

Jilt

**a play about power, beauty and justification set in a post-rape culture
by Jennie Webb**

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Jilt

Characters:

HIS MOTHER late 50s-70s, F. Patrician in affect even if not appearance.
NED, HIS OLDER BROTHER 30s-40s, M. Not comfortable in his own privileged skin.

JAE'S MOTHER 40s-50s, F. Protective and wary while keeping her head down.

JAE, AIKA'S FRIEND early 20s, Trans F. Trusting and self-assured out of naivety.

AIKA early 20s, F. Overflowing with sexuality and unfiltered observations.

Setting:

Various locations in a small college town, someplace like California

Time:

About 50 years from now, spring, in a world somewhat like ours

Casting:

Multi-racial casting is encouraged, as genetic material is probably pretty fluid in this world. Jae can be played by a F, Trans or M actor; character should identify and present as female but not be overtly feminized.

It's suggested that the presence of crowds be indicated by the actors or through some stylized means.

Pronunciation:

Aika is pronounced "Aye – E – ka"

Jae is pronounced "Jay"

Cis is pronounced "Sis"

Neutrois is pronounced "New – troy"

Defluo is pronounced "Deaf – Loo – yo" but it is a new word in this world

Dialogue:

— Indicates a character's dialogue is interrupted, by another character speaking, an event or a character abruptly shifting gears within a line of dialogue.

... Indicates a character is searching for words, does not complete a thought or leaves a line of dialogue open.

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SYNOPSIS

In the not-so-distant future, the .1% is ensconced in the Ivory Towers of Independent Academia, having broken off from the Center States. There, a privileged few pride themselves on creating a culture of fluid gender identity, filled with celebrity and free of sexual violence. A young woman named Aika may have something to say about that. Except that no one can hear her. Of course. So who will tell her story in a world that's lost the words to deal with unspeakable crimes? *Jilt* is a play about power, beauty and justification set in a post-rape culture.

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We see two women—one's a bit older, always maintains a physical distance from others and carries herself as if she were beautiful, even if she isn't; the other's not at home in her present surroundings but appears to be ready to hunker down, if necessary. With them is a young transfemale person, Jae, who can't quite cover her nervousness. All three are standing, a bit awkwardly, in a room that smells of money and privilege with at least one image—if not many—of an incredibly beautiful young man prominently visible. There are two armchairs and a table with a tea service and a plate of cookies. And napkins. Of course, there are napkins. After a suspended moment,

HIS MOTHER:

I'm not sure I understand.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Ha ha. I'm not sure I do, either.

HIS MOTHER:

Ha ha ha. Good! Then we're all in the same, murky boat!

JAE'S MOTHER:

I... I guess. Sure.

HIS MOTHER:

Or the boat's not murky. That's not right.

JAE'S MOTHER:

No?

HIS MOTHER:

It's the water that's murky, isn't it? Or that's what I meant, anyway. If water was allowed to get murky!

Short pause.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Yes.

HIS MOTHER:

All of which is neither here nor there, I suppose. All right. So I'm not asking you this time, I'm telling you: sit down! The both of you. (*very loudly, to no one in particular*) Another chair, please!

A small side chair appears as the mothers sit in the armchairs.

And I'll bet you're thirsty; I'm pouring you some tea. How do you take it?

JAE'S MOTHER:

I...

JAE:

We don't drink tea.

HIS MOTHER:

Of course. How ridiculous of me.

JAE'S MOTHER:

It's not ridiculous. Not at all. I'd love some tea.

HIS MOTHER:

I can get you something else. We've given up coffee, but—

JAE'S MOTHER:

(interrupting) No! Tea is terrific.

HIS MOTHER:

Well, I certainly think so! Never underestimate antioxidants. I let those free radicals go free range on every part of my body, ha ha ha. *(to Jae)* Are you still going to fight me on this?

JAE:

I'm okay.

His mother pours a cup of tea for Jae's mother.

HIS MOTHER:

And I'll translate: "Okay" would be "No?"

JAE'S MOTHER:

Ha ha. Yes. Thanks. Black, for me, please. That looks wonderful.

HIS MOTHER:

It's herbal. More brown, than black—tea of color, if you will—but you got it! *(to Jae)* At least have some of these cookies. If you don't, I'll have to eat them all myself and I'll hate you for it.

JAE'S MOTHER:

(covering) Ha ha ha ha!

Jae takes a cookie.

JAE:

(to his mother) Why, "of course?"

Short pause.

HIS MOTHER:
What?

JAE'S MOTHER:
Honey?

JAE:
(to his mother) I said we don't drink tea—

JAE'S MOTHER:
(interrupting, to his mother) Which is not really true. But with the drought restrictions, it's—

JAE:
(interrupting, to his mother) And you said, "of course." Why, "of course?"

HIS MOTHER:
I don't...

Very short pause.

I don't have any idea. I really don't. Sometimes I just say things. Probably because most of the time no one's here to listen to me! How ridiculous is that, huh? Now a cup for me—with a little milk; it's real dairy. I can't help myself, even though it's so outrageously expensive—and we're all set. *(very loudly, to no one in particular)* Thank you!

The tea pot disappears.

It pays to keep things nice and hot, I find. *(to Jae)* What a surprise to see you again. And looking so... lovely! *(to Jae's mother)* You're no longer employed by the University?

JAE'S MOTHER:
No. I'm not. I'm working off campus.

HIS MOTHER:
Are you, now? And how long has it been; must be nearly 5, no: 10 years! At least! The boys were in primary school... *(to Jae)* You both were on crew, together? When you were a boy?

JAE:
I wasn't—

JAE'S MOTHER:
(interrupting, to his mother) My daughter was assigned male at birth.

JAE:
(interrupting) She means misgendered. I was never—

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) Yes! I know. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be—

JAE:

(interrupting) It's okay.

HIS MOTHER:

Does that “okay” mean you'll forgive me? I'm certainly not complaining, but everything has changed so drastically in such a short time, really, and I never know what— To you it must seem like a million years ago, the dark ages of binary gender identification, “he” vs. “she.” But I even remember, when we were still part of the Center States, the fight for same-sex marriages— I mean, marriage equality!

JAE'S MOTHER:

Ha ha. It must have been quite different, then.

HIS MOTHER:

Oh, yes. Before Academic Independence, *(re Jae)* she might not have even known she was a she, much less been allowed to— *(to Jae)* Or no: what do I call you? Is it “she?” Or “they?” “Zie?” “Ey” ...?

JAE:

She's good.

HIS MOTHER:

Good. So. What exactly did you come here today to talk about?

Short pause.

JAE:

My friend Aika.

Short pause.

HIS MOTHER:

You mentioned her before. Wait. “Her?”

JAE'S MOTHER:

Yes.

HIS MOTHER:

“Whew!”

JAE'S MOTHER:

She was close to your son. *(to Jae)* Right?

HIS MOTHER:

Vincent.

JAE'S MOTHER:
Right. Vincent.

HIS MOTHER:
This Aika.

JAE'S MOTHER:
They were on the same degree track. She was—

JAE:
(interrupting) Why are you talking about her in past tense?

JAE'S MOTHER:
She— Honey, what am I supposed to say? You wanted to come here to share and now you won't tell us what's going on.

HIS MOTHER:
Aika... Yes! I thought that name sounded familiar. And "close"... well, sure! Close and then some. She was like Vincent's little, painted shadow. When he first enrolled, at least. Oh, to hear that name again...

JAE:
Then have you heard? Did the Regents contact you?

HIS MOTHER:
About?

JAE:
Aika. And Vincent. He didn't say anything?

HIS MOTHER:
My Vincent says lots of things. I'm just glad all of them aren't on camera!

JAE:
He didn't tell you that he raped her?

Pause. Then his mother breaks out into merry peals of laughter.

JAE'S MOTHER:
(covering, joining his mother) Ha ha ha. *(to Jae)* Sweetie, what do you mean by that?

HIS MOTHER:
Well! That certainly takes me back in time! "Rape." *(to Jae's mother)* Remember?

JAE'S MOTHER:
I...

HIS MOTHER:

I mean, I don't personally remember. When there were "rapists." Can you imagine? I suppose I shouldn't be laughing, but it all seems so... Cinematic: living in a time when getting "raped" was even a possibility!

JAE:

But that's what happened. It was rape.

HIS MOTHER:

How quaint! Bless your heart...

JAE'S MOTHER:

All right. This was a mistake.

JAE:

(to her mother, re his mother) No, she needs to—

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) Wait a minute...

JAE'S MOTHER:

I'm so, so sorry! *(to Jae)* I need you to apologize, right now.

HIS MOTHER:

No, no, now I'm remembering: Weren't you all—you, my Vincent, this girl— weren't you friends when you were— I mean before?

JAE:

(challenging) Before what?

JAE'S MOTHER:

When you kids were growing up, together! *(to his mother)* Yes, they were, and I had no idea about any of this. I—

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) She was an amusing little girl. Always chattering away; I remember my husband was particularly fond of her. And now I'm putting it all together. She's also the one who... Oh, it was so bizarre. Quite the event; just last week it was all over the feed! No one knows why, but, she's not really... there, anymore?

JAE:

I know why. It's—

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) I mean, she's there, but they were saying she's like a blank screen?

JAE:

She—

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) Although I hear she tries to speak. Or makes gurgling sounds, at any rate? And it happened just like that, didn't it!

JAE:

No. It—

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) So suddenly, out of nowhere. Just the strangest thing. Like something from a fantastical cyberspace nightmare.

JAE:

But this is real!

HIS MOTHER:

Of course it is!

JAE:

She might never be okay again, and it's all because of Vincent! You don't know who he really is!

HIS MOTHER:

Oh, a mother knows, a mother always knows! And I know how difficult this must be for you. How disorienting. For all of us here, when something goes awry, but especially for someone like you!

JAE:

Like me?

HIS MOTHER:

I haven't talked to Vincent but I expect he's absolutely torn up about this. My son Ned's so much older, though, and he's not... He's not close to her, is he? This Aika?

Short pause.

JAE:

No. He's not.

HIS MOTHER:

And another light activated! I must apologize, I can be so thick at times. This is about funding, isn't it!

JAE'S MOTHER:

What? No!

HIS MOTHER:

Are you starting a collection for this girl? I think that's a wonderful idea.

JAE'S MOTHER:

No! We would never be part of something like that. No one's—

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) Well, if they're not, then they should! She's already got everything she needs, but there's always those little extras. We can get the whole campus involved! *(to Jae)* You said you've talked to the Regents? What about the Chancellor?

JAE:

I didn't—

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) Even if there's no real hope for her, we all need to do what we can, if we can. And those of us who can do a little more, well... I'm happy to help. Truly. *(to Jae)* That's actually a big part of what makes me happy. That and these cookies. So you're going to have to take them home with you. You don't want to see me *too* happy, do you?

Short pause.

JAE:

No.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Honey. Let's go.

