

*JEFF and TERESA (any ages ~mid-50s or older) are sitting in an inexpensive restaurant at dinnertime. The set can consist of as little as a table, two chairs, and two big laminated menus. Maybe there's the muted sounds of people talking, servers hustling, forks hitting plates in the background.*

*(The lights slowly rise as Jeff is speaking.)*

JEFF: They don't know if she's gonna need more surgery. It might not help. Right now it's like her left eye sits higher on her face than the right, but they can't do anything until the eyeball, like, sinks back into the socket.

TERESA: Can we not talk about this at dinner, please?

JEFF: What do you want to talk about?

TERESA: *(with a sigh)* Well, you know me. I'd love to be talking about how you finished your letter.

*(Jeff nods, considering this.)*

JEFF: Do you have a second choice?

TERESA: Not really.

JEFF: Hmm.

*(Beat.)*

JEFF (cont'd): What do you want to eat?

TERESA: It would take literally ten minutes. Less. An opening, five lines, respectfully yours.

JEFF: I don't doubt it.

TERESA: I could dictate an example.

JEFF: You've offered.

TERESA: You're an absolute ass.

JEFF: Can we not talk about this at dinner?

TERESA: Fine.

*(Beat. Silence. Jeff cranes around, looking for a server.)*

JEFF: Are we gonna get some water?

TERESA: They're slammed.

*(Beat. Silence.)*

JEFF: They said we're getting more rain tomorrow. All weekend. The pond's gonna flood.

*(Beat. Silence. Teresa is studying her menu. Jeff looks around the restaurant.)*

JEFF (cont'd): I like when you can see into the kitchen like this. How you can see the cooks' heads pop up in the window when they put food on the line. It's like the opposite of baby birds.

*(No response from Teresa. Jeff presses on.)*

JEFF (cont'd): Because just their heads peep up over the edge of the nest. And then the waitresses swoop in and grab the plates and swoop off again. Like birds. But here the baby birds are all old men, and they're the ones giving food to the mamas.

*(Jeff looks at Teresa expectantly. No response.)*

JEFF (cont'd): Nothing?

TERESA: *(dolefully)* I just don't know how we're going to explain this to Danny, that's all.

JEFF: He'll come to his own conclusions.

TERESA: *(wounded)* I don't get you.

JEFF: What looks good? I want something pasta. Spaghetti and garlic bread. Mac and cheese.

TERESA: That's too much salt for you today.

JEFF: You think?

TERESA: Get steak and a salad. Just make sure there's no rub on the steak.

JEFF: I don't know if I'm up for steak, considering.

TERESA: What the heck does that mean?

JEFF: I don't think I'm up for steak.

*(Teresa shakes her head and looks at her menu.)*

JEFF (cont'd): What are you getting?

TERESA: I don't know. Chicken salad.

JEFF: There's walnuts in it.

TERESA: Oh. *(sighs)* Then I don't know.

JEFF: You know there's walnuts in their chicken salad.

TERESA: I forget.

*(Long beat. Silence. Jeff fidgets. Teresa doesn't. After a while, Jeff says,)*

JEFF: So I think the Channel 6 weatherman is having an affair the anchorwoman.

*(Teresa's interest is caught in spite of herself. Then she pretends to dismiss the idea.)*

TERESA: C'mon.

JEFF: I'm serious. They're all over each other. They do some repartee that's frankly embarrassing.

TERESA: Which anchor?

JEFF: Bridget Diamantis.

TERESA: Is that eyebrow girl or the underweight one?

JEFF: Eyebrow girl.

TERESA: Good.

JEFF: Good?

TERESA: We shouldn't encourage that other one's eating disorder.

JEFF: What about the weatherman? He's got two DUIs. Should we not encourage his alcoholism?

TERESA: That was years ago.

JEFF: *(scoffing)* Women are always harder on women.

TERESA: So my opinion is because of my gender?

