

Morisot
Reclining

A play by

William C. Kovacsik

MORISOT RECLINING

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Cast of characters

BERTHE MORISOT

EDOUARD MANET

EDGAR DEGAS

The actor playing DEGAS also portrays:

CORNELIE MORISOT (all but one scene, see below)

PIERRE PUVIS De CHAVANNES

MONSIEUR GUICHARD

MONSIEUR DeSALES

EUGENE MANET

MARY CASSATT

The actress playing CASSATT also portrays:

EDMA MORISOT

VICTORINE MEURENT

SUZANNE MANET

CORNELIE MORISOT (in one scene)

A YOUNG MODEL

The setting

Various parts of France in the second half of the 19th Century. The stage should have a large platform upstage, used by Degas and Cassatt. This platform should contain two period chairs, and two period armoires, from which Degas and Cassatt remove various costume pieces as they portray different characters. Downstage of this platform is a large open space. The entire set is surrounded by easels of varying sizes, some of them quite impossibly huge.

This play is dedicated to Maureen McGranaghan and Sarah Early – muses with very distinct voices.

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MORISOT RECLINING received its premiere production by the Boulder Ensemble Theatre Company at the Dairy Center for the Performing Arts in Boulder, Colorado on April 24, 2009.

The cast and crew were as follows:

Berthe Morisot.....Karen Slack
Edouard Manet.....Stephen Weitz
Edgar Degas.....Matthew Mueller
Mary Cassatt.....Lindsey Pierce
Young Model.....Ashley Simpson

Director.....Rebecca Remaly
Production Stage Manager.....Amy Scura
Stage Manager.....Amy Cole
Costume Design.....Brenda King
Set Design.....Tina Anderson
Lighting/Projection Design.....Mitch Dickman
Sound Design.....John Thornberry

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ACT I

The stage is entirely dark; from out of nowhere, EDGAR DEGAS appears. He seems a bit confused. Dim light rises and reveals an easel, a canvas, brushes and paints. He looks around for a subject, but there is none. He sighs. Suddenly, a YOUNG WOMAN, naked except for a towel, appears. Degas smiles; he beckons to the Young Woman, who obligingly poses, drying herself as if she has just been bathing. Degas begins to paint her. MARY CASSATT enters.

CASSATT. Degas.

DEGAS. Yes?

CASSATT. What are you doing?

DEGAS. You can see perfectly well what I'm doing. I'm working.

CASSATT. But you're dead.

DEGAS. I was dead. Now, I'm working. Consequently, I must either be back from the dead, or else being dead is no longer an impediment to my work. In either case, I'm happy to be painting a new canvas. If you're here, you must be in the same position. May I suggest that you take advantage of this opportunity and get to work yourself?

CASSATT. Degas.

DEGAS. *What? (Cassatt points, discreetly, at the audience.)*
Who are these people?

CASSATT. I believe they're...an audience.

DEGAS. An...audience?

CASSATT. The lights make it very difficult to see, but I think we're in a theatre.

DEGAS. That seems very unlikely.

CASSATT. I agree, but...

DEGAS. Yes, it does look like a theatre. How extraordinary.

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CASSATT. Degas.

DEGAS. Yes? (*Cassatt gestures to the naked model.*) Ah, yes. (*to the Young Woman.*) I'm sorry, my dear, it seems we've been interrupted. Perhaps you could come back later?

YOUNG WOMAN. Yes, monsieur. (*The Young Woman exits.*)

DEGAS. Now what do we do?

CASSATT. I suppose we could introduce ourselves. (*Degas ponders this for a moment, then gathers himself up and steps forward.*)

DEGAS. I am Degas. You know me. You've seen the paintings – the race horses – (*One of Degas' paintings of a horse race is projected on the back wall.*) the ballet dancers – (*One of Degas' paintings of the backstage of the ballet is projected.*) the naked women bathing. (*Nothing on the wall. Cassatt nudges Degas, after which one of his paintings of a naked bather is projected.*) I needn't tell you how good I was – if you have any taste, you already know. This is Cassatt.

CASSATT. Mary Cassatt.

DEGAS. You don't know her.

CASSATT. Some people might.

DEGAS. Art historians, perhaps. For the benefit of the majority, however, we should explain that you're a painter also.

CASSATT. How good a painter?

DEGAS. A very good painter indeed.

CASSATT. He would say that. I was his protégé.

DEGAS. She certainly was.

CASSATT. Not *that* kind of protégé. Get your mind out of the gutter.

DEGAS. But it's so much at home there.

CASSATT. Pervert.

DEGAS. We all revert to type, my dear. But let's not have the people guess. Let's show them how talented you were.

CASSATT. As you wish, monsieur.

DEGAS. She was good enough to have painted this... (*Cassatt's painting "The Boating Party" is projected on the wall.*) And this... (*Cassatt's "Little Girl in a Blue Armchair" is projected.*) And my personal favorite... (*Cassatt's "Woman with a Pearl*

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Necklace in a Loge” is projected; Degas looks out over the audience.) So. That should remove any doubt about my estimation of her talent. If there’s anyone who disagrees, let them leave now. I won’t waste my time on you. Are there any idiots in the room...? No? Good. Where were we? Ah. She was my protégé.

CASSATT. We talked. About painting.

DEGAS. Sometimes about the weather.

CASSATT. Sometimes about the latest gossip in Paris.

DEGAS. I never gossip.

CASSATT. You’re the most incurable gossip I’ve ever met.

DEGAS. Mostly we talked about painting.

CASSATT. Mostly.

DEGAS. And I would have said you were a very good painter even if you hadn’t been my protégé. (*Degas speaks directly to the audience.*) That’s who we are. Now, who are you and what do you want?

CASSATT. Degas, there’s no need to be rude.

DEGAS. I’m not being rude, I’m simply asking them –

CASSATT. You were brusque.

DEGAS. Well, they’ve called us back from the dead. Surely they must want *something*. Don’t we have a right to know?

CASSATT. Look at this. (*Cassatt pulls out a playbill and hands it to Degas.*)

DEGAS. *Morisot Reclining*. That’s the title? Of the...play, I presume?

CASSATT. Yes. One of his portraits of her. Maybe they want to know more about her.

DEGAS. Maybe they want to know more about both of them.

CASSATT. Ah. Well, they came to the right people, didn’t they?

DEGAS. Indeed they did. (*Cassatt speaks to the audience.*)

CASSATT. We should explain. We never faced any of the problems that arise when two friends become...entangled.

DEGAS. Our friend, however -- Another painter –

CASSATT. Another good painter –

DEGAS. Very good indeed.

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CASSATT. Was not so lucky. (*BERTHE enters downstage, to one side.*) Her name was –

DEGAS. Berthe Morisot. (*EDOUARD enters downstage, on the opposite side from Berthe.*)

CASSATT. And the man: Edouard Manet.

DEGAS. The only painter of the age with a reputation that rivaled mine.

CASSATT. But to the point...where should we start?

DEGAS. Where the life of every artist begins. The moment when they decide to pick up a brush, put pen to paper –

CASSATT. Or step on a stage?

DEGAS. Just so...Shall we?

CASSATT. Yes, I suppose we shall.

DEGAS. After you.

CASSATT. One day, when she was still young, her mother called Berthe and her sister – how would we portray the mother, Madame Cornелиe Morisot, if we were to put her image on canvas, Monsieur Degas?

DEGAS. We would make her solid, of course...

CASSATT. Respectable...

DEGAS. In a bourgeois manner, yes...

CASSATT. But also warm...

DEGAS. Oh, yes...

CASSATT. And her sister, Edma?

DEGAS. Slight of build...

CASSATT. Fragile.

DEGAS. I agree.

CASSATT. And perhaps just a little sad?

DEGAS. Definitely.

CASSATT. That sounds like me. Which means that you'll have to play the mother. (*Cassatt tosses a costume for CORNELIE to Degas.*)

DEGAS. But I'm not solid, respectable or warm.