There is a fluid change and we see an attractive young woman alone who looks pretty much like a blank screen. This is Aika. She stands facing us, wearing a loose-fitting gown. Then suddenly she fills with self, and opens her mouth. A great deal of water comes out.

AIKA:

Hello? Hello? Anyone? Can anyone hear me?

Short pause.

Shit.

Jae and her mother walk on along with a huge crowd of people who absorb Aika. Jae is clutching a cloth shopping bag. It's hot and noisy; we see video screens showing the beautiful young man in a swimsuit, performing crowd-pleasing, athletic feats in front of cheering fans.

JAE'S MOTHER:

I have no idea what to— Why didn't you tell me that's why you wanted an audience? Why you wanted to see her?

JAE:
What would you have said?

JAE'S MOTHER:
I would have said no!

JAE:
Yeah!

JAE'S MOTHER:
I would have said how dare you use me to get in there. I used up any linkage I had because I thought you were sharing something of value. That might help you get a permanent position!

JAE:
I'm sorry; it's what I had to do.

JAE'S MOTHER:
You don't understand what going there, saying things like that could—

JAE:
(interrupting) I understand much more than you think I do!

JAE'S MOTHER:
Then how in the world did you come up with rape?

JAE:
“Come up” with rape?

JAE'S MOTHER:
We're just lucky that she— that legacy people can afford to laugh it off. No one wants to dredge all that up again.

JAE:
You're the one who told me stories.

JAE'S MOTHER:
And that's just what they were. That's what they are. Cisgender stories. Once upon a time, we lived through an epidemic of rape. A war against women in what was then one ridiculously huge country headed by hostile factions and extremists. Everyone at the mercy of their so-called biological urges.

JAE:
Yes, I know. “But our little college community broke off and came out all the stronger.”

JAE'S MOTHER:
It's true. During gender polarization, “sex” was something that happened every day. Sometimes more than once.

JAE:

Ew. Whatever.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Be glad you can't even imagine it. Grateful we don't have those feelings. They incapacitated people and led to... uncontrolled, extracurricular reproduction.

JAE:

Ugh.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Employees weren't assigned children; just about anyone could become pregnant. And did. There was no way to stop it.

JAE:

Enough!

JAE'S MOTHER:

I'm serious; it poisoned the entire culture.

JAE:

And I'm serious. Aika was raped.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Where would you even get an idea like that?

JAE:

Aika told me!

JAE'S MOTHER:

How? She doesn't speak!

JAE:

Mom!

JAE'S MOTHER:

Or whatever it is, no one understands her. Not anymore. So what are you up to?

JAE:

She told me before. After it happened. Last September.

JAE'S MOTHER:

September? And the "it" that you're talking about is...?

JAE:

The rape.

JAE'S MOTHER:

(looking around) Will you please stop using that word. It's absolutely meaningless.

JAE:

They why does it upset you?

JAE'S MOTHER:

I'm not upset!

JAE:

You certainly sound upset. *(holding out the bag)* Do you want a cookie?

JAE'S MOTHER:

No. Yes. Thanks. Let's sit.

She's spotted an opening on a crowded bench, maybe a public transportation stop decorated with a version of the beautiful young man's face. They sit and eat cookies.

All right. Help me piece this all together.

JAE:

This is the last time I'll involve you. I promise.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Is there something else I should know about?

JAE:

I'm going to help Aika.

JAE'S MOTHER:

No. I know what she means to you but I warned you about her. About spending too much time with her.

JAE:

She's my friend. She needs me.

JAE'S MOTHER:

She might not be the sort of friend *you* need. And in her condition—

JAE:

(interrupting) "Defluo."

JAE'S MOTHER:

What?

JAE:

They're calling it "Defluo." From the Latin: to flow away, disappear.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Honey, you said it: She may never come back. When things happen so suddenly, it's hard—

JAE:

(interrupting) No! It wasn't— I mean, I guess it might seem like that if you weren't around her and weren't looking, or listening. But it was more like... she flowed away. Her self. Until it was just her voice, but even that got muddled, diluted into sounds that didn't make any sense, just wrapped around each other and swallowed each other up.

JAE'S MOTHER:

And... you think it started because of something that happened—

JAE:

(interrupting) The rape. That's what happened.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Aika told you this?

JAE:

Yes. But not in so many words. Because she didn't really know what it was that *had* happened.

JAE'S MOTHER:

That's probably because it didn't! Rape is not a reality, here. We can't know what goes on in other parts of the world, but do you want to risk expulsion to find out? Do you really want to think about what living with "sexual violence" could mean?

JAE:

But—

JAE'S MOTHER:

(interrupting) All we need to know is that for us, rape is not possible. In a college town, there's an elevated natural order.

JAE:

That's what everyone says, but—

JAE'S MOTHER:

(interrupting) And here's what else I don't understand. If she told you last year, why are you bringing it up now?

JAE:

Because *I* just pieced it together! What she'd said to me before, or tried to say, but I didn't do anything because "Of course, that couldn't have happened!"

JAE'S MOTHER:

But now you believe her? Is this some kind of game to you?

JAE:

No!

JAE'S MOTHER:

My god. His mother practically accused us of being part of a fund drive. I've never been so humiliated in my life.

JAE:

She came up with that all on her own.

JAE'S MOTHER:

And you mentioned the Regents? What's the University got to do with it?

JAE:

It happened on campus. The administration has procedures. We're going to file a complaint.

JAE'S MOTHER:

You—! (*checking herself*) A complaint? I thought I'd heard everything. Who is we and why would you do something like that?

JAE:

So that there'll be an investigation!

JAE'S MOTHER:

Ha ha ha. Okay, now I have to laugh. You seriously think they're going to investigate this "rape?" Like it's an event?

JAE:

Yes! Mom, we have to take action or what happened to Aika will—!

JAE'S MOTHER:

(*interrupting*) Jae! You have a good job, which is the only reason they even let you on campus. And the fact that you were brought up there was because of my job; they took care of us and watched over you. But you don't belong there, not like they do. So don't start pretending you're a student. Some kind of tenured scholar who can sit in on heteronormativity studies.

JAE:

I told you, I'm not alone in this. I have people behind me.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Oh, you do, do you?

JAE:

I do.

Short pause, as the crowd noises become louder and they have a new awareness of the masses rushing past them.

JAE'S MOTHER:

I just hope you know what you're doing.

There is another fluid change and we find ourselves in an expansive room filled with items and boxes of things which give off a sense of surplus, of waiting. Then Aika appears.

AIKA:

When I was younger I said things. All sorts of things. If I thought things, I said them. Somehow, no one told me I wasn't supposed to do that. I remember always feeling excited when I was around people because they never knew what would come out. Sometimes, I would even surprise myself.

Not that I had anything that was really deep or meaningful to say. If I'm honest—and what choice do I have, anymore?—I don't think I've ever been particularly insightful. I wasn't sharing, or telling a story. I would just... say what I saw.

That girl has the most unpleasant face imaginable—by the time she's a woman she's going to have forgotten how to smile so she might as well become a man.

That house has too many windows for anyone to ever possibly look out of—if there were eyes in every window and bodies for all the eyes it would have to sink into the earth because it was too heavy for itself.

That person's keeping so much bottled up inside of them it's like they're about to explode. And look: they've already started; there's a little rice pudding on their chin.

So maybe I was observant? Not that everyone else couldn't see the same things. But the thing is, I think that things can be there but if you get used to not seeing, and not saying... they might as well disappear.

A man opens a door and comes into the room. While he may be attractive, he's not beautiful by his family's standards. He's all too aware of this. Maybe he's too large. Or too small. Or not perfectly proportioned. This is Ned. Holding a cloth bag, he closes the door behind him and Aika disappears. Ned appears to be having an intense conversation with himself.

NED:

Of course, that's... extraordinary. I can't imagine where or why this was all dreamed up, Mr. Provost. And I'll certainly do my best to keep any leaks from reaching the student body... But no real cause for concern; exactly. If that's what my father says—he is head of Oversight! We're all on the same page when it comes to Vincent: It would be absolutely unheard of for a story like this to even touch my unshakeable brother, much less... soil him.

NED:

Correct. I agree; that's the only option. Send this "Blank Screen Girl" home from the Institute with a enough credits to keep her family silent— No. Ha ha. No need to worry about the girl talking, she can only gurgle. That's a good one, sir. Again, you can count on me. As my delightfully pedestrian mother would say, "Loose lips sink ships."

Another look around.

To you, as well.

He taps something somewhere on his body and his whole demeanor shifts.

Christ. It's like they're hoarding five-star supplies for the afterlife down here.
(louder) Hello?

He taps something on his body again and starts speaking.

Hi. Jae: I'm in this... I think I got your directions right. Am I in the right place?

JAE:

I didn't think your people ever had to worry about that, Ned.

Jae comes in from another direction wheeling an empty cart.

NED:

Hey! I had no idea there are so many of these... spaces. It's like a maze. And they're all filled with so much of... so much.

He taps and disconnects.

JAE:

We're told there must be overabundance just on standby. Just in case.

NED:

And if anyone wants for anything, you're the one they send to fetch it?

JAE:

That's me. Go-to girl of the underworld. When I first got the job I used to get lost but now I like it down here. This room in particular.

NED:

For god's sake, why?

JAE:

It's a Vincent-free zone. Look around!

Ned does, and notes something new.

NED:

Hah! Whaddya know. I'm surprised it didn't hit me when I first walked in: his face is absolutely nowhere!

JAE:

Right? It's not even like this where I live. It almost feels... healthy.

They are standing close but they don't touch.

NED:

Right.

Short pause.

JAE:

So?

NED:

Yes?

JAE:

What's happening? I didn't sleep all night; I thought you'd message me after we left your mother.

NED:

No, I couldn't. I told you that.

JAE:

I know, but—

NED:

(interrupting) Everything's going according to plan. Better, actually!

JAE:

What does that mean?

Lights on Jae's cart begin to flash, maybe accompanied by faint warning sounds.

Sorry. I have to pin my target early today.

NED:

Go ahead. It won't bother me.

JAE:

But you'll tell me—

NED:

(interrupting) Of course!

Jae hurriedly begins to load boxes, maybe accessing electronic files that are somewhere we might not expect.

NED:

So! Apparently your visit was “unnerving” and almost immediately upon your departure, I was summoned by my mother.

JAE:

Vincent, too?

NED:

Please. He has a competition tonight.

JAE:

But does he know what’s—?

NED:

Oh, I’m sure he knows. As I arrived, I could hear good old Mom having a lively rape conversation with the Dean.

JAE:

You’re kidding.

NED:

I am not. She was in fine form, reaching for even the most tenuous links in her frantic little network. This morning we could feel the buzz all the way up the hill.

JAE:

Which is good?

NED:

It’s great! And meanwhile, my Dad and his lot can’t be bothered; I just got off with the Provost—assured him there was nothing at all to worry about.