*(Jeff meets Teresa's eye intently – but only for a second. Then he looks at his menu.)*

JEFF: No, 'course not.

TERESA: What were you about to say?

*(Jeff remains looking down for a long beat. Then meets his wife's gaze and says – carefully –)*

JEFF: You're awfully hard on Chrissy.

TERESA: Not because I'm a woman. Because she's a fucking criminal.

*(Jeff stares at Teresa, almost dazed. Then he looks back down at his menu.)*

TERESA (cont'd): What? You think that's impossible?

JEFF: I didn't say anything.

TERESA: Well, say something.

JEFF: What do you want me to say?

TERESA: I want you to acknowledge it's at least *possible* he's a hundred percent, totally innocent and framed.

*(Beat – Jeff looks incredulous.)*

JEFF: ...She would've had to do that to herself.

TERESA: People do it every day.

JEFF: ...Every *day*?

TERESA: You never liked him.

JEFF: Now you're just being ridiculous.

TERESA: But forget for a second that you've chosen not to believe him. If there's even a one in a thousand chance he's telling the truth, you should be on his side. You *have* to be on his side.

*(Jeff doesn't respond immediately. He holds up one hand and thoughtfully examines his fingers.)*

JEFF: You know. They say your pinkie is only as hard as a baby carrot. So you could bite it in half just that easy. *(He looks from his hand to his wife.)* What d'you think? Could you bite off your pinkie?

TERESA: I know I could bite yours off.

*(Jeff laughs.)*

TERESA (cont'd): I'm not kidding.

JEFF: No, I know.

*(Teresa shoots him with a withering look.)*

TERESA: You're a hypocrite. You think you're so progressive, but you're patronizing. Just assume a pretty girl must be so *innocent*, so *pure*. Helpless and sexy, just how men like 'em. You never stop to think that maybe she's manipulating everyone.

JEFF: That's fine, but I'm not trying to write a treatise on feminism. I just don't think she's lying!

*(Beat as the implication of that statement reverberates. Teresa is aghast that he said it out loud.)*

TERESA: Unbelievable.

JEFF: *(ironically, under his breath)* The opposite, actually.

*(Teresa stands up, grabbing her purse to leave. Jeff lurches across the table to grab her hand.)*

JEFF (cont'd): Sorry, I'm sorry, I couldn't help that one. Please don't strand me here without a ride. You know I never have my phone.

*(Teresa has her back to him and doesn't turn around. But she doesn't pull her hand away, either.)*

TERESA: Unhelpful *and* helpless. If only women found that sexy.

JEFF: Would you sit, please? Let's just eat.

*(Teresa looks around the restaurant for a few seconds, as if weighing her options and not liking any of them. She turns around, glares at Jeff, and – slowly – sits back down.)*

JEFF (cont'd): Thank you.

*(Teresa ignores him and studies the menu, scowling and aloof. After a while,)*

TERESA: What should bring home for Danny? The ribs?

JEFF: Nothing. He can make his own dinner.

*(Jeff says this sharply, causing Teresa to look up sharply.)*

TERESA: He's already going through hell. He doesn't need to know his own dad doesn't believe him.

JEFF: I'm not going to lie to him.

TERESA: How can you be so cold?

JEFF: It's bad enough you bailed him out. It's bad enough you're making him take Nana to the grocery store every day so everyone can see what a nice young man.

TERESA: I'm not *making* him.

JEFF: The woman doesn't even need the groceries. They're piling up. The fruit's starting to rot.

TERESA: And don't say *I* bailed him out. You did that too.

JEFF: I...

*(Jeff trails off. He can't deny it.)*

TERESA: Why are you blaming me for all this? But no, I know why. Because it's always the mother's fault.

JEFF: I don't blame you.

TERESA: You better not.

JEFF: I blame him.

TERESA: He didn't *do* anything.

*(Beat. Silence.)*

TERESA (cont'd): Don't just sit there in silence, it's so annoying. Say whatever it is you're thinking.