CASSATT. True.

DEGAS. I'm also not a woman.

CASSATT. No. But I'm sure you'll manage to overcome the handicap of being a man. Berthe's mother called her and her

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sister, and announced – (*Degas hesitates.*) Go ahead. (*Cassatt, as EDMA, goes downstage, and gestures to Degas to join her.*)

She announced:

DEGAS. (*as Cornелиe*) Your father's name-day is coming up. It might be nice if both of you were to draw a portrait of him.

You're both to have art lessons. Apart from the pleasure it will give your father, it's time for you to acquire some knowledge of the arts. It's an adornment for a girl who would make a good match. (*Degas speaks to Cassatt.*) Well, that was humiliating.

CASSATT. You're not finished yet.

DEGAS. (*To audience.*) They met at the Louvre. He was already famous.

CASSATT. She was not.

DEGAS. She was copying the old masters.

CASSATT. Which we all did at one time or another. It was just slightly scandalous for a woman to paint at the Louvre, so she was chaperoned by her mother -- who passed the time by knitting. (*Cassatt points; Degas as Cornелиe sits on a stool to one side of the stage and knits as paintings of the old masters are projected on the back wall.*)

DEGAS. They copied... (*Degas as Cornелиe has the beginnings of a scarf... more old masters are projected.*) And copied... (*More old masters. Degas as Cornелиe has a scarf of modest length.*) And when they grew tired of copying, one would remind the other –

EDMA. If it was good enough for Manet, it should be good enough for us.

BERTHE. Manet? Edouard Manet?

EDMA. Exactly. Guichard says Manet spent months here, drinking in these paintings, then copying. He didn't think about doing anything of his own until he had absorbed everything this place has to offer. Neither should we. But I'm worried about maman...

CORNELIE. Don't concern yourself about me, I'll keep knitting. (*Degas as Cornелиe has a scarf of absurd length.*)

CASSATT. (*To audience.*) And so they copied more... (*More old masters are projected.*)

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DEGAS. Until one day...Manet turned up. (*Edouard crosses to Berthe and Edma.*)

EDOUARD. So these are the famous Morisot sisters.

EDMA. Famous, Monsieur?

EDOUARD. Two sisters, both serious painters, with some real training. You are both rather rare birds, Mademoiselle. You must expect your fame to precede you. I've been watching you work.

BERTHE. Monsieur.

EDOUARD. You have gifts, Mademoiselle. Rather extensive gifts, I should say.

BERTHE. Monsieur is too kind.

EDOUARD. Whether I am kind at all is something I must leave to my friends – and perhaps to my enemies – to decide. One thing that both groups would undoubtedly agree on is that I have never been *too* kind. I am, however, an honest man – my one genuine virtue. And I can assure you that my estimate of your talent as a painter is colored by nothing other than the truth. If you would vouchsafe me the honor of seeing some of your own work, I would be most grateful.

BERTHE. My family entertains on Tuesday evenings, Monsieur. We would be honored by your presence.

EDOUARD. Thank you, Mademoiselle. You may count on my visit. It has been an uncommon pleasure to meet you. (*Edouard exits.*)

BERTHE. Edma!

EDMA. Manet! I can't even catch my breath! He liked our work!

BERTHE. I can hardly believe it.

EDMA. I can hardly believe you invited him to the house. What will maman say?

BERTHE. There's only one way to find out. Maman!

CORNELIE. Yes, my dear?

EDMA. The gentleman we just met –

CORNELIE. Is he a gentleman?

BERTHE. His name is Manet, his family is –

CORNELIE. I've heard of them, they're quite respectable.

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BERTHE. I've invited him for Tuesday.

CORNELIE. Hmm.

EDMA. We should warn you --

BERTHE. He's a painter.

CORNELIE. Hmm. He *was* well-dressed. Not like these... weathercocks we meet here, clad only in rags. I suppose it's all right.

BERTHE. Excellent. *(Cornelie holds up the scarf she has been knitting, which is now of almost impossible length.)*

CASSATT. *(To audience.)* And so, on the following Tuesday... *(The Louvre disappears. Cassatt and Degas cross to the upstage platform. Cross-fade to the Morisot home. Edouard enters.)*

BERTHE. You do our home honor, Monsieur.

EDOUARD. The honor is mine, I assure you. And now that we have satisfied the bare minimum requirements for civilized people greeting each other, let me see your work.

BERTHE. Monsieur, such a rush. And here I was, after our first meeting, believing that you were the soul of gallantry.

EDOUARD. My dear Mademoiselle, whoever told you that a painter could be a gallant left you terribly deceived. Are you afraid of what I'll say?

BERTHE. Yes.

EDOUARD. You must never care what people say, Mademoiselle. Let them see what you have done. If they understand it and approve, so much the better. If they understand it and do not approve, well, everyone has the right to an opinion. If they don't understand it at all, then why care about what they think? *(They cross the stage to one of the easels. Edouard looks at one of Berthe's paintings.)* It's exceptional. You must enter it for this year's Salon.

BERTHE. Monsieur, I could hardly --

EDOUARD. Nonsense, you must submit it.

BERTHE. Oh, Monsieur, it's nothing at all like what I intended to capture.

EDOUARD. Nonetheless, it's superb.

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BERTHE. Thank you, Monsieur. Given the handicaps we face, my sister and I do the best we can to learn.

EDOUARD. And what would you judge to be the worst of these handicaps?

BERTHE. Things you would no doubt take for granted.

EDOUARD. Such as...?

BERTHE. When you wish to paint a particular subject, what do you do?

EDOUARD. I arrange my studio and I paint it.

BERTHE. If you wanted to work out of doors, let's say.

EDOUARD. It's something that never tempts me, I'm afraid.

BERTHE. But if it did -- ?

EDOUARD. I would take my easel and go where I found a subject I wished to put on canvas.

BERTHE. Precisely. But Edma and I don't have that freedom. We can't venture out without a chaperone, whereas any man can go wherever he pleases, whenever he chooses to go. When you want to talk to your colleagues, you go to a café, do you not?

EDOUARD. We often frequent the Café Guerbois.

BERTHE. And so you keep up with what other artists are doing, you talk over your day's work, you learn from others and I daresay they learn from you. My sister and I can hardly show ourselves in a café.

EDOUARD. You miss this, then? Talking with other artists?

BERTHE. More than I can express.

EDOUARD. Then we must remedy that, in whatever way we can. While I can hardly invite you along for a few drinks at the café, I think I have a way to give you some of what you crave. With your indulgence, and with your mother as a chaperone, you must model for me. (*Berthe is thunderstruck.*) If the idea is disagreeable to you, of course, then –

BERTHE. No! It's not that –

EDOUARD. Then what is it, Mademoiselle?

BERTHE. I'm – I can hardly – you're the greatest artist of the age, Monsieur. Why do you want to paint me?

EDOUARD. Perhaps you'll know why after you see the likeness I make of you. Actually, I have a project in mind. It

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involves a group of figures – you’ll see. Can you come tomorrow?

BERTHE. Yes. Monsieur.

EDOUARD. Excellent.

DEGAS. And thus a classic painting was born.

CASSATT. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. The painting is not yet finished.

DEGAS. Of course. *(Degas and Cassatt cross upstage. Cross-fade to Edouard’s studio; Berthe enters.)*

EDOUARD. Mademoiselle, a thousand thanks for once again giving me your time. It’s an unforgivable imposition on my part.

BERTHE. Monsieur, you forget – I also paint. I’ve imposed on my sister and my mother to sit for a thousand hours.

EDOUARD. I assure you, Mademoiselle, I had not forgotten you were a painter. Not for a single second. I was merely observing the forms.

BERTHE. *Pardon.* Where are Madame Claus and Monsieur Guillemet?

EDOUARD. I’m done with them. There’s nothing more for me to paint.

BERTHE. Ah. So they won’t be here?