JAE:

That’s—

NED:

(interrupting) The way it works. They’re all so busy gazing at their own irreproachable reflections that they can’t see what’s happening around them, and by the time they look up, there’s no way they can keep it off the eventfeed. My beautiful brother will have no choice but to go face to face with Father and the Oversight Committee, and Vincent will get knocked down off his pedestal, once and for all.

Jae turns from her work

JAE:

Then this is really happening?

NED:

It really is! All it takes is one voice to start an echo. That was you, Jae.

JAE:

It was Aika!

NED:

Of course.

JAE:

Wow...

NED:

"Wow?"

JAE:

Yeah! I never—

She presses a request button on the cart.

It's just been so strange. For a long time, now. Being with her. Watching her, trying to hang onto herself, but not being able to and no one knew why or what would happen next, or seemed to even care until it was too— I don't think I really expected that I could get through to you, or that you'd even pull my message.

NED:

What message?

JAE:

Last week. When they took her to the—

NED:

(interrupting) No! I was glad to hear from— You did the right thing. People need to hear the truth behind the "Blank Screen Girl."

JAE:

Ugh, I hate them calling her that.

NED:

Sure. I was just—

JAE:

(interrupting) It's not like that when you're with her. I mean, she's... She's not "there," but she's still somewhere. She's still Aika. And I can still... I can find her. I can help her. I know I can.

We hear an electronic fulfillment sound and a small glass of water appears; Jae takes it.

NED:

Well. Here's to the power of the "anonymous source!"

JAE:

You really don't think your mother will tell them it's me?

She returns the empty glass and goes back to work, loading boxes.

NED:

Oh, no. She would never reveal she was fraternizing with the hoi polloi.

JAE:

Hah! That's a phrase from the history books.

NED:

You like it? I've got more.

JAE:

"Fraternizing." What does that even mean? It's a binary, masculine term?

NED:

Meaning, "to become brothers" originally, so yes. In general usage it referred to mingling, or people coming together—often from enemy camps—of both genders.

JAE:

Ha ha. "Both genders."

NED:

You laugh, but my mother's terrified at the thought of losing what she's clawed her way to get. She wasn't born into Academia, like my father.

JAE:

Or you.

NED:

Or me.

JAE:

And what about the complaint? When do we file that?

NED:

With the administration? We don't have to, now.

JAE:

No?

NED:

No. Thanks to my mother's desperate blathering, too many channels are open to keep the story from going public. All we have to do is sit and wait.

Jae may be moving a particularly cumbersome box.

JAE:

Okay! So I'll let my mom know?

NED:

About what?

JAE:

If you're an employee, a complaint tag is a really big deal. I told her we were filing one and—

NED:

(interrupting) We?

JAE:

A whole group of us. She started to get a little panicky. Even talked about expulsion. I mean, she wasn't serious. It's what all employees scare their kids with: being expelled from town and cut loose into the wilds of the Center States.

NED:

Ah.

Very short pause.

You didn't mention me, though.

JAE:

What?

NED:

As part of your... group?

JAE:

No...

NED:

That's probably best. And from here on out, you should put some distance between you and your mom.

JAE:

You do know that distance is a little tricky where we live, right? I can try to platform her so she can't access me at work...

NED:
You gotta do it. "What she doesn't know..."

JAE:
"You gotta?" Your mother does that, too.

NED:
Does what?

JAE:
The street thing. Like a "We are not the point-one-percent with doctorates."

NED:
Gimme a break.

JAE:
You see? "Gimme gimme." It's true.

NED:
I have to stay connected to the real people, don't I? After all, it's half my gene pool.

JAE:
I don't know whether you're joking when you say things like that.

NED:
It's not in my DNA to joke about myself.

JAE:
Ha ha...

NED:
Oh! I brought you some cookies.

JAE:
No, thanks. We've still got some. Your mother sent them home with us.

NED:
Really.

He opens the bag.

These?

JAE:
Yeah, she said— Oh! No. Those look... amazing.

NED:
Yep. She wouldn't have brought these out. Not for...

JAE:
Uh huh.

He hands her the cookies and she looks around.

NED:
Don't worry. You're safe.

JAE:
Oh, I feel safe. Like we're sitting on an underground volcano about to erupt.

NED:
Ha ha ha. Did you mean that, sexually?

JAE:
What?

She didn't.

NED:
Sorry. Old-school humor.

Jae adds the cookies to her cart's contents.

So. How is the— How is Aika?

JAE:
I didn't get to see her this morning. They said they were switching her to another unit and they didn't have the numbers yet.

NED:
No. They're sending her home.

JAE:
That's what I thought. Her mom said they changed their minds.

NED:
When did—? Shit.

He starts tapping, pulling messages and checking feeds.

JAE:
At least at the Institute she's being taken care of.

NED:
She's not. Or not in the way you're thinking. This is not good. This is not good at all. We want her home, as proof. As a citation.

JAE:

Why? What's wrong?

NED:

You're all hooked on the line that the great, gated Institute takes care of problems, makes things better, but you have no idea of what they they're truly capable of. What the best and the brightest will do in the name of research... and to make problems disappear.

JAE:

I don't understand.

NED:

What they gave you, Jae, you're paying for it one way or another.

JAE:

What did they give me?

NED:

The fact that you're— Everything that goes on in there is about keeping you in your place, in the dark, ready to be used. The Institute and whole administration? They're as bad as my brother. Or worse; they created him! They protect him, sustain him, feed him. They're all a bunch of licentious perverts!

JAE:

Whoa. Isn't that a little—?

NED:

(interrupting) No! It's not!

JAE:

Okay!

NED:

I have to get out of here. I don't know how you stand it, coming down here, every day...

JAE:

It's my job.

NED:

I'll be in touch.

He starts out.

JAE:

Ned?

NED:
What?

Short pause.

JAE:
Nothing.

She returns to her cart.

NED:
Say it.

JAE:
What if we're wrong?

NED:
What do you mean?

JAE:
You helped me... connect things. But what if she was wrong. Aika was— is very... imaginative. Passionate, even. So what if, what she described, what if it was more in her mind than in reality?

NED:
You're saying she made it up?

JAE:
Not made it up. I'm sure he did something, but how would...? She studied sexual history. She was fascinated by it. More so than any cis-femme I'd ever known. She's always been that way.

NED:
Always? Or after she met my father?

JAE:
What?

NED:
Never mind. That's a conversation for another day.

JAE:
I don't—

NED:
(interrupting) You don't want to. But this is about much more than just your girlfriend. People need to look at what Vincent did, and call it by its name. He has to be stopped, and I can't be weighed by someone who isn't crystal clear about why that matters. Are you with me or not?

Short pause.

JAE:

I'm with you.

There is another fluid change and we again see a huge crowd of people. Out of the crowd steps Aika. She smiles seductively at the audience.

AIKA:

Hellooooooo?

Her greeting hangs in the air, then the self leaves her. She looks as if she's about to collapse and Jae's mother rushes past as part of the crowd; Aika is swallowed up. We see pictures of the beautiful young man, illuminated or neon, flashing on and off. It's hot. Jae's mother seems as if she's straining to listen to something, then stops abruptly. She taps something somewhere on her body.

JAE'S MOTHER:

All right. I don't know why I can't get through, or if you pulled my message earlier, or if it's platformed while you're working, or maybe you tried me and couldn't get through, but I need to tell you—

She checks herself because of the people around her and her mode of communication.

I wanted to let you know that I'm meeting Vincent's mother for lunch! Isn't that nice? And as luck would have it I'm available because I was fired. I went in today and I am no longer an employee. I don't actually know what was tagged and I'm sure there's no connection between that and your current... activities. But I just thought you should know. Let me hear from you; I'll see you later. I shouldn't be too late. I hope.

She taps and disconnects, then prepares to re-enter the force of people around her, which escalates in intensity until there is a sudden vacuum. Out of which his mother appears, bringing with her a cool blast of air—she wears sunglasses or something that not-so-subtly says incognito.

HIS MOTHER:

Hey there! I'm so glad you could make it. On such short notice!

JAE'S MOTHER:

I... yes.

HIS MOTHER:

Are you hungry? I'm starving. I've never been here—as you know this isn't my part of town—but I thought it'd be fun. I looked onscreen and they have a wonderful menu! (*whispering*) I've heard they even have protected seafood, if you know who to ask!

JAE'S MOTHER:

That's certainly an extravagance.

HIS MOTHER:

Shhhh, don't tell anyone! Shall we get a table? (*very loudly, to no one in particular*) In the corner, away from the windows.

A table and chairs appear.

Sit.

They sit.

So. I'm sure you realize that I asked you to meet me here for more than just forbidden, underwater fruit, ha ha ha!

JAE'S MOTHER:

Ha ha.

HIS MOTHER:

The thing is, I'm worried about your... child.

JAE'S MOTHER:

My daughter.

HIS MOTHER:

Yes. Not really a child anymore. But still...

She picks up or activates menus decorated with pictures of the beautiful young man.

I know I can't look at Vincent without picturing him as a tiny, perfect baby, staring into my eyes, absolutely mesmerized by what he sees there. Would you like me to order for you, or does something strike your fancy?

JAE'S MOTHER:

I'm not really hungry.

HIS MOTHER:

Nonsense! I'm famished! Let's eat anything we want and enjoy it, with the blessings of the final-wave feminists.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Right.

HIS MOTHER:

And don't think twice about the bill. Believe me, you don't even want to look! But it's on me.

JAE'S MOTHER:

You said you were worried about Jae?

HIS MOTHER:

Well, yes. And I can't imagine how you must feel. After what happened.

JAE'S MOTHER:

So you know about my job.

HIS MOTHER:

Your job? Is there something I *should* know?

Very short pause.

You're lucky you have a job. I've heard that it's becoming more difficult to find one unless you're linked to the right people. That ship may have already sailed for you, but you never know. Now, let's get back to Jae. This idea of hers.

JAE'S MOTHER:

It's... It's not her idea.

HIS MOTHER:

Then whose is it?

JAE'S MOTHER:

It's something she heard about. At work, I think.

HIS MOTHER:

Is that what she said?

JAE'S MOTHER:

Yes.

HIS MOTHER:

From whom?

JAE'S MOTHER:

What?

HIS MOTHER:

From whom did she hear it? Another employee?

JAE'S MOTHER:

I... don't remember. She didn't say.

HIS MOTHER:

Which was it?

JAE'S MOTHER:
I'm sorry?

HIS MOTHER:
She said and you don't remember, or she didn't say?

JAE'S MOTHER:
I—

HIS MOTHER:
(interrupting) Because I talked to the Chancellor.

JAE'S MOTHER:
You—

HIS MOTHER:
(interrupting) Even though there is absolutely no basis of reality in this peculiar tale.

JAE'S MOTHER:
No! That's—

HIS MOTHER:
(interrupting) How on earth could there be? But I, of course, wanted to get ahead of any fabrications that could do serious harm to someone with a bright, bright future.