JEFF: *(evenly)* I think if you had eaten a walnut, we'd've had to race to the hospital, and I'd probably have felt so bad for you that I'd've just written the letter.

*(Teresa opens her mouth indignantly – then shuts it. She fixes Jeff with a long, cold look.)*

TERESA: Still think I couldn't bite off my finger?

JEFF: My God.

TERESA: You, meanwhile, won't write a letter to save your son's life.

JEFF: He's not going to die. He's going to prison.

TERESA: He *will* go to prison. Just because you just fully *believe* some woman you don't even know.

JEFF: Seems like the judge believes her too.

TERESA: *Bullshit*. You're projecting. She hasn't said anything yet.

JEFF: You're getting so worked up about these letters, but they're just character references, they don't *mean* anything.

TERESA: Oh, it means something.

JEFF: And we *do* know Chrissy.

TERESA: We had dinner twice. You don't know someone after two dinners.

JEFF: *(nonjudgmentally)* You're a piece of work.

TERESA: Maybe. But I don't deserve this.

*(Beat; Jeff says softly,)*

JEFF: No.

TERESA: I don't deserve for you to abandon me during the worst thing we've gone through.

JEFF: I'm not abandoning you. I'm just not doing what you want.

TERESA: How's it gonna look to the judge if his own father won't write a letter?

*(Jeff pauses, looking away.)*

JEFF: ...I think it's possible – just possible – that prison might do him some good.

TERESA: *(passionately)* Not if *he didn't do anything*.

JEFF: *(snapping)* You keep telling me to think about the chance he's being framed. Well, there's more than a chance he did it, Tess. You know that by now. You ever think about that?

*(Teresa, for the first time, looks thrown off balance, disoriented – vulnerable. She says slowly,)*

TERESA: I... We don't know what happened that day. We don't know how – what might have been going on. What she might have said –

JEFF: Jesus, Teresa.

TERESA: A person loses their temper for one second, and then...

*(Teresa trails off.)*

JEFF: I'd keep that out of my letter, if I were you.

TERESA: I *know* he didn't do anything. That's not the point. I'm just saying, I could see how a person, hypothetically...

*(Teresa meets Jeff's eye, and she hardens back up a little.)*

TERESA (cont'd): I just mean, I can understand how a person could wind up doing almost anything. Can't you? If you tried? They call bad things 'inhumane,' but it's the opposite. Those things are human. Those things *happen*.

JEFF: What things happen?

TERESA: You know what we're talking about.

JEFF: But I need you say it out loud.

*(Teresa looks wounded.)*

TERESA: You're mean to me.

JEFF: What we're talking about broke her cheekbone.

TERESA: You're not even listening to me.

*(Silence. They both look around the restaurant, impatient but too exhausted to fight. After a minute,)*

TERESA (cont'd): That thing about line cooks and baby birds. That's something Danny said, isn't it?

JEFF: Yeah.

TERESA: Thief.

JEFF: I didn't have anything else to say.

TERESA: I'm not gonna turn my back on him.

JEFF: I'm not turning my back on him, either –

TERESA: In what world are you not? Trying to clear your own conscience by feeding him to the wolves.

JEFF: Is that what you think of me?

TERESA: I don't think it. I see it.

*(Beat. When Jeff can't look at Teresa anymore, he starts looking around for a server, patience exhausted.)*

JEFF: They forgot about us. I'm gonna go get the hostess, this is ridiculous. I need water.

TERESA: Jeff.

*(Jeff, who had half-risen from his seat, sits back down. When he does, Teresa can't look at him and looks down at her menu instead.)*

TERESA (cont'd): I'll leave you if you don't write that letter.

JEFF: I know.

*(This kills Teresa. Long beat. Finally, Teresa looks up from her menu, affecting cool composure. She clears her throat.)*

TERESA: So. Do you know what you want?

*(Lights out. END SCENE.)*