

ERIC

Aspens in the breeze...

TARA

Can I visit again?!

ERIC

Only if it makes you happy... my love...

Lights out as we hear the  
iron door slam shut. Lights  
up, back in blank space.

ERIC (CONT'D)

(To audience)

But they wouldn't let her visit again, as much as she  
insisted... or even write to me... or let me write to  
her... Said it had agitated me too much. I mean... just  
because I bit a big chunk out of Ike and tried to gouge out  
my eyes... Assholes... I guess it's for the best... for  
her at least... Until I'm yours in the ever after, my  
green-eyed angel... My goddess of whispers...

THE END.