JAE'S MOTHER:
Oh, I'm sure Vincent—

HIS MOTHER:
(interrupting) Ha ha ha. I'm not talking about Vincent. I'm talking about other individuals who are involved. And the kind of losses you could not possibly even fathom if this goes any further.

Short pause, then Jae's mother puts down or deactivates her menu.

JAE'S MOTHER:
Look: I'm probably not at my best, today. But I'm sure that whoever filed the complaint did so in... what's the term, "good faith." That has academic standing, doesn't it?

HIS MOTHER:
Good faith.

JAE'S MOTHER:
Yes. If someone thought they were doing the right thing.

HIS MOTHER:

By filing a complaint about a theoretical event which is a conceptual impossibility?

JAE'S MOTHER:

But if someone... If someone was naïve. Had been especially sheltered, perhaps, protected, and in turn thought that they were protecting someone else. A friend who was very confused. What if someone thought that they were sharing. To help clarify matters! Prove that everyone was innocent of any wrongdoing—there was nothing even remotely event-worthy—and at the same time, perhaps, provide some answers about a terrible, tragic situation. To help that friend. A friend they... love.

Short pause.

HIS MOTHER:

Well! That's a whole lot of good faith!

She breaks out into her practiced peals of laughter. Then,

(very loudly, to no one in particular) Unagi!!

JAE'S MOTHER:

What?

His mother swiftly collects or de-activates the menus.

HIS MOTHER:

Grilled eel. It's what we're having for lunch. And you can relax. There's not going to be an investigation.

JAE'S MOTHER:

No! I didn't think there actually would be.

HIS MOTHER:

Of course not. And there was no complaint filed, either.

JAE'S MOTHER:

No?

HIS MOTHER:

No. They were all very curious at the University about where these ridiculous rumors may have started, however.

Jae's mother doesn't quite know what's coming next.

You look like you could use some water.

JAE'S MOTHER:
Yes...

A very large glass of water appears.

HIS MOTHER:
Drink that.

JAE'S MOTHER:
I...

HIS MOTHER:
Drink it all. You won't get water like that again for a very long time.

Jae's mother drinks. It's very good water.

Now, I won't say anything to the administration about your Jae—I didn't know she had a job on campus; must have wonderful benefits! I am reminded everyday how fortunate we all are, now; accepted for who we are, no questions asked...

JAE'S MOTHER:
Yes.

HIS MOTHER:
All right, then. I do not believe for a minute that Jae's not somehow caught up in this. I don't blame her because she's just an employee and I'm sure she's being used, here. Which brings me to my original point. It's very worrisome that she could have let herself even listen to this story. I mean, really: rape?

JAE'S MOTHER:
I know.

HIS MOTHER:
You do! I know you do! Which is why I made some calls. I inquired about her confused friend, about what led up to the... terrible, tragic situation she now finds herself in.

JAE'S MOTHER:
Aika.

HIS MOTHER:
Yes. I don't know if you remember, but I was saying, yesterday, that I know who this girl is.

JAE'S MOTHER:
Yes.

HIS MOTHER:

Yes. And she was never really one to go with the flow, so to speak. We did know the family, in passing, and when she was younger I have to admit we all got a kick out of her. But she became a little too fond of us and began *asking* for things.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Oh, her parents would have never—

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) I would not make that accusation if I couldn't back it up. Having said that, she was a rather exceptional young girl and, as you may be aware, we enrolled her at the University! Why have purse strings if you can't pull them, right? To help out when someone's truly in need? Whoever they are, whatever it is...

Very short pause.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Right.

She takes another drink.

HIS MOTHER:

So. As you pointed out, she was in the same program as my Vincent and—of course!—it wasn't very long before she fell, head over heels, in love with him! It was quite absurd and no one really took it seriously. I mean, girls still do fall in love and to be honest, who isn't a little in love with my son Vincent?

JAE'S MOTHER:

Uh huh.

HIS MOTHER:

Here's what I'm getting at, the long way around, obviously.

JAE'S MOTHER:

No, sorry, I didn't mean anything...

HIS MOTHER:

Of course not. Finish your water. My point, is this: This girl did more than adore him, she pursued him. She wanted to... She wanted to touch him. Physically. Sexually.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Excuse me?

HIS MOTHER:

It's true! And that unimaginable, unsavory desire was the first indication of her psychotic break and resulting condition.

JAE'S MOTHER:

They're calling it Defluo.

HIS MOTHER:

Are they? Well. It's good that you've done your homework. And now let me share something with you: I've talked to the doctors. Your daughter spent a lot of time around this girl and may have been infected. Jae's bizarre inventions and rape fantasies?

JAE'S MOTHER:

I wouldn't say they're—

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) They're early signs. The specialists agree. I've made an appointment for her.

JAE'S MOTHER:

What?

HIS MOTHER:

At the Institute—no need to thank me. I realize you couldn't possibly afford what she needs right now. You don't want to see your daughter just... fade away, do you?

NED:

Mother! What are you doing here?

We see Ned, none too pleased at finding the women together.

HIS MOTHER:

Ned! I could ask you the same question. I'd say you should join us for lunch, but we'd have to get a bigger table.

NED:

We have to leave. You can't be seen this far off campus.

HIS MOTHER:

Don't worry. They're very discreet.

NED:

I wouldn't be so sure. The Department Chair interrupted my office hours to let me know I was to collect you.

HIS MOTHER:

Isn't that marvelous. I feel wanted!

NED:

Come on.

HIS MOTHER:

But we've already ordered.

NED:

(very loudly, to no one in particular) Make that on-the-go, please.

HIS MOTHER:

I can't be seen with bags of—!

NED:

Leave them for your friend, then.

HIS MOTHER:

Oh, this is not— Remember the employee I I told you about, who visited the house yesterday? A friend of Vincent's from when they were both... on crew, together?

Very short pause.

NED:

Yes.

HIS MOTHER:

This is her mother.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Hello.

NED:

Yes. Hello.

HIS MOTHER:

This is Ned.

JAE'S MOTHER:

So you know my daughter, Jae?

NED:

No.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Oh... I thought—

NED:

(interrupting) No. Nice to meet you.

JAE'S MOTHER:

And—

Ned and his mother are gone. Noise and heat flow in and two small cloth bags plop down onto the table. There is a fluid change and the table and chairs disappear. Jae's mother moves away with the bags as if she's carrying a burden heavier than an on-the-go order. Aika appears and starts to follow her. Then,

AIKA:

It's funny how sometimes changes are slow, gradual. You feel, every day when you wake up, that something's a little different but you don't quite know what or how and you blink but, no... or maybe... maybe... yeah, look, look at that, it has changed! And you can do all the blinking you want but it won't change back. It will probably change again, but you'd better not sit around waiting for it to change; you'd just get old.

And there are other times when... Ah!

It's as if Aika's been hit by an unexpected wave, or jolted by a stream of electricity.

Holy crap! All of the sudden everything's different. What you thought was, isn't. And you blink, and think, maybe it never was.

I don't remember how old I was, but one day it hit me: things had certainly changed. I'd say something, something that I'd expect to be delightfully surprising, and I didn't get that, "How charming" look. Instead, it was "How awkward!"

I was not at all happy about this.

However, being an observant young lady, I made up my mind to do something about it. At first, I was silent. Which was not particularly easy for me. But I made myself just sit, and watch. I listened, too, but I mostly watched. For clues, for reactions, for flickers of a solution to my problem.

I happened upon it quite by accident, really. My mind had wandered off somewhere—probably to a place where I was still charming—and my father, watching something onscreen, blurted out: "That's an incredible statement!"

I don't remember what the statement was, but I was standing in back of him, and I heard myself saying, "That's an incredible statement!" Just as he had. And what do you know? My father turned around looked at me and... beamed. He was beaming. He lit up with pride and happiness. He was filled with light. He was fulfilled.

Huh.

So I tried it again. Whenever he'd say something, I'd repeat it back to him, and he'd beam some more. Then I tried it with others. Goodness, how clever I'd suddenly become. How perceptive. How scintillating it was to talk to me!

AIKA:

At first I thought it was a joke. Nothing could be that simple. I say simple, and not easy, because it was actually very difficult, having to tamp down all the things that came into my head I used to let out. Having to keep my head open, instead, for whatever words of wisdom he said, or she said, or they said, to bounce right back for the beam.

But over and over again, I managed to do it. And that's how I got into college.

Another fluid change, faster this time, as Ned and his mother sweep onstage. They're standing or sitting comfortably with space between them in a vehicle which may be sporting a version of the beautiful young man's face, and they almost hit Aika, who is thrown into traffic. If she screams we don't hear it.

NED:

(very loudly, to no one in particular) Watch out!

HIS MOTHER:

What?

NED:

I wasn't talking to you.

He and his mother face opposite directions, looking out of their respective windows.

HIS MOTHER:

What a fascinating part of town. So... vivid.

NED:

So filthy.

HIS MOTHER:

Do you think so? I find it refreshing.

NED:

Refreshing? It's like some kind of third world clay oven out there. Why were you lunching with that woman?

HIS MOTHER:

I told you. She was over at the house yesterday. She and her... daughter.

NED:

And?

HIS MOTHER:

They're the ones who shared the accusations against your brother. I told you that.

NED:
Did you?

HIS MOTHER:
Yes! I had a few more questions for her. They're friends with the girl.

NED:
What girl?

HIS MOTHER:
You know what girl!! The girl who's claiming Vincent...

She can't bring herself to say it.

NED:
Oh! This is about the rape! Sure.

HIS MOTHER:
There was no—! Ach. Aren't you at all concerned?

NED:
Should I be? All I know is I got your hysterical summons yesterday, but by the time I got there you were too saturated to make any sense.

HIS MOTHER:
I was not—!

Very short pause.

You may be interested to know that I've taken steps to avert any more trouble in this situation.

NED:
Why?

HIS MOTHER:
Why have I taken steps?

NED:
Why would I be interested?

HIS MOTHER:
You really are a bastard, aren't you?

NED:
Only you would know the answer to that, Mother.

Short pause, then his mother's peals of laughter.

HIS MOTHER:

Oh, every time I begin to take you seriously, you remind me I'm wasting my time. So! I spent my morning doing research about that girl, that horrible girl. Ugh. She used to follow Vincent around at his competitions like a puppy. We had to remove her from all the photos and video clips.

NED:

Does she have a name, this girl?

HIS MOTHER:

Aika.

NED:

Aika. Wait. Wasn't she one of Father's favorite little things? When you were both so much younger? Aika?

HIS MOTHER:

Yes, actually. She was close to all of us, if you remember.

NED:

She... Sure! I do remember! That is a shocker. Why would a close family friend like that say such a thing about our Vincent? Did you ask her?

HIS MOTHER:

Ask who?

NED:

Aika, of course!

HIS MOTHER:

How am I going to do that?