EDOUARD. Does it disturb you?

BERTHE. Well...

EDOUARD. What is it?

BERTHE. My maman was detained, she can’t be here today.

EDOUARD. I see.

BERTHE. And it might be considered --

EDOUARD. Odd?

BERTHE. -- inappropriate, for me to be here alone.

EDOUARD. Are you afraid that I’ll do something...untoward?
(Pause.)

BERTHE. No.

EDOUARD. It’s undoubtedly a grievous faux pas for me to admit this, but it’s truly gratifying to hear the uncertainty in your voice as you say that. Regrettably, I am a gentleman. And nothing will happen here that you don’t desire.

BERTHE. Thank you, Monsieur.

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EDOUARD. (*Laughing.*) You're welcome. Is Puvis still pestering you with his attentions?

BERTHE. Monsieur de Chavannes continues to call at our home, if that's what you mean.

EDOUARD. Marriage to that good man holds no attractions for you?

BERTHE. The way you call him a "good man" makes me believe you know exactly how much attraction such a person might hold for me.

EDOUARD. (*Laughing.*) I knew you were an intelligent woman the moment I met you.

BERTHE. You seem to connect intelligence and a rejection of Puvis de Chavannes as propositions that are inextricably connected.

EDOUARD. Are you implying that they're not?

BERTHE. No.

EDOUARD. Then you tell me: why would you, an undeniably intelligent woman, find such a match unsuitable?

BERTHE. Because he's so utterly convinced that he's right, even when there's not much evidence to support that idea. There's not a single stroke of originality in him, and there never will be.

EDOUARD. Bravo, Mademoiselle!

BERTHE. You're laughing at me.

EDOUARD. No, Mademoiselle – whether you know it or not, I'm laughing *with* you. You may be bound by conventions, just as I am. But you don't believe in them, any more than I do.

BERTHE. How do you know that?

EDOUARD. You're a bourgeois woman who reject suitors as if they were so much chaff, just so you can paint. If that's not unconventional, I hardly know what is.

BERTHE. You're quite brutal, aren't you?

EDOUARD. No, I am just truthful, that's all; and the truth is neither brutal, nor gentle. It's just the truth. (*Edouard paints.*) Tell me about your work.

BERTHE. What is there to say?

EDOUARD. Does it proceed as you would wish?

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BERTHE. I...I stand in front of the canvas, and it's as if I'm standing at the edge of a great abyss. It's as if I'm about to be annihilated – it makes me want to run away, to do anything but paint...and yet I don't run. And then, when I am done with a canvas, weeks or months might pass, I go back to look at it, and I feel sick when I see what I've done. Everything seems so trivial, so unfinished. I want never to paint again.

EDOUARD. And yet you do. You pick up the brushes and go back to work.

BERTHE. Yes. It's as if I'm in love with this sense of disaster. If only I could do one canvas that was at least good, even if it didn't do everything I hoped, if it was *good* – (*Edouard laughs.*)

EDOUARD. It's as if I was listening to myself speak ten years ago. 'If only I did something truly fine, it would make me feel better!' How absurd I was. Do you honestly believe you can truly be an artist without these doubts, these fears?

BERTHE. But it's so frustrating! You start with an idea, or an image...

EDOUARD. But no matter how strongly it seems to live in our mind --

BERTHE. When you pick up your brush, suddenly, it's impossible. We strive, we try to grasp it, but –

EDOUARD. ...before we've even heard its echo, that truth recedes from us. And capturing that same truth on the canvas – *that one moment of honest life* -- it's like trying to catch a butterfly with a net that's full of holes.

BERTHE. What you said just now – have you ever said that to another human being?

EDOUARD. No.

BERTHE. What I would give...to paint one moment of that truth. I would give everything I have, everything I would ever have...(*Berthe looks off to the side, with a look of such longing that it seems her heart will break at that moment.*)

EDOUARD. Stop. Don't move! (*Berthe turns to look at him for the briefest second, then looks off to the side again, as if there is something new she has realized in that instant. Berthe exits as a*

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detail from “The Balcony” – a close-up of Berthe’s face in that painting – is projected.)

DEGAS. Just try to imagine that painting without Morisot’s face. You’ll find that it’s quite impossible.

CASSATT. The man is a standard, self-satisfied bourgeoisie.

DEGAS. The other woman, a cowed little wisp of a thing. But Morisot...

CASSATT. And at moments like that, when you see something –

DEGAS. An intimation of what you’ve been hoping to achieve –

CASSATT. Your breath stops. How lucky she was.

DEGAS. You envy her?

CASSATT. Yes.

DEGAS. But *we* talked about art.

CASSATT. I know.

DEGAS. Then why –

CASSATT. Don’t concern yourself. It’s nothing, really. We should tell them about those other moments of revelation –

DEGAS. Yes. Moments when you admit to yourself what you’ve been feeling all along. *(Cassatt, as Edma, joins Berthe downstage. They carry easels and a case containing their painting equipment. They both wear sun hats.)*

EDMA. You can see the entire valley! It’s magnificent!

BERTHE. Yes!

EDMA. And look – over in the distance – the harbor! What will you paint?

BERTHE. The mother and child – over there.

EDMA. With the butterfly net?

BERTHE. Yes. I’d paint the ships in the harbor, except that your friend would no doubt tell me how many details I got wrong when I painted the sails, and how all the masts were in the wrong place.

EDMA. He can’t help it, he’s a naval officer. It’s the way we feel when we see a painting where the brushstrokes are clumsy. It matters more to us because it’s what we do.

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BERTHE. Well, I wouldn't want to offend your dear Adolphe -
- my future brother in-law.

EDMA. Bite your tongue!

BERTHE. You can't say you haven't thought of it. Mother mentions his name at every possible opportunity, she must have ordered your trousseau already.

EDMA. Berthe!

BERTHE. He wants to marry you, it's obvious to everyone.

EDMA. What he wants is only half the question, though, isn't it?

BERTHE. Are you saying it's not what you want?

EDMA. I'm saying I have other things on my mind. And I hear enough of this from Maman, every morning, noon and night. It's so gorgeous here, please, don't spoil the day.

BERTHE. I won't say another word. What are *you* going to paint?

EDMA. The wildflowers on the hill.

BERTHE. A good choice.

EDMA. Look at this! The sky, the hillside – and an entire day to paint. When you told Guichard that you wanted to paint outdoors, I thought he was going to start frothing at the mouth!
(Degas, as GUICHARD, speaks from the upstage platform.)

GUICHARD. Ladies don't paint outdoors! No one of any value paints outdoors!

BERTHE. Don't be too hard on Guichard. He did introduce us to the Louvre.

EDMA. But he had grown so tiresome!

GUICHARD. There's nothing in nature that you can't produce perfectly well from the safety of your studio!

EDMA. As if we had a studio! At least not one of our own.

BERTHE. He worried about us. As Maman worries. As everyone who knows us worries.

EDMA. I wish there was one person, just one person, who would say to us "Yes! What you do is worthwhile! Do what you have to do!"

BERTHE. Manet says what we do is good.

EDMA. He's hardly objective.

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BERTHE. Just because he likes us, doesn't me that he can't –

EDMA. It's not "us" he likes...

BERTHE. You're dreaming. He likes us both equally well.

EDMA. I don't recall having been asked to pose for him. Don't worry, I won't mention it again.

BERTHE. Thank you. *(Pause; they paint.)*

EDMA. Berthe?

BERTHE. Yes?

EDMA. What if we were to really do this?

BERTHE. Do what?

EDMA. To paint. Not as a diversion, not as an "adornment" – but to really paint seriously. Do you think we could?

BERTHE. As for the skill, I'm quite certain you have it. As for myself –

EDMA. You know you have it. Is it what you want?

BERTHE. I hate painting. I hate the imperfection of it, I hate the way I feel when I do it.

EDMA. But...

BERTHE. It's life, isn't it?