NED:

You don't seem to have any problems interrogating anyone else about this little escapade.

HIS MOTHER:

Whatever you may think of your brother, this is not a frivolous matter. I've no doubt that it was this conniving Aika who opened her mouth after she felt... jilted by Vincent. Although obviously there was nothing for her to have been jilted from.

NED:

Obviously.

HIS MOTHER:

But this is the same girl who was on the eventfeed awhile ago, "The Blank Screen Girl."

NED:

Oh, that's right.

HIS MOTHER:

So I can't very well ask her, can I? Not that I need to. Because it's someone else who's orchestrating this, now.

NED:

Really?

HIS MOTHER:

Yes, really. And this other girl, her friend, whose mother I was lunching with?

NED:

She's the secret band leader?

HIS MOTHER:

Hah. No. But she can tell me who is.

NED:

And how have you determined that, pray tell?

HIS MOTHER:

Call it a mother's instinct.

NED:

You picked that up, over in this part of town?

HIS MOTHER:

I don't know why I'm even talking to you. You're not going to lift a finger to protect your brother.

NED:

And why would Vincent need "protection?" The women he has sex with can't possibly procreate.

HIS MOTHER:

What did you say?

NED:

What you already know. He has no interest in legacy partners as active... participants. He prefers them from neighborhoods like this, where they're all next to neutered and won't remember a thing.

HIS MOTHER:

He's young. There's no rush to make an appropriate match.

NED:

And in the meantime, what's the expression: "Fish in a barrel?"

HIS MOTHER:

Which is neither here nor there, is it? Your father and I gave up waiting for you to find someone, Ned. But I assure you Vincent has no problem catching what he wants.

NED:

Of course not.

HIS MOTHER:

Not that you would understand a real man's appetite.

NED:

A real man? That's how you see Vincent?

HIS MOTHER:

I'm not talking about his choice of entrees. I'm talking about his ability to clean his plate, as it were. And come back for seconds.

NED:

That is... revolting.

HIS MOTHER:

Is it? Don't tell me you're on some sort of hunger strike, now. Maybe it's you who belongs out here with these people. You play your cards right, you can switch departments and do field work. Who knows, the little hard-working drones might even look up to you! Make you queen!

NED:

Would you please shut up?

HIS MOTHER:

I'd think you'd like that! A nice, feudal crown and followers? Or would you still be jealous of your brother?

NED:

So I'm jealous? Is this your expert analysis?

HIS MOTHER:

My educated opinion.

NED:

I wasn't aware you actually studied psychology, Mother. Or had any sort of degree, at all!

HIS MOTHER:

Well! I do have lots of life credits, and resources. I talked to some people, and I want them to examine this other girl at the Institute, the new unit where they're keeping Aika. The specialists there—

NED:

(interrupting, louder than he intends) Wait—slow down...

They lurch forward as the vehicle they're traveling in suddenly slows down.

(very loudly, to no one in particular) No! Keep going.

Ned and his mother collect themselves as they speed up again.

What did you say?

HIS MOTHER:

Now, you're interested?

NED:

I'm always interested when you put your non-patrician nose where it doesn't belong. You're not faculty; what are you doing, messing with the Institute? You don't know anything about what goes on there.

HIS MOTHER:

Well! I can certainly smell when something's about to spoil, from all the years your father's headed the Oversight Committee. The consensus is that if this girl Jae has bought into the insidious lies Aika was spreading, she might have become infected, too.

Pause.

NED:

(very loudly, to no one in particular) Stop.

They stop, abruptly.

Mother, I'm honestly not sure if you believe what you're saying or not. But you know as well as I do that there are no "insidious lies." Not in this case. Vincent did what he did, what he was expected to do. It's what he and all of his kind have always done. Just because no one calls it rape...

HIS MOTHER:

(under her breath) How dare you!?

She looks around, perhaps feeling exposed for the first time.

NED:

Are you really going to pretend we're not divided into two groups? There's the raped, and there's the rapists.

HIS MOTHER:

I—!

NED:

(interrupting) And as dear old Dad once said to me, "The only question is, which one are you?"

With a sudden jolt, Ned and his mother quickly move away, and Aika and Jae are thrust on. They are in a space which is like a blank canvas, but for an evocative figure of some form which resembles the beautiful young man. Aika is again a blank screen. Jae takes this in. After a moment she looks away.

JAE:

I like your new room. Lots of light. What do they call it? "Natural light?" Hah. What a place, this is. "Natural light." What would it be like, being able to afford to say shit like that? Oh. And "it flows." This room. "It's got a good flow." I never knew what that meant, before.

They are taking care of you, right? I mean, everyone seems so smart. And kind. Truly kind. Not that full-of-crap-pour-some-tea-put-a-ribbon-on-it kind. And giving. Like they really care. So I don't know what Ned's problem is.

Do you know what he called them? "Perverts." I'm not sure who he was talking about, even. Of all the words to pick out of the linguistic gutter, huh?

Short pause.

Fuck.

Now, that is a good one! Can you tell I've been reading your old study materials? I think we should start using it again. "Fuck." And "suck." "Prick." "Dick." Or "Snatch." Even "cunt."

Cunt. Cunt cunt cuntcuntcunt ahhhhhhh! Ohhhh, Aaaaaiikaaa!

Was I wrong to go to Ned? There was no one else. Your mom brought you here and I was all alone and it used to be I could talk to him! It was years ago, but he'd listen. Like he understood and knew who I was, who I really was, even before I became me. This me. Remember? You teased me. When I told you Ned and I would talk and it wasn't like sharing; nothing was expected, it was just... what it was.

And now... what is anything? Would it have been different if I'd heard you, believed you, when you first told me what happened? I don't know how I could have. But Ned did. Right away. It was almost like he wanted to believe, had been waiting for it. I... I guess I'm not sure what that means. Could mean. I look around, now, and everything seems... Nothing seems okay anymore. For me, or you, or anyone. Does that sound crazy?

Hah. Here's something: This morning, Ned said you were my "girlfriend." As if that were really a thing, anymore. Like we were living in the Center States, running around all like animals, like in your books.

JAE:

What do you think? Maybe there's a way you could be. I mean, maybe I could try. Try to understand. Why you feel more. Want more. Need more, like there's something— Or maybe it's me. Because I don't know if I can ever figure out where all of that comes from and what it does to you and why you don't look at me like you look at...

She looks at the figure, then reaches out for Aika's blank screen face.

But here's what I don't even want to understand. Ever. I don't want to know how he could have done this to you. How something like that's even possible. How a human being is capable of it. How can that physically happen? Be allowed to happen. What could have gone on in his head that would let him... take you. And erase you? How could he come out of that, whole, with you completely gone?

Through closed lips, Aika makes a sound like bubbling water.

Okay. We'll make this right. Things will change so that something like this never happens again. One voice will echo and grow louder and no one will be able to silence it. Ned said that's exactly the way it'll... "go down."

Ha ha ha. You like that one? Can you imagine, "going down" on someone? Now that's crazy.

Aika has begun to sway almost imperceptibly.

He doesn't know I'm here. On my way over, he messages me: "Do not go to the Institute. Stay Away." An edict. Like that's going to happen.

Jae tentatively moves to Aika, then holds her. It's rather awkward at first, and she finds herself looking in the direction of Aika's blank stare.

Hey! How wild; you've got a room with a view! Maybe we can we just stay here, huh? Not worry about anything, or anyone. Just you and me. Just like this...

Together, they sway back and forth, like they're caught in gentle waves. Then, a swell and crash and they're both swept off. We see Ned in a lecture hall. He has a more authoritarian air than last we saw him. His finger acts as a laser pointer. Perhaps there are key words projected.

NED:

So for all intents and purposes, by taking agency and embracing intersectionality our community has broken down the artificial barriers of a binary society. No more institutionalized misogyny. No more internalized misandry. As universal PanTransAllies, the pressure to cissimilate is a thing of the past.

Well. We never miss a chance to congratulate ourselves, do we?

NED:

Nor does the Institute fail to remind us that they've been integral to streamlining fully-funded medical procedures over the last two generations, which allow us each to present and indentify however it is we choose. Whether you're a man, woman, transgender, transexual, genderqueer or agender neutrois, "we're all the same under the sun!"

Silence.

That last, thanks to my mother, who seems to have recently adopted a fondness for the quaint phrases of her youth.

We hear rustling, restlessness.

Which brings us back to where we started. Separated from gender, take a look again at the word "Identity." When we talk of our identity, we generally refer to our sense of "self"—what makes us ourselves and not someone else. Some thing else. What makes us different from others.

Yet at the root of "identity" is the Latin *identidem*—a contraction of a phrase which means, literally, "same and same." We identify with others because we see something in them that is the same, that reflects who we are. Who we want to be. Or... is it who they want us to be?

We hear a dull alarm sound and see flashing lights, among them a graphic representation of the beautiful young man.

All right, then. No doubt you've heard the recent on-campus rumors. Not that we like to picture our all-star, gilded athletes anywhere near this sort of muck, but I ask you to consider: What if?

We hear beeps and clicks; students preparing to sign off, electronically.

What if there's one grain of truth hidden in there? In Independent Academia we tell ourselves that the battle of the sexes is over; we're all equal when it comes to gender identity and human sexuality. But what if by leveling the playing field, we're hiding something quite different underneath it?

The sounds become louder.

Think about it! What if we are normalizing abhorrent behaviors by denying their very existence? Are we seeking our own reflection in a glass that's completely false?

We can now barely hear Ned underneath the chaotic noises of a vacating hall and electronic signals.

What if the things we *don't* talk about in our enlightened world are allowing the most beautiful amongst us to commit the absolute worst deeds?

We hear the sound of a heavy door being shut. Then silence. Perhaps the flashing graphic emits a sudden loud buzz before it shuts off.

NED:

Right.

Ned collects himself and picks up a bag, preparing to start out, then

JAE'S MOTHER:

Excuse me...

We see Jae's mother, hot, sweaty and uncomfortable. And thirsty.

NED:

Oh.

Very short pause.

NED:

Hello.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Hello, I'm—

NED:

(interrupting) I have to—

JAE'S MOTHER:

(interrupting) We met earlier today, when—

NED:

(interrupting) Yes.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Yes.

NED:

Can I help you?

JAE'S MOTHER:

I don't know.

NED:

Then I'm sorry. I have to—

JAE'S MOTHER:

(interrupting) I didn't know where else to go.

NED:

If this is about your daughter, I told you. I don't—

JAE'S MOTHER:

(interrupting) You do. You know her, or you did. She considered you a friend. She was called Jason, then.

Short pause.

NED:

Yes.

JAE'S MOTHER:

So you do remember.

NED:

I—

JAE'S MOTHER:

(interrupting) I was sure you would. But what with your important studies and lectures, it's probably too hard to keep track of people who don't really matter.

NED:

How is she? It's Jae, you said?

JAE'S MOTHER:

Yes. She's— She's missing. I can't find her.

NED:

What?

JAE'S MOTHER:

I don't know where she is. She left work early but she didn't come home.

NED:

Did you message her?

JAE'S MOTHER:

I've been trying. She hasn't pulled a message all day, since before I met with your mother.

NED:

And?

He taps something on his body and strains to detect a response.

JAE'S MOTHER:

And I figured she'd want to know that I lost my job.

NED:
What?

JAE'S MOTHER:
I'm no longer employed. I found out this morning.

NED:
I'm... I'm sorry. I know that happens. Did they tell you why?

JAE'S MOTHER:
Ha ha. No. They did not. I'm sure it'll all be in the justification tag but right now, I just want to find Jae. Your mother said she made an appointment for her. At the Institute?

NED:
She did.

JAE'S MOTHER:
Do you know when it is?

NED:
No. What I mean is my mother did, indeed, say that. But what she says and what she does are often two very different things. You shouldn't worry about it.

He taps and disconnects. Very short pause.

JAE'S MOTHER:
I'm sorry to bother you.

NED:
No. I'm glad you shared.

JAE'S MOTHER:
Yeah?

NED:
Yes.

Pause. Perhaps Jae's Mother starts to leave, but is stopped by a cool blast of air which somehow makes her even more uncomfortable.

JAE'S MOTHER:
So are you going to help me, or not?

NED:
I—

JAE'S MOTHER:

(interrupting) I don't know what you think life is like for us down there, off campus, or if you even think of us at all. But I don't know what the hell is going on. I have no job because my daughter trusted the wrong people and now I'm afraid she's in real trouble. It was not at all easy for me to get back in here today, but I know my daughter. She is not a liar and if she says she's not alone in this—

NED:

(interrupting) You don't think I'm—

JAE'S MOTHER:

(interrupting) I'm not saying that. But with your family's linkage you must have heard things, and seen things, that I can't. That we can't. Believe me, Jae does not know what she's up against and if you care about her, any of this, or any of us, you have to help me.

Very short pause.

And now I've gone too far. I apologize. I'll go.

She starts to leave.

NED:

Don't!

He looks around and presses a button on a device in his bag. We hear a low-level, almost ambient sound, like water running. Ned opens up a bit and Jae's mother unconsciously clutches her throat; she's parched.

We can't really talk now, but I understand: you're concerned.

JAE'S MOTHER:

I'm more than "concerned!" She is my daughter!

NED:

I know.

JAE'S MOTHER:

I don't think you do. I'm saying she wasn't assigned to me, I physically gave birth to her.

NED:

Oh!

JAE'S MOTHER:

Oh! Right! Just like the pioneers!

NED:

So— I'm sorry, how did you become—?

JAE'S MOTHER:

(interrupting) The Institute said I was part of a study; I don't actually remember. And I don't know why my body could carry a baby. For most of us, with no letters after our names, it's not even an option.

NED:

Right. I'm... sorry.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Why are you sorry?

NED:

That must have been why Jae, when— when you were employed here, was allowed to be with us. To participate on campus.

JAE'S MOTHER:

I knew enough not to ask. To be grateful for all we had, what was provided for her. But that was a long time ago. And if it's true that this Defluo is somehow connected to Vincent—

NED:

(interrupting) There's a very direct connection. Jae told me!

Jae's mother moves close to Ned and leans in, almost touching him but not quite.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Then it is you. You're behind this.

NED:

I'm—

JAE'S MOTHER:

(interrupting) Don't even try to lie to me. I am now unemployed. Which in this community puts me in a next to impossible position and if we get sidetracked by the whole, divisive idea of rape again we are going to lose everything; there'll be no place for us. We will be expelled!

NED:

You don't know that.

JAE'S MOTHER:

I do, and let me tell you what else I know: Aika has always been different. Her mother never knew what to do with her, and I never knew how to help. Your family tried, too.

NED:

You bet they did.

JAE'S MOTHER:

So it makes sense, what your mother said. If Aika felt rejected by your brother and that's what caused this Defluo, then she—

NED:

(interrupting) Oh! Right! It's because she was jilted! Aika forgot who she was, lost her entire sense of self because her feelings were hurt. You buy that?

JAE'S MOTHER:

I—

NED:

(interrupting) Good! Because we've got a whole lot more where that came from. My family's got stories that'll keep you up all night. Ask my father all about his playtime with little Aika, why don't you?

JAE'S MOTHER:

What are you—?

NED:

(interrupting) But this is now bigger than that, even. Much bigger than our legacy, and more twisted than any hooded academician wants to admit—the kind of machinations that have gone into sanctioning the unthinkable as if it's part of some natural order. Aika was not jilted. She was not rejected. She was raped. Vincent raped her. That's what caused this!

JAE'S MOTHER:

(looking around) How can you—?

NED:

(interrupting) Because it's true. My beautiful brother is a rapist. He's done it before and he'll do it again. And he's not the only one! They're all in on this! So maybe you should look at them a little differently next time you take a drink and they shove his shining face in front of yours.

Pause. The graphic version of the beautiful young man flashes on again and we begin to hear soft beeps accompanying it.

(referring to the device in his bag) It's all right. We're still safe.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Oh. Sure. Ha ha. Just like the Early Cen crime stories. With "serial rapists" all around us, hidden in plain sight.

NED:

Yes.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Because a "rape culture" is not an urban myth and we, as women, should be afraid to set foot outside of our homes.

NED:

Not just your homes and not just women!

JAE'S MOTHER:

I am sorry! No one is going to believe that!

NED:

Then he'll get away with it. They all will—is that what you want?

JAE'S MOTHER:

They always have! That's not an event!

NED:

But this time it's different! Once Jae is on the eventfeed people will have no choice but to believe.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Wait. Jae?! On the—?

NED:

(interrupting) Yes! With Aika. To tell the truth about Vincent.

JAE'S MOTHER:

No...

NED:

It wasn't part of the plan, but she will. She'll have to.

JAE'S MOTHER:

But if it's really the truth, why haven't we heard it before?

NED:

What?

JAE'S MOTHER:

About Vincent and the others. This is not the Center States; they can't silence everyone. The eventfeed is an open, public channel. If I was raped, I would say something!

NED:

Not if you don't remember.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Being raped? How could I not remember?

NED:
Because you're given new memories. Encoded in the DNA. When it's...
transferred.

Pause. Then we begin to hear a different set of sounds, and Ned goes to collect his bag.

JAE'S MOTHER:
I don't understand.

NED:
Of course not. It's absolutely inconceivable—the Institute's finest achievement.
It's the rapists who get to tell the stories.

JAE'S MOTHER:
You're saying it's... like a biological hall pass?

NED:
Our genetics are altered. To override evidence in short-term neural loops with
chemically re-created memories.

JAE'S MOTHER:
How is that even—?

NED:
(interrupting) Not my department.

JAE'S MOTHER:
No. But you said Aika remembered.

NED:
Yeah. And maybe that had something to do with my dad putting his DNA where it
had no business being.

JAE'S MOTHER:
My god.

NED:
One of the perks of heading Oversight. Everyone looks the other way.

JAE'S MOTHER:
Including you.

NED:
No. You have to understand: I'm not like them, the rest of them!

JAE'S MOTHER:
No?

NED:

No! I don't want to keep you all mollified and unquestioning—I don't have needs I can't speak of and people like Jae do matter to me. I'm not ashamed of that.

He accesses or reaches into his bag and pulls out a water bottle. He starts to put it to his lips but is interrupted by an involuntary gasp from Jae's mother.

Oh.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Sorry. I...

Ned hands her the bottle and she drinks.

NED:

You come with me.

He taps something on his body again.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Where are we going?

NED:

To the Institute. I think I may have seriously underestimated my mom.

They sweep offstage together. From opposite directions we see his mother and Jae, moving toward one another as if they're in a long hallway. An image of the beautiful young man is projected on the floor beneath them, perhaps in a tile-like pattern.

HIS MOTHER:

Well! Look at you!

JAE:

What are you doing here?

HIS MOTHER:

Ha ha ha! I came to check on you.

JAE:

Check on me? I was leaving.

HIS MOTHER:

I mean, your lovely little friend. To see if anyone was there, yet. So to speak.

JAE:

They've moved her to another room.

HIS MOTHER:

Yes. Of course.

JAE:
Of course?

HIS MOTHER:
I wanted to make sure she was getting the best possible treatment.

JAE:
You did.

HIS MOTHER:
Of course.

JAE:
Why?

HIS MOTHER:
Why?

JAE:
Why all of this sudden caring for Aika.

HIS MOTHER:
There's nothing sudden about it! She's almost like a member of our family!

JAE:
So is Vincent on his way? You all gonna have a little family reunion, here?

HIS MOTHER:
Ha ha ha. You've very sharp. You really should have continued your education, my dear.

JAE:
And how might that have happened?

HIS MOTHER:
There are all sorts of ways. Ways and means, if you know who to ask.

JAE:
"Ask." Like that would get someone like me anywhere.

HIS MOTHER:
Ha ha ha. Are you thirsty?

A pitcher of water and an empty glass appears, along with Aika. She stands between them, full of her self again, and takes in Jae. The other women don't hear or see her.

AIKA:

Was I really that certain? I suppose I was. On the outside, at least. Probably more even. How can you not be when it's so obvious who you are ... and what you're meant to do!

She fills the glass with water.

JAE:

No. I'm okay. I have to get home.

HIS MOTHER:

Stay awhile! We'll have a little chat.

JAE:

I can't.

HIS MOTHER:

Oh, come on. Don't play "hard to get."

JAE:

Ha ha. That's a good one.

HIS MOTHER:

I thought so!

She takes the glass of water from Aika and holds it out to Jae who hesitates, then drinks.

AIKA:

(to Jae) I don't know why I could never see how you felt. Or maybe I did. And because I knew it wasn't the same—didn't connect the same way for you—maybe I didn't think it counted?

HIS MOTHER:

You know something? We're a lot alike, you and me.

JAE:

You and me?

AIKA:

Because I was the one with special feelings. For as long as I can remember.

HIS MOTHER:

Oh! I don't mean like— I've always been a woman, if that's where you thought I was going.

AIKA:

Special feelings no one else talked about.

JAE:
No, don't worry. But you're nothing like me.

AIKA:
No one had words for.

HIS MOTHER:
You might be surprised!

AIKA:
Those feelings were mine, and mine alone.

HIS MOTHER:
What if I told you that I didn't come from (*gesturing around*) this.

AIKA:
I even felt sorry for you!

HIS MOTHER:
So I can guess what it must be like to be an employee.

AIKA:
Oh. I loved you.

JAE:
Yeah. I already know that.

AIKA:
I really did, I really do!

JAE:
Ned told me. We're friends.

AIKA:
But I'd look at you...

HIS MOTHER:
I didn't think Ned had any friends.

JAE:
Ha ha.

AIKA:
And I'd think, what does she want with me?