EDMA. Yes.

BERTHE. But...can we cope with all the people who will remind us of everything we're giving up?

EDMA. Together – we might be able to stand against them all.

BERTHE. Then we'll have to stay together, won't we? Always. *(Edma reaches out her hand toward Berthe; Berthe takes it.)*

But we won't make any headway if we waste this amazing sunshine. Let's work. *(They paint; Morisot's painting "Chasing Butterflies" is projected. As the lights cross-fade to the Morisot home in Passy, Berthe exits. Cassatt returns to the upstage platform.)*

CASSATT. And after that simple conversation –

DEGAS. Again?

CASSATT. Again. *(Degas dons the costume as Cornelia.)*

Certain steps were taken...*(The sounds of hammering and sawing are heard. Offstage, workman's voices rise above the din as the sounds of construction grow louder. Degas as Cornelia crosses downstage. Berthe enters from the side.)*

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BERTHE. No, no, no! The window must be bigger! We need more light!

CORNELIE. What is all this? What's going on?

BERTHE. Just a bit of building, Maman.

CORNELIE. What on earth are you talking about?!

BERTHE. We're building a studio.

CORNELIE. What!?

BERTHE. We need a place to work. We cleared out the hibiscus in the corner –

CORNELIE. My hibiscus!

BERTHE. You hate hibiscus. They make you sneeze.

CORNELIE. That doesn't mean I wanted them gone!

(Cassatt, as Edma, enters, brushing sawdust from her dress.)

EDMA. It's coming along beautifully!

CORNELIE. What have you been doing?

EDMA. One of the workmen was kind enough to teach me how to saw boards. Isn't it marvelous?

CORNELIE. I'm feeling faint.

EDMA. It's not that bad.

BERTHE. You were the one who wanted us to have art lessons all those years ago.

CORNELIE. But all this –

BERTHE. It's the only way we can get any real work done. Surely you understand.

CORNELIE. I understand that I never expected –

EDMA. It's a way of being taken seriously, maman.

BERTHE. It's a way of saying that we've decided to live, and not hide.

CORNELIE. How was I to know –

BERTHE. That one day our foolish obsession would lead to the destruction of flowers you've never even liked? I don't know, Maman. I truly don't know. *(Berthe exits; Cassatt crosses upstage.)*

CORNELIE. My hibiscus. *(Degas crosses upstage.)*

CASSATT. One of the occupational hazards of being an artist is a perpetual sense of insecurity. At one time or another, we all feel it.

MORISOT RECLINING

DEGAS. I never did. (*Cassatt looks at Degas.*) Can I help it if I never doubted myself?

CASSATT. Most of us spend far too much time wondering if anyone will ever like our work.

DEGAS. Which leaves you at the mercy of everyone else's bad taste. (*Berthe comes onstage holding a brush and a palette. She throws them on the floor, just as Cassatt/Edma enters.*)

EDMA. What's wrong?

BERTHE. Manet is a beast! I could happily shoot him! It began when I decided to finish the portrait of you and maman and – at last – submit it as an entry for this year's Salon. I hadn't shown it to anyone, and, in a fit of complete stupidity, I asked Puvis to look at it first.

DEGAS. Thus Puvis de Chavannes enters our story.

CASSATT. Another painter.

DEGAS. A bad painter.

CASSATT. Very bad.

DEGAS. Miss Cassatt, how should we paint de Chavannes?

CASSATT. With a thin head, a thin nose –

DEGAS. And a thin soul?

CASSATT. Exactly.

DEGAS. Now *this* is a role that's meant for me. (*Degas as PIERRE PUVIS de CHAVANNES enters. Edma, in the present moment, stands to one side and watches the flashback.*)

BERTHE. I'm most grateful to you for coming.

De CHAVANNES. Don't be silly, I always enjoy your work, even when you're at your most...challenging, shall we say?

BERTHE. I need to know if –

De CHAVANNES. Yes?

BERTHE. If you think it's ready to submit.

De CHAVANNES. For the Salon?

BERTHE. Yes.

De CHAVANNES. Waiting until the last minute, I see.

BERTHE. Yes, well...

De CHAVANNES. My dear Berthe. What a contradiction. Such a lioness in her personal life, yet such a shy flower when it comes to her work.

MORISOT RECLINING

BERTHE. Hardly a lioness, monsieur.

De CHAVANNES. I beg to differ, mademoiselle. You turn down proposals as if they were mere drops of rain, sure that there will never be a drought. Even proposals made by those of us who esteem you as much for your talent as for your beauty –

BERTHE. Monsieur, if my feelings were such that I could –

De CHAVANNES. I wasn't trying to open up old wounds, my dear. You must forgive me if I gave that impression.

BERTHE. It's all right. Perhaps we should look at the portrait.

De CHAVANNES. Of course. (*Berthe unveils the painting. De Chavannes surveys it for a long time.*) Hmm. Yes. (*He looks at the painting again, for an even longer period.*) Um.

BERTHE. What is it?

De CHAVANNES. There's so much in it that's quite wonderful.

BERTHE. But...?

De CHAVANNES. But what?

BERTHE. There was something that made you hesitate.

De CHAVANNES. It's perhaps a small thing...

BERTHE. What is it?

De CHAVANNES. Really, in all likelihood, I shouldn't even –

BERTHE. Tell me, for God's sake!

De CHAVANNES. Well...it's just...your mother's head. It's not there, it's not done.

BERTHE. What do you think I should do to fix it? (*De Chavannes looks again at the painting. Another eternity passes.*) Monsieur?

De CHAVANNES. I'm sorry I can't be more specific...as far as I can see, it's just...I'm not sure there's any way you can...if you see what I mean...I don't know if it can be...fixed.

BERTHE. I see.

De CHAVANNES. It's a trifle, really, in a painting that has all of the charm and delicacy your work always contains.

BERTHE. Thank you.

De CHAVANNES. If I've offended in any way –

BERTHE. Not at all. If you had been anything less than candid, how could I consider you my friend?

MORISOT RECLINING

De CHAVANNES. Your regard flatters me.

BERTHE. Nonsense, monsieur.

De CHAVANNES. I'm afraid I must take my leave, my own work calls...Really, the portrait is –

BERTHE. Flawed, of course, you're right. I haven't been working well lately. You were so kind to come.

De CHAVANNES. My dear Berthe, I am at your disposal at any time.

BERTHE. Again, my thanks.

De CHAVANNES. Au revoir. (*Degas as De Chavannes crosses upstage. Berthe crosses to Edma.*)

BERTHE. As if I hadn't been enough of a fool to ask Puvis for an opinion, I then compounded my mistake by asking Manet to look at the painting. (*Edouard enters.*)

EDOUARD. And what crisis inspired the charming Mademoiselle Morisot to summon me to her home this morning?

BERTHE. Puvis saw it.

EDOUARD. The portrait of –

BERTHE. Of Edma and my mother, yes.

EDOUARD. What of it?

BERTHE. He said my mother's head wasn't finished.

EDOUARD. Is he right?

BERTHE. I don't know!

EDOUARD. You do realize he's an imbecile?

BERTHE. But if he's right –

EDOUARD. The odds against that are staggering.

BERTHE. He said my work was like me: "charming and delicate."

EDOUARD. He doesn't know you very well, does he? Now listen. Puvis is so stupid, it makes me doubt he was actually born in this country. Surely there must be some way France can disclaim him. Truly, it's embarrassing to share the same nationality with that man.

BERTHE. Why did I ask you to come here? So I could listen to you make a joke out of everything?

EDOUARD. Within living memory, you said that I was the greatest artist of the age. Do you still believe that? (*Berthe turns*

MORISOT RECLINING

to face Edouard.) All right, then. Now stop worrying, and let me see the painting. (Berthe picks up a palette and brush as Edouard takes in the painting, briefly. Degas as Cornelia enters and stands behind Edouard as he looks at the portrait.)