HIS MOTHER:
Would that be from all of your important work on campus?

AIKA:
She's already got something so fierce and good.

JAE:
And before that.

AIKA:
Something so strong and true.

JAE:
When I was—

HIS MOTHER:
(interrupting) Ah! Yes! I should have realized. It's you!

AIKA:
So beautiful.

JAE:
What is?

MOTHER:
You were the one Ned used to talk about!

AIKA:
That even if I were a bottomless well...

JAE:
What?

AIKA:
And could keep giving, and giving and giving...

HIS MOTHER:
He was quite taken with you, back in the day.

AIKA:
It would never be what she truly needs.

HIS MOTHER:
He'd tell me all about your conversations.

AIKA:
That's something I don't have.

JAE:
He did?

AIKA:

Not anymore.

She abruptly hands the pitcher to his mother and disappears

HIS MOTHER:

Let's walk, shall we? Drink up

Jae does as she and his mother turn and move together down the hallway; maybe the hallway moves along with them.

It was during your... "Transition." That word's still used?

JAE:

By some people.

HIS MOTHER:

Am I allowed to be one of them? Because I really can't keep up and my feet spend altogether too much time in my mouth these days! Ha ha ha.

JAE:

So what did Ned tell you?

HIS MOTHER

All sorts of things. You know, I find it all so fascinating, people turning into one thing or another. How wonderful to be given that opportunity, but it is a bit odd when you just follow the progression. It seems... unnatural. And that's not me judging! What I mean is that it doesn't quite seem real. It being so easy, so simple: 1, 2, Trans and you're an entirely different person? More water?

She stops and fills Jae's glass.

JAE:

No. You're not a different person.

HIS MOTHER:

But you're not the same.

JAE:

No, you become you. More you.

HIS MOTHER:

I know that's what they say.

JAE:

No! That's what I say!

HIS MOTHER:

Yes! Yes, I know, sweetheart! Let's sit.

A table and two chairs appear.

HIS MOTHER:

Listen, I'm bringing this up because I'd like your help.

She places the pitcher of water on the table and sits.

I see someone like you, full of so much potential, and I believe, wholeheartedly, that you... are...

JAE:

What?

HIS MOTHER:

You! You are most certainly "more" you; I've no doubt you're the absolute most you, ha ha ha. Here's what I don't buy: that it was easy. The transition "to" you, if you will. I remember you, on Vincent's team, before you took that step. You can't tell me that wasn't one hell of a change, and I am all too aware that change is not always easy. It's hardly ever easy.

Jae sits.

JAE:

What are you saying?

She drinks.

HIS MOTHER:

That there's more than they're telling us. About what it's really like, getting the outside and inside to match. Am I right?

JAE:

I... yes.

HIS MOTHER:

I thought so. Even from my side of the "cis-tracks." Ha ha ha.

JAE:

Hah.

HIS MOTHER:

So what is it like?

Very short pause.

JAE:

Are you really asking me?

HIS MOTHER:

My dear, you have to trust someone. Let me...

She fills Jae's glass again.

JAE:

Thanks.

HIS MOTHER:

"Okay!"

Jae drinks again.

JAE:

You know that's the line they use, don't you? When you file a trans-app?

HIS MOTHER:

What is?

JAE:

"You have to trust someone."

HIS MOTHER:

Really? I did not know!

JAE:

"You have to trust someone. Start with you."

HIS MOTHER:

Hah! That's very good, I'll have to admit.

JAE:

Yeah. "When you trust you, we will, too!" It's the first step of becoming who you are.

HIS MOTHER:

Just like that, huh?

JAE:

Just like that. It's all onscreen. "What to expect when you're trans-pecting: shift, disconnect, reconnect."

HIS MOTHER:

Sounds simple enough.

JAE:

Yeah. But it's not. I mean, sure, you follow the check-ins but even with the script adjustment float, it's a lot of work to... to hang onto who you are while everything's changing around you, and the fact that it *is* changing, that kind of leaks in.

HIS MOTHER

People don't want to talk about that.

JAE:

They don't. And while it's all going on, and you're thinking about what it will be like to really be you, you start to wonder about that "you" you were supposed to trust in the first place. Who is that?

Short pause.

Why am I telling you this?

HIS MOTHER:

Because you needed to tell someone?

JAE:

I... maybe.

HIS MOTHER:

I try to keep it a secret, but I'm actually a very good listener.

JAE:

So is Ned. Maybe he gets it from you.

HIS MOTHER:

Maybe! Cookies?

A plate of cookies appears. Jae takes one.

And now, I'd like to tell you something. Share something.

JAE:

Okay.

HIS MOTHER:

There are reasons why things happen the way they do, and why they don't tell everyone everything, even the scholars. (*whispering*) The hallowed halls of learning have a lot of necessary dead ends. Those cookies are good, huh? I'm going to have one too, if you promise not to blab!

JAE:

Yeah...

HIS MOTHER:

All right, then. You said it yourself: when things are in flux, it's very easy to lose track of who you really are. We can only handle so much change. And that's why we need people like my son Vincent.

JAE:

What?

HIS MOTHER:

We need to know that there are people for whom things are easy. Who are extraordinary. We trust them. We wish we were them.

JAE:

Vincent? Are you serious?

HIS MOTHER:

I have never been more serious.

JAE:

Ned says—

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) I know what Ned says. But here's the thing, Jae: When Vincent wins, we all win.

JAE:

What he did is—

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) You really are naïve; what do you think will happen to you if you drag him down?

JAE:

Vincent raped my friend!

HIS MOTHER:

Yes, well, you know, sweetheart, I've been around the block with that one over the last few days. Rape. Do you even have any idea what it means?

JAE:

It means he... he...

HIS MOTHER:

What? What? You can't say it, you can't imagine it, and that's because it's meaningless. There are certain actions that are reserved for the proprietary health of an elite few. Vincent is one of those. His has needs that are part of who he is and they do no harm to anyone. Even if your friend was "raped," in the historical sense, her body would adapt. And this is another reason why I know it did not occur—it would be medically impossible for her to have any memory of such an action. So whatever else happened to your friend is the result of her own choices.

JAE:

I...

HIS MOTHER:

Oh, god. Be glad you don't know what I'm talking about. Can you imagine, if your people all started developing sexual urges again? But I'll tell you what will happen if you insist upon rocking the boat. You? The way you are now? The you we gave you that's so much more you than when you used to be you?

JAE:

What are—?

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) It's all a trade-off, honey. Today, you're accepted. You're even embraced. As the symbol of cultural fluidity and tolerance, makes us all look good. But if you push for more change right now—threaten to send ripples through the reflection of our beautiful life—both you and your devoted mother will pay the price.

As if pushed by a force neither of them can control, his mother and Jae are swept off in opposite directions. In their wake, Aika appears. She's full of self and something else, too. She sits at the table and bites a cookie.

AIKA:

Ughh! These taste like piss! Bleah. I used to love cookies. But that was before. If it was even a real memory. Sharing warm, soft cookies with other girls and boys and everything in between and extra—because when you're young that's the way it is; everyone is unformed. Soft. Full of possibilities and things that don't belong but are hiding safely underneath the surface. Protected. Or they're supposed to be.

She stands.

I had been trying to tell him. I tried every way I could think of to make him understand. I did everything I knew how to do, I'd learned how to do. To make him realize that he and I were meant to be together, part of one another. Nothing else mattered. And then, it happened.

AIKA:

A glimpse. I caught a glimpse of him looking in my direction. It was from the corner of his eye and he quickly turned away, but I could tell that he was looking at me. He saw me. And the next day, he touched me. Only in passing, but after that it was impossible to be away from him. Standing next to him, I could feel the space between us wash over me and before long, a whole other world opened up. I had no choice but to fall deep, deep inside of it and I could feel myself needing to get closer and closer and deeper and deeper until I found myself in this incredible vortex of what's beneath, and below, and underneath and true and dark and dangerous and...

AHHH!

If Aika's cry starts as something else, at one point there's a violent jilt—as if she's been hit hard with something. Something which shocks her. She is still for a moment. It's as if she's seeing something she never imagined, yet somehow recognizes. Something that's starting to happen to someone else.

I've... been watching this, over and over again, for so long, now. But it was all muddled, before. It was never clear. Not like this. Who he is. And what he's doing to her. Because I'm no longer there. So I can tell that she'd been told a lie. Not by him, he never even bothered with that. It was a story she heard a long time ago: that everything that happened was because of her, what she asked for, what she wanted but what I see now is... He's up against her, moving inside her but he's not with her. He doesn't want to be part of her. He wants to take her. Rip her apart. Destroy her. What she thought was passion is anger. Unbearable anger at something that has nothing to do with her and that she will not be able to survive because she had believed in something that wasn't true for so long, lived in only a part of herself, that she will never be whole again. She will never truly be here, again. It's too late and as I'm watching, I ask myself: What can I do? What can I do, to end this, that she can't?

Aika screams one word:

STOP!!

We hear her scream continue until it's drowned out by a sound which is like crashing waves, or speeding traffic. She disappears as Ned and Jae's mother rush on. They stand very close together and do everything they can to keep from touching. It's very noisy and very hot and there are many other people around them. Ned is extremely uncomfortable, but Jae's mother is used to it. We see fleeting images—still and video—coming from different directions, of the beautiful young man and, at some point, Aika and Jae. Ned is jostled.

NED:

Christ!

JAE'S MOTHER:

You're not a fan of public transportation?

NED:
Sorry.

JAE'S MOTHER:
It takes some getting used to.

NED:
If you say so.

Ned awkwardly maneuvers himself so he can tap something somewhere on his body, but doesn't get the response he wants.

JAE'S MOTHER:
Nothing?

NED:
No. Platformed.

JAE'S MOTHER:
You said Jae pulled your message from before?

NED:
In which I told her to stay away from the Institute? She did. But she's there.

Ned manages to tap again and notes something new.

JAE'S MOTHER:
What's going on, then?

NED:
I'm trying a different search.

JAE'S MOTHER:
I mean at the Institute. What do they want from her?

NED:
They want to silence her. But I think... Hah! Look at that. It's too late.

JAE'S MOTHER:
What is?

NED:
They're too late. It's already starting. Even faster than I thought! Look: The girls. They're on the eventfeed!

He points to images of Aika and Jae.

JAE'S MOTHER:
Oh, no...

NED:

No, it's good. It's older frames but we want them to stay up there. People see them, they're protected.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Do you really believe that?

NED:

Yes.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Uh huh.

NED:

What?

JAE'S MOTHER:

Why should I believe you? You're telling me you knew about this—for how many years, now ?—and you let it go on, over and over again. Said nothing.

NED:

No! I—

JAE'S MOTHER:

How can you function in a world like that? Be part of it, knowing there are people around you that are...

She starts to take in the people around them when a sudden shift jolts them both.

NED:

Is this our gate?

JAE'S MOTHER:

Not yet. If this is all true—

NED:

(interrupting) It is!

JAE'S MOTHER:

Then why do you care, now? Why this rape?

NED:

Vincent has to be held accountable.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Is that all you want? To see your brother banned from competitions?

NED:

That's exactly what he deserves!

JAE'S MOTHER:

Won't there just be someone else to take his place?

NED:

At least it won't be Vincent!

JAE'S MOTHER:

Should it be you? Is that what this is about?

NED:

No! These people have to be stopped!

JAE'S MOTHER:

These people. Your people.

NED:

Yes. My people.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Right.

She adjusts her body against the crowd, preparing herself to move.

NED:

Wait.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Our gate's next.

NED:

No! I mean look.

He points the monitors again.

Where are they...?

He taps somewhere on his body again.

They're missing. They're not on the feed. That's—That's too fast. That couldn't have happened. It's impossible. There's no... Shit! My mother: she's inserted a alternative stream!

JAE'S MOTHER:

What does—?

NED:

(interrupting) It means they've killed it. The story. They've closed the channel—it's already dead.

JAE'S MOTHER:
She can do that?

He taps again, looking for something that's not there.

NED:
No, but the Provost can. I didn't know she'd— Son of a bitch. We have to go back.

JAE'S MOTHER:
Back where? What about Jae?

NED:
Now I can't even search her. She might as well be— Fuck! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!

JAE'S MOTHER:
(registering his unexpected word choice) What are you talking about?

NED:
I have to go back to my office. I can't risk it; there's nothing we can do, now.

JAE'S MOTHER:
We're almost there. They need to be stopped, right?

NED:
I shouldn't have told you! You didn't need to know, you were better off—

JAE'S MOTHER:
(interrupting) Of course you should have!

NED:
You don't—

JAE'S MOTHER:
(interrupting) Maybe a part of me always has known. I've tried to protect Jae in the only way I thought I could, but now—

NED:
(interrupting) It's not safe, for you or me.

JAE'S MOTHER:
Because you're no longer hiding behind my daughter?

NED:
There's no way we can help her!

JAE'S MOTHER:
That's just what I tried to tell Jae. We have to go get her. Both of them!

NED:

We can't! We won't be able to. They're...

Ned taps, again unsuccessfully.

JAE'S MOTHER:

What?

NED:

Jae and Aika were problems. The Institute makes problems go away.

Short pause.

I'm so sorry. I did care. I really did.

JAE'S MOTHER:

You... No. No no no no no. You said you're not like them. Whatever your motives, you and Jae started something and this isn't how it ends. I won't let that happen.

NED:

But you're an employee!

JAE'S MOTHER:

I am a mother. I am a woman! I am a human being! And I refuse to live like this. Not anymore.

NED:

It's too late for Jae, she's—!

JAE'S MOTHER:

(interrupting) I can't believe that. I know I don't have anything except her to lose. But now that I know the truth, I can't just do nothing. Can you?

Short pause.

NED:

I...

Another sudden jolt.

JAE'S MOTHER:

This is us.

They are pushed off together, backwards, as Jae and Aika sweep on, both now wearing loose-fitting gowns. The girls stand close, looking at each other. Jae puts her hand out, and Aika touches it. Maybe Aika smiles. Jae may start to laugh, and also to cry. It's an extended moment, one that feels very full and clear. Then, it's gone. Jae looks through Aika, suddenly overcome with something new—unmitigated fear. She turns to face us.

JAE:

Hello? Hello? Can anyone hear me?

She and Aika disappear as Jae's mother, alone, crashes on as if she's been thrown by a moving vehicle. She doesn't have time to collect herself before we see his mother, eating a cookie. Behind them is an imposing gate decorated with an icon representing the beautiful young man. Of course.

HIS MOTHER:

Well! You look like you've been washed up on a desert island!

JAE'S MOTHER:

Is my daughter here?

HIS MOTHER:

Do I need more cookies?

JAE'S MOTHER:

No. Have you seen my daughter?

HIS MOTHER:

As a matter of fact, there's something I have to— Oh!

A beatific look comes over her face and she taps something somewhere on her body.

Hello Vincent! How lovely to hear from you!

JAE'S MOTHER:

(re his mother's pre-Vincent statement) What? What is it?

HIS MOTHER:

(covering) A message. *(listening to the message)* Vincent's at the stadium preparing for the diving competition.

JAE'S MOTHER:

What were you—?

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) I told him to go early so that he could avoid any distractions. Speaking of which, where's Ned?

Very short pause.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Yeah. How did—?

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) I keep tabs on all my boys.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Ned... decided not to come.

HIS MOTHER:

Really! Well. I can't say I'm surprised. He's never been one for finishing. If you know what I mean. But I'm sure you don't. Are you thirsty?

JAE'S MOTHER:

No. *(re the gate)* Is Jae inside?

HIS MOTHER:

He must have been crushed, though—his little revolt, ended almost before it even began!

JAE'S MOTHER

(calling out and moving toward the gate) Jae?

HIS MOTHER:

But no damage done. Everyone can go back to work, happy bargains still in place.

JAE'S MOTHER:

(at the gate) Jae?

HIS MOTHER:

I think this calls for some... *(very loudly, to no one in particular)* Water!

JAE'S MOTHER:

Jae!

JAE:

(offstage) Mom!

JAE'S MOTHER:

Baby?!

Still in a gown—not even trying to hide her distress—Jae rushes on from a non-gate direction, and into her mother's arms, for the first time.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Oh, god! Are you all right?

HIS MOTHER:

(to Jae) You should be at your appointment!

JAE:

(to her mother) No! I'm not. I'm not, at all!

JAE'S MOTHER:

What did they do to you?

HIS MOTHER:

(to Jae, looking at the closed gate) How did you even get out here?

JAE:

(to her mother) They— Oh, Mom...!

JAE'S MOTHER:

Did they hurt you? You look—

JAE:

(interrupting, to her mother) No! They—

HIS MOTHER:

(interrupting) You look thirsty. We're all thirsty. *(very loudly, to a nonresponsive force)* Excuse me!

JAE:

(to her mother) Mom! Aika's gone!

JAE'S MOTHER:

Gone?

HIS MOTHER:

What?

JAE:

(to her mother) Yes! I don't know where, or how, but she's—

JAE'S MOTHER:

(interrupting) Did they take her somewhere?

JAE:

No. It was just us, together, and she— One minute she was there. I mean, like she used to be there. And then she wasn't.

HIS MOTHER:

Wait, that's not— It's not supposed to happen that way!

His mother begins to tap something on her body again. Maybe a lot of things. Jae begins to center herself.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Jae: what happened?

JAE:

I don't know. It was like... there was a window that opened.

HIS MOTHER:

Those windows should not be—!

JAE:

(interrupting) Not that kind of window! *(to her mother)* But all of the sudden I saw. Really saw—the way things are. She looked at me and I could see why she couldn't stay here.

HIS MOTHER:

Nonsense. The Institute is the very best place for her.

JAE:

No. I mean this whole— the campus, the community. That's why she had to go, Mom.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Yeah.

JAE:

And that's why we have to stay.

HIS MOTHER:

Why don't you both go inside? I'll get you a room with a—

JAE'S MOTHER:

(interrupting) No! *(to Jae)* We are all alone, here, Jae. Without credits, or linkage, we can't stay, either.

JAE:

But we need to!

JAE'S MOTHER:

No, we need to *go!*

HIS MOTHER:

Let's all go! I was on my way to watch Vincent up on the high dive; you'll join me!

JAE:

(to her mother) No, I think that's why Aika disappeared like she did, when she did. When it happened, I've never been so scared but when I called out, I heard something different—something I've never heard before—in my voice. And when they heard me and saw she was gone, everything came apart... and back together, I guess, so that I could get away. To speak for her, and for all of us. So that things will change!

HIS MOTHER:

Oh, for heaven's sake.

JAE:

(to her mother) We're part of something, here! Ned, too.

JAE'S MOTHER:

No, he's not. Ned's...

Very short pause.

JAE:

What?

HIS MOTHER:

Yeah! What?

JAE'S MOTHER:

Ned doesn't want change. Not really. He's too afraid of what he'll lose.

HIS MOTHER:

Ha ha. And you've only just met him. How very perceptive. Are you ladies ready? I'll even give you a ride. How's that for change?

JAE:

(to her mother) No. If you're right, Mom, we'll do it without him. I'm not afraid. *(to his mother)* I won't let things happen to other people so that I can be me. I know who I am and that's not something anyone gave me, or anyone can take away.

JAE'S MOTHER:

Jae...

JAE:

And we're going to start asking. We're not alone and there'll be lots and lots and lots of asking!

HIS MOTHER:

Lord help us.

JAE:

Things are already changing, Mom. I can feel it!

HIS MOTHER:

And I feel like a drink. *(very loudly, to no one in particular)* Hello?

NED:

Jae!

We see Ned coming through the gate, swinging it open.

JAE:

Ned!

HIS MOTHER:
Ned?!

NED:
(to Jae) You're okay?

JAE:
Yeah.

JAE'S MOTHER:
(to Ned) What are you doing here?

HIS MOTHER:
(to Ned) Yes, what *are* you doing here?!

NED:
(to Jae's mother) I tried to— Aika's gone.

JAE'S MOTHER:
We know. I thought you were going back to your office.

NED:
I was. I was on my way and then— I couldn't.

JAE'S MOTHER:
Couldn't what?

NED:
Do nothing.

JAE:
What does that mean?

Short pause. Maybe Ned holds his hand out to Jae.

NED:
It means I'm with you. With all of you.

HIS MOTHER:
Oh, my. Isn't this a special moment! *(very, very loudly as last-ditch effort)* Could we please have some—?

A pitcher of water suddenly drops in, and shatters in a really loud crash combined with what sounds like a large splash, then water dripping. We see a single white flower in a puddle among the pieces of the broken vase.

(looking at the water) Man. What a waste.

They all disappear. The dripping sounds flow into reverberations of gently lapping water. Aika floats onstage, slowly and almost luxuriously. She speaks while she's moving. There is something different about her. Something has changed.

AIKA:

They say he fell. Vincent just fell. He was looking down into the pool before anyone else got there, lost his footing and fell. He must have hit his head. That's the way he drowned.

We begin to see pictures of the beautiful young man, this time draped in black. If possible, he looks even more beautiful in these pictures.

Certainly not what anyone expected to happen at the highest level imaginable of all intercollegiate championship swim meets!

Granted, it was a beautiful fall. According to the few people who saw it. Which is why they didn't realize, before it was too late, that it wasn't on purpose. The fact is, he wasn't supposed to be on the diving board. Or in the stadium, yet. So no one was ready and for once, the cameras weren't on him.

The score-keeper gave him a 10. Of course. She said his form was perfect. That he flew off the board with an incredible burst of energy. Almost as if he'd been propelled by some unseen force. Thrown, even.

Huh.

I bet there's a story there...

End of Play