BERTHE. Well?

EDOUARD. Puvis is full of utter rubbish. There's nothing wrong with your mother's head.

CORNELIE. Thank you, Monsieur Manet. I've always held that opinion myself.

EDOUARD. Madame Morisot, always a great – no, a *distinct* – pleasure.

CORNELIE. Whatever your other eccentricities, it's comforting that you know a good head when you see one.

BERTHE. So it's all right.

EDOUARD. No, it's not "all right." It's quite perfect.

CORNELIE. I told her, but she wouldn't listen.

EDOUARD. It's exquisite, actually.

CORNELIE. Do you hear this? An exquisite head.

BERTHE. Yes, maman.

EDOUARD. Of course, there is – *(Edouard reaches for the palette.)* May I?

BERTHE. Of course.

EDOUARD. Just right here, in the bottom part of the dress. *(Edouard applies small dabs of paint to the canvas.)* Just a little flick here and there, you see?

BERTHE. Ah.

EDOUARD. There. Nothing to it. *(Edouard hands the palette back to Berthe.)*

CORNELIE. Oh, yes. Yes. That's very good.

EDOUARD. Madame.

CORNELIE. It looks so real!

EDOUARD. And now it's done. *(All three stand back to admire the portrait.)* Ah, ah, ah! Look!

BERTHE. What?

EDOUARD. Here, on the skirt, just here, around the waist.

BERTHE. Where?

EDOUARD. Here! *(Berthe offers the palette to Edouard.)*

MORISOT RECLINING

BERTHE. Do you want to...?

EDOUARD. No, no, no – why don't you...right here.

BERTHE. You think?

EDOUARD. Just a touch, perhaps.

BERTHE. Like so? *(Berthe applies a touch of paint to the canvas.)*

EDOUARD. That's good, that's good. Maybe a bit more...

(Berthe paints, then looks to Edouard to see if she's getting it.)

Yes, but – *(Edouard gestures, trying to mimic the kind of brushstroke he thinks Berthe should apply. She hesitates.)*

EDOUARD. Allow me. *(Edouard takes the palette and applies a few brushstrokes to the painting.)*

BERTHE. Thank you, Monsieur.

EDOUARD. And here...*(Edouard applies a few more brushstrokes.)*

BERTHE. I see.

EDOUARD. Perhaps a bit of shading around the elbow.

(and a few more...)

BERTHE. Yes, I could –

EDOUARD. Here, at the bodice – Madame Morisot, don't you think that makes you look somewhat more –

CORNELIE. Dignified!

EDOUARD. Yes!

CORNELIE. It does!

EDOUARD. Puvis de Chavannes would never dream of *this*, would he?

CORNELIE. I doubt it, Monsieur Manet! I doubt it very much!

BERTHE. If I could – *(...but Edouard is off to the races.*

Berthe slowly retreats as Edouard keeps on painting.)

EDOUARD. Let's add a bit more color to the bouquet on the table...and the shadow on the wall, cast by the frame of the

painting behind them, there could be a bit more – good, good, yes! – Madame Morisot's face, let's see if we can't – there!

(Lights fade on Edouard as he happily paints away. Berthe crosses and resumes speaking to Edma as her painting

“Reading: the Mother and Sister of the Artist,” from 1869-70, is projected.)

MORISOT RECLINING

BERTHE. He had brought messengers with him, who waited at the door until he finished my painting. They took it away and submitted it to the Salon. And he stood there, cracking jokes with maman all the while, oblivious to the fact that I wanted to take a paintbrush and gouge out his eyeballs! It was an outrage. Maman, of course, thinks it's all a huge joke. (*Degas as Cornelia enters.*)

CORNELIE. Really, my dear, you mustn't get so upset. I may not have much use for Monsieur Manet, but he was only trying to help. (*Cornelia exits.*)

BERTHE. The worse part is – it was my own fault. I said nothing! Why? Why did I stand there, as if it was perfectly all right for him to take over my painting? My only hope is that the Salon judges reject it. I couldn't bear to see it hang anywhere in public. (*Berthe exits; Cassatt crosses upstage.*)

CASSATT. Of course, betrayal can take many forms.

DEGAS. Aren't you over-dramatizing just a bit?

CASSATT. People need support, Degas.

DEGAS. Not me. I've never needed anyone. (*Cassatt snorts.*)

CASSATT. Well, some of us do. Morisot included. (*Berthe and Cassatt as Edma enter; Edma models for Morisot's "Reading," from 1873. Berthe paints; as she does so, the painting is projected on the wall. Edma sits on the ground, holding a book. After a moment, Edma puts the book down.*)

BERTHE. What's the matter? Are you tired?

EDMA. I was remembering something.

BERTHE. What?

EDMA. When we first started to work outdoors. You recall? On the hillside at Beuzeval?

BERTHE. I remember.

EDMA. What we said that day made so much possible.

BERTHE. Yes.

EDMA. We said some splendid things.

BERTHE. What is it?

EDMA. You must understand, I meant what I said.

BERTHE. I know.

MORISOT RECLINING

EDMA. And if it was possible for me to go on as we have been, I would.

BERTHE. What are you saying?

EDMA. I thought I could do without any of it, but I find myself --

BERTHE. Edma --

EDMA. You must listen to me --

BERTHE. We can still --

EDMA. Berthe!

BERTHE. Have I -- is there some part of our bargain I haven't lived up to? If there is, then you must tell me. I would do anything, anything to make it possible for you to --

EDMA. I know that! God, I know it, I just --

BERTHE. Don't give up. Please. I don't know if I can -- if you were to --

EDMA. Don't say that, please don't.

BERTHE. It's true.

EDMA. Adolphe has asked me to marry him. *(Silence.)*

It simply became too much. I'm sorry. I am so sorry. *(And Edma is gone. Cassatt crosses upstage. Lights shift so that Berthe is surrounded by the shadows of impossibly huge easels.)*

CASSATT. And when one gets over feeling betrayed, one is not necessarily immune to jealousy.

DEGAS. Of course, even jealousy has its uses.

CASSATT. What do you mean?

DEGAS. Sometimes, those who inspire jealousy in our soul still have things to teach us.

CASSATT. The cost can be high.

DEGAS. Learning always comes with a price, mademoiselle. We should proceed.

CASSATT. Manet's studio, as he works on one of his most famous paintings. *(Cassatt exits.)*

DEGAS. With one of his most famous models. I'm going to enjoy this.

CASSATT. *(offstage)* Lecher.

DEGAS. It's not lechery, my dear, merely an appreciation for the bounty of nature.

MORISOT RECLINING

CASSATT. “The bounty of nature.” Ha! Lechery, by another name.

DEGAS. Do you always assume the worst of people?

CASSATT. No. I only assume the worst of those who earn my poor opinion.

DEGAS. You wound me, Cassatt.

CASSATT. What?

DEGAS. I said you’ve wounded me. *(Cassatt emerges, naked.)*

CASSATT. I’ll clean up the blood later. *(Crossfade to Edouard’s studio. Cassatt performs the role of VICTORINE MEURENT, who poses for Edouard; except for a thin black ribbon around her neck, she is naked, reclining on a chaise lounge.)*

EDOUARD. Just a few minutes more, my dear.

VICTORINE. You said that two hours ago.

EDOUARD. And I sincerely believed it to be the truth. You want me to make you as beautiful as you are, don’t you? One cannot rush these things.

VICTORINE. It’s easy for you to say that. You have your clothes on. It’s cold in here.

EDOUARD. We must suffer, Victorine, for all good things in life.

VICTORINE. I thought it was only artists who were supposed to suffer.

EDOUARD. Did you imagine that those who serve as our muses would be exempt? Foolish child.

VICTORINE. Do you really think of me as a child?

EDOUARD. It was a figure of speech.

VICTORINE. No, I think you really meant it.

EDOUARD. When you see this painting, you won’t believe I see you as a mere infant.

VICTORINE. And when will I see it? *(Pause.)*

EDOUARD. Now, I think.

VICTORINE. It’s done?

EDOUARD. Wait. Let me look. *(Pause.)* Yes, it’s finished.

VICTORINE. May I...?

MORISOT RECLINING

EDOUARD. Yes, come and see. (*Victorine moves to stand beside Edouard. Together, they look at the canvas as “Olympia” is revealed to the audience on the wall behind them.*) I don’t think I painted you as a child, do you?

VICTORINE. No.

EDOUARD. Are you pleased?

VICTORINE. Yes.

EDOUARD. I’m glad. (*Berthe enters the studio. She stops, startled to see Edouard and the naked Victorine together near his easel.*)

BERTHE. I’m sorry...I –

EDOUARD. It’s perfectly all right. We’re finished.

BERTHE. Ah. May I see?

EDOUARD. Of course. (*Berthe looks at the painting.*)

BERTHE. (*Smiling.*) Hmm. This one is going to get you in trouble.

EDOUARD. Don’t they all?

BERTHE. I think this is going to be different. Brace yourself, Monsieur.

EDOUARD. Time to change, ladies. I’ll leave you two alone. (*Victorine and Berthe cross and stand behind a screen. Victorine puts on a dress; during the following, Berthe disrobes, then starts to put on the clothes she wears in “Repose.”*)

BERTHE. How do you feel...when he paints you?

VICTORINE. I’m a model. He pays me to take off my clothes, and to lie there. He doesn’t pay me to think.

BERTHE. I wasn’t talking about your thoughts.

VICTORINE. I feel...I didn’t know he’d paint me like that.

BERTHE. Like what?

VICTORINE. Looking straight at him.

BERTHE. Were you looking at him when you posed?

VICTORINE. Yes, but –

BERTHE. Then why didn’t you think he would --

VICTORINE. It was different somehow – I can’t explain it.

BERTHE. Like you took off more than your clothes?

VICTORINE. Maybe.

BERTHE. Have you made love with him?

MORISOT RECLINING

VICTORINE. Have you?

BERTHE. How dare you –

VICTORINE. How dare *you*?

BERTHE. Because we're different people.

VICTORINE. Are we?

BERTHE. I don't lie there, naked – that's not why he asks me to pose for him.

VICTORINE. Oh, really? I've seen his sketches of you.

BERTHE. What are you saying?

VICTORINE. Don't pretend to be naïve.

BERTHE. *What are you saying?*

VICTORINE. I'm saying that, whether or not you've ever taken your clothes off, he's already seen you naked. (*Berthe looks at Victorine.*) If you don't believe me, there's a simple way to find out. Lie down there, right now, as naked as I was, and wait for him to come back. Of course, he'll act as if he's surprised, shocked. He'll pretend to be flustered. But just watch and see how long it takes him to pick up his brush. It will take him less than a minute to get back to work. Not even sixty seconds of bluster and "oh, mademoiselle!" And it won't be just your breasts and what's between your legs that he'll show. But you don't have enough courage, do you? You can't let him see you without any clothes, because you're afraid there won't be any part of your soul he won't lay bare. Of course, if you don't want to be completely nude, you could always wear this.

(Victorine holds out the thin ribbon she wore around her neck at the beginning of the scene. Pause. They both stand completely still.) I didn't think so. Have a pleasant day, mademoiselle.

(Victorine exits. Berthe stands in her undergarments; for a moment, she seems on the verge of disrobing further, as Victorine has suggested. Then Berthe dons the dress she is to wear in the painting; as she does so, Edouard re-enters.)

EDOUARD. Is Victorine gone?

BERTHE. Yes.

EDOUARD. A pity.

BERTHE. Why is that?

EDOUARD. For once, I have enough money to pay her.

MORISOT RECLINING

BERTHE. I doubt she comes here for the money.

EDOUARD. Don't underestimate her avarice, my dear.

BERTHE. No one who models for what you pay could possibly be considered greedy, Manet.

EDOUARD. You're probably right. Ready? *(Berthe pauses. Then she walks out, fully clothed.)*

BERTHE. Yes. *(Lights cross-fade as Berthe exits.)*

DEGAS. We mentioned the insecurity of artists a few moments ago. As I've already confessed, I am no expert on the subject. Our friend Manet, however, while he appeared quite confident most of the time, was not immune to this particular demon. It manifested itself with particular ferocity during the annual Salon, the officially recognized exhibit that, supposedly, showed the very best of French art. It was a painful thing to watch. Fortunately, he had a friend on hand. Unfortunately, his wife was also there. *(Edouard paces outside the exhibition hall of the Salon. There is none of the confident, charming man-about-town as he paces; he's nervous, upset, preoccupied. Berthe enters.)*

EDOUARD. Thank god, you're here.

BERTHE. Monsieur? What is it?

EDOUARD. They want me to go in there. Well, at least Puvis and Fantin want me to go in. Suzanne has been shuttling messages in and out for the last half hour.

BERTHE. You mean you haven't been into the exhibit?

EDOUARD. Good God, no.

BERTHE. Why on earth not?

EDOUARD. Because it's hanging in there. They've hung my picture.

BERTHE. Of course they have. It was accepted by the jury.

EDOUARD. What does the jury know? They're idiots. They don't know when a painting is good or bad. Ever since we had the porters bring it to the jury, I've had the painting right there, in my mind's eye. I can see every detail, and now – now that it's exposed to the public, all I can see are its faults. I can see a hundred things I would have done differently, if only – oh, God.

BERTHE. It's agony, isn't it – being one's harshest critic.

MORISOT RECLINING

EDOUARD. You see it. I knew you would. But let's not talk about it. I'm sick of myself, and sick of talking about myself.

BERTHE. Then what shall we talk about?

EDOUARD. You always think of something.

BERTHE. Maman bought a dog.

EDOUARD. Good grief.

BERTHE. Yes.

EDOUARD. What kind of a dog?

BERTHE. A Belgian Water Spaniel.

EDOUARD. Aren't they hunting dogs?

BERTHE. Yes.

EDOUARD. But no one in your family hunts.

BERTHE. No, but Maman thinks he's...decorative.

EDOUARD. Decorative? *Decorative?* Is the dog aware of this?

BERTHE. As long as we feed him, he seems blissfully unaware of anything at all.

EDOUARD. It's possible that your maman is the most absurd person I've ever met. Perhaps that's why I absolutely adore her. *(They laugh. Cassatt as SUZANNE MANET enters, upstage of Edouard, unseen by him.)* See, you made me laugh. No one else around me has a clue. Can you do it?

BERTHE. Do what?

EDOUARD. When they exhibited your picture last year, did you stay calm?

BERTHE. No, not at all. I sat on this same bench and prayed that my painting would mysteriously vanish off the face of the earth. *(Edouard and Berthe laugh. Suzanne comes forward.)*

SUZANNE. Edouard, they still insist -- you must come into the hall.

EDOUARD. Damn them.

SUZANNE. Edouard!

EDOUARD. Oh, they'd say the same thing if they were sitting here, in the same position.

SUZANNE. Darling, they both have paintings hanging in there as well. But they're not throwing a tantrum.

EDOUARD. Suzanne, listen to me –

MORISOT RECLINING

SUZANNE. Edouard, don't be rude. You haven't introduced me to your friend.

EDOUARD. Mademoiselle Berthe Morisot -- my wife, Suzanne.

BERTHE. Madame Manet.

SUZANNE. Mademoiselle, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. It seems to me I've heard your name, but I can't quite remember --

EDOUARD. Mademoiselle Morisot is a painter.

SUZANNE. A painter! How charming. It's so important for a woman to have hobbies that make her an adornment for her husband. I myself play the piano.

EDOUARD. And you're a wonderful musician, my dear, but painting is hardly a hobby for Mademoiselle. She is a professional -- at least insofar as any of us can be called professionals when we sell so few paintings.

SUZANNE. (*With the thinnest smile possible for any human being.*) A professional? How lovely.

EDOUARD. Mademoiselle Morisot has also been modeling for me; she sat for me when I painted *The Balcony*. And she has already agreed to model for me again.

SUZANNE. You shouldn't keep Mademoiselle Morisot busy posing for you if she's a *professional* painter, my dear. Think of what she could accomplish if she were working in her own studio, rather than being cooped up with you.

EDOUARD. If I could afford models, my sweet, I wouldn't have to rely on my friends, such as Mademoiselle Morisot. But since I can't --

SUZANNE. I could pose for you again.

EDOUARD. One can only paint the same person so many times, my dear, no matter how lovely she may be.

SUZANNE. But still, you know how long you detain your models, with that endless perfectionism of yours. It's really quite unfair --

EDOUARD. My dear, you tend to the hearth, and I will attend to my studio -- what goes on there, and who sits for me. Here comes Puvis. (*To Berthe.*) Mademoiselle, don't neglect even the

MORISOT RECLINING

slightest opportunity to tell him how wretched his painting is.

(Degas as Puvis De Chavannes enters.)

De CHAVANNES. Manet, this is ridiculous. You must face the music, however you feel about the tune.

EDOUARD. Yes, Puvis, you're absolutely correct. I'm behaving abominably. My friends, of course, have come to expect this over the years, haven't they? *(To Berthe first, then to Suzanne.)* Shall we go in? *(Edouard and Berthe exit; Degas and Cassatt cross upstage.)*

CASSATT. We've confessed to the occasional bouts of insecurity and jealousy that plague most artists.

DEGAS. We can also be competitive creatures.

CASSATT. During the countless hours when one painter is sitting for a portrait by another painter, conversations inevitably occur.

DEGAS. And, since Morisot sat for eleven different portraits by Manet, it was inevitable that some of those conversations might turn to...rivals. *(Cross-fade to Edouard's studio. Berthe sits in a chair, wearing a white dress with a black belt and a subtle floral pattern. She is posing for Edouard's portrait "Repose.")*

EDOUARD. Don't move.

BERTHE. My leg is killing me!

EDOUARD. Don't move.

BERTHE. This is agony.

EDOUARD. Don't move! You'll ruin the way your dress is draped.

BERTHE. What does it matter?

EDOUARD. You ask that question?

BERTHE. Who more than me?

EDOUARD. You chose a life in art. Stop feeling sorry for yourself.

BERTHE. Who are you to say such things?

EDOUARD. Oh, pardon me. How right you are. With honors being given to me every day, with riches bestowed at my feet. I'm sorry! With such acclaim, how can I venture to say to anyone that creating art is a privilege!

BERTHE. That's not the way you felt at the Salon.

MORISOT RECLINING

EDOUARD. I was perfectly calm at the Salon.

BERTHE. You stood outside the hall where your work was hung. You behaved like they were going to hang *you*.

EDOUARD. At least that last time, I was right. Besides, it's quite unfair to compare how we feel during an exhibit – especially the Salon! – and how we should view things in the cold light of day. Miss Gonzalez would understand.

BERTHE. Miss Gonzalez!

EDOUARD. Yes, she would know that –

BERTHE. Just once, I would like to go through a sitting with you without hearing about that cow!

EDOUARD. Excuse me, but she is not --

BERTHE. “Miss Gonzalez understands.” “Miss Gonzalez remains calm, no matter what.”

EDOUARD. I can't help it if Miss Gonzalez has poise.

BERTHE. You say that because she never contradicts you to your face, so you think she agrees with you. Which, in your eyes, means she's a goddess.

EDOUARD. It so happens that Miss Gonzalez has tenacity. She starts a thing, and she sticks with it until she finishes it. Is that such a crime?

BERTHE. I suppose it's not a criminal act to be satisfied with mediocrity.

EDOUARD. Be silent so I can paint you. *(Brief pause.)*

BERTHE. That doesn't mean she shouldn't be shot for it.

EDOUARD. A gentleman should never say this to a lady, but you're being an ass. Please stop it.

BERTHE. I believe this session is quite finished. *(Berthe gets up to leave.)*

EDOUARD. You're not upset at Eva. You're upset at yourself.

BERTHE. What do you mean by that?

EDOUARD. You're angry that your own work isn't going as well as you'd like. You feel the need to flog yourself, so you take it out on Eva. It's really quite silly. And it's unworthy of you. *(Berthe flops down on the chair where she had been sitting.)*

BERTHE. Then what should I do?

MORISOT RECLINING

EDOUARD. It might be useful to forget about being perfect, just for five minutes at a time. During that five minutes, you might actually paint something worthwhile.

BERTHE. So now I've never painted anything worthwhile?

EDOUARD. That's not what I said, and you know it.

BERTHE. Why did you take her as a pupil?

EDOUARD. Eva?

BERTHE. It's not as if you have any other students.

EDOUARD. I took her because she needs me.

BERTHE. And I don't?

EDOUARD. All right, we're done here.

BERTHE. Have I said something to offend the great *artiste*?

EDOUARD. Go now.

BERTHE. What was it I said that got under your skin? I'd really like to know.

EDOUARD. She needs me because she is a *student*. She has much to learn. I don't treat you as if I were your nursemaid because you are my *colleague*. If you can't understand the difference, then why am I...this is useless. I can barely paint when I'm perfectly calm, and now you've made me furious. Change, then go. (*Edouard exits.*)

CASSATT. Of course he behaved like an absolute dolt. He could have prevented that with one sentence. One simple sentence, but he was too proud to say it.

DEGAS. What are you talking about?

CASSATT. All he had to say was, "you're a finer artist than Eva Gonzalez will ever be." Just that, and the argument would have disappeared into thin air.

DEGAS. That's exactly what he did say.

CASSATT. No it's not.

DEGAS. He said that Gonzalez was a student, and Morisot a colleague.

CASSATT. That's not the same thing.

DEGAS. It's exactly the same thing!

CASSATT. You're insufferable!

DEGAS. Because I look at the substance of what he said, rather than searching for some obscure feminine formula?

MORISOT RECLINING

CASSATT. When all he had to do was –

DEGAS. Say it exactly the way you want it said? Stop being a child!

CASSATT. Stop being an ass! *(Cassatt exits in a huff.)*

DEGAS. You'll have to forgive her. She's a woman. They get like that sometimes... In any case, we must move along. The next time Morisot posed for Manet, there was a different result. Some say it's the most Impressionistic portrait Manet ever did. *(Cross-fade to Edouard's studio. Berthe poses for "Berthe Morisot with a Fan." The pose she uses at the top of the scene should not resemble the final painting. Edouard occasionally takes a sip from a glass of champagne; the bottle is in an ice bucket nearby.)*

EDOUARD. No, no, no. You're holding it like it's something foreign to you.

BERTHE. How do want me to hold it?

EDOUARD. Like any woman holds a fan when she –

BERTHE. Do you have another glass?

EDOUARD. Do you need some water?

BERTHE. No, but I would like some champagne.

EDOUARD. Champagne?

BERTHE. Monsieur, we both know that this is not the first time you've ever poured a glass of champagne for a woman.

EDOUARD. No, but...

BERTHE. But what?

EDOUARD. Your mother – *(Berthe laughs.)*

BERTHE. You're really like a little boy when you pretend to care about what my mother thinks. It's very charming.

EDOUARD. Thank you. I think. *(Edouard pours a glass of champagne for Berthe.)*

BERTHE. That's very good.

EDOUARD. It ought to be. It's Veuve Clicquot.

BERTHE. Is that good?

EDOUARD. Your education has been sadly neglected.

BERTHE. Then you must instruct me.

EDOUARD. First I must paint you.

BERTHE. Has Mademoiselle Meurent been here lately?

MORISOT RECLINING

EDOUARD. Victorine? Once or twice, perhaps.

BERTHE. And did you paint her?

EDOUARD. Of course.

BERTHE. Another glass, please.

EDOUARD. It's something to savor, you know, not gulp.

BERTHE. I stand corrected. I'll savor this glass, you have my assurance. (*Edouard pours her another glass.*) Did you paint her literally, or figuratively?

EDOUARD. I wasn't aware you could paint someone other than literally.

BERTHE. I was trying to discover whether you were using a euphemism.

EDOUARD. No. I painted her as I would any subject.

BERTHE. It's called Veuve Clicquot?

EDOUARD. Um-huh.

BERTHE. I'll have to tell Papa to order a case.

EDOUARD. Please don't tell him you acquired your taste for it from me. He might forbid you from posing for me again.

BERTHE. And that would disturb you?

EDOUARD. Indeed it would.

BERTHE. Why?

EDOUARD. Because I can't afford Veuve Clicquot if I have to pay my models as well, so I rely on my friends to pose for me.

BERTHE. I see. Mademoiselle Meurent is a friend, then?

EDOUARD. No.

BERTHE. So you still pay her?

EDOUARD. Yes.

BERTHE. I thought you couldn't afford both models and wine?

EDOUARD. Typically, I can't. That's why Victorine only poses for me now and then.

BERTHE. Ah. (*Pause.*) Why are painters so obsessed with fans? I never know what to do with it. It feels like...an appendage. Tell me why it fascinates you so.

EDOUARD. Fans are the most powerful element in the female arsenal.

BERTHE. What makes you say that?

MORISOT RECLINING

EDOUARD. Because a fan can serve so many different purposes.

BERTHE. Such as...?

EDOUARD. Well, you can use it to dismiss someone.

BERTHE. How?

EDOUARD. My dear, you're the expert in this case.

BERTHE. I've never become properly acquainted with all the feminine arts. Show me.

EDOUARD. Here. *(He takes the fan and uses it to make a dismissive gesture.)*

BERTHE. I see.

EDOUARD. And of course it has other uses we haven't discussed.

BERTHE. Another glass, please.

EDOUARD. Are you sure?

BERTHE. Don't be tiresome. *(Edouard pours her another glass.)*

EDOUARD. And that's quite enough for you.

BERTHE. And what would you have me do now?

EDOUARD. Experiment.

BERTHE. What do you mean?

EDOUARD. Pretend that you're Victorine. No, no. That's wrong. Pretend that you're you. Pretend that you're you when you've had just a little too much to drink. You have a fan, and you need to use it to get what you want from...an admirer. What would you do?

BERTHE. I have no idea. I don't know!

EDOUARD. Let's take a break then. Stretch your legs, if you need to. *(Berthe stands. She moves to the window, looks out. She looks at Edouard. She drains her champagne glass. She starts to move around the room, whirling slowly, playing with the fan; it becomes a ballet in miniature. Ultimately, she spins back into her chair, and opens the fan, holding it so that she reveals her face through the lower half of the fan, which is transparent.)*

BERTHE. Pick up your brush.

EDOUARD. Pardon me?

MORISOT RECLINING

BERTHE. Paint me now. (*Edouard hesitates.*) Do it! (*Edouard paints.*)

DEGAS. They say that lightning never strikes the same place twice. How foolish. (*Cassatt re-enters.*)

CASSATT. They didn't take into account the lightning that strikes between two people.

DEGAS. How good of you to re-join us.

CASSATT. And what happens when lightning strikes between two artists, Degas?

DEGAS. Then sparks fly, and some of them wind up on the canvas.

CASSATT. If all this sounds rather incendiary –

DEGAS. That's because it is.

CASSATT. A connection happens –

DEGAS. ...art is made –

CASSATT. ...the connection deepens,

DEGAS. ...and the next picture catches an even bigger thunderbolt.

CASSATT. Which brings us to the painting at the center of our story. (*Cross-fade to Edouard's studio. Berthe sits as Edouard paints her portrait.*)

BERTHE. I can't imagine why I'm allowing you to do this.

EDOUARD. Because you find it flattering.

BERTHE. I beg your pardon!

EDOUARD. You mustn't bother to deny it.

BERTHE. I shouldn't have to. This is absurd. You have a dozen portraits of me already!

EDOUARD. Nine, actually.

BERTHE. More than enough, in any case. You should paint your wife more often.

EDOUARD. Suzanne, I'm afraid, would remain utterly herself no matter how many portraits I made of her.

BERTHE. Whereas I become different people?

EDOUARD. I'm working on your mouth.

BERTHE. You could paint it from memory.

EDOUARD. If you could just –

MORISOT RECLINING

BERTHE. I'm sure that Suzanne would stay quite still. The Dutch are famous for their patience.

EDOUARD. Just as you have a reputation for quiet strength, my dear.

BERTHE. Meaning what?

EDOUARD. Meaning that I would very much like to enjoy some of that quiescence now.

BERTHE. My apologies. I don't mean to distract the greatest painter of the age.

EDOUARD. The great artiste thanks you. (*Berthe sits quietly. Edouard paints. After a long moment...*) There's something missing.

BERTHE. What? (*Edouard goes behind the dressing screen and fetches the black ribbon worn by Victorine in "Olympia."*)

EDOUARD. Here. (*He goes behind Berthe, and fastens the ribbon around her neck. Berthe touches the ribbon, then leans back and smiles to herself while Edouard moves back to his easel.*) Have you seen my brother lately?

BERTHE. Eugene? Yes.

EDOUARD. He's quite smitten with you, you know.

BERTHE. I think he does love me.

EDOUARD. And you? How do you feel about him?

BERTHE. Deeply enough so that I'm not going to discuss those feelings with someone as frivolous as you.

EDOUARD. He's going to propose to you, I think.

BERTHE. He might. He is shy, you know.

EDOUARD. If he does, will you accept?

BERTHE. I thought you were working on my mouth.

EDOUARD. Just so. (*Edouard paints. More silence. Edouard stops painting, turns away from Berthe and wipes a handkerchief across his eyes.*)

BERTHE. Are you all right?

EDOUARD. Just a head cold, that's all.

BERTHE. Suzanne should take better care of you.

EDOUARD. Suzanne does what's in her power to do. As do we all.

BERTHE. I think I know why you paint me.

MORISOT RECLINING

EDOUARD. You don't need to guess. I paint you because I see something new in you each time you sit for me.

BERTHE. Some new imperfection rises to the surface each time?

EDOUARD. Stop it.

BERTHE. I can't help it. Self-criticism is a way of life for me. Everything I do always turns out to be a catastrophe. I don't know why you –

EDOUARD. *Please don't.*

BERTHE. What is it? What did I say?

EDOUARD. I just wish you wouldn't talk about yourself in those terms.

BERTHE. What's the matter? *(Edouard shakes his head.)* You haven't been yourself all day. What's wrong?

EDOUARD. Nothing. Nothing at all. It's finished. *(Berthe moves to see the portrait. Edouard draws a cover over it.)*

It might be better if you didn't.

BERTHE. Don't be ridiculous.

EDOUARD. I would appreciate it if –

BERTHE. We're artists, for God's sake. Hiding things isn't the point, is it?

EDOUARD. It's only that...

BERTHE. What? You've painted me in every conceivable mood. You've shown me coy, aloof, arrogant, bored and restless. What could you have done that could possibly offend me?

EDOUARD. Will you trust me on this point? Please?

BERTHE. If there's a lack of trust here, I don't think –

EDOUARD. All right. Look at it if you want to! *(Edouard uncovers the painting and walks away. Berthe moves to look at the portrait. She gazes at it for a good long time. She is silent.)*

Do you want me to destroy it?

BERTHE. Don't be absurd. *(Beat.)* Is this the way you see me?

EDOUARD. Maybe it's the way I see both of us. It's something I know is in you. That's all I can say. I'll keep the painting. No one else will ever see it. And now I think it would be best if we didn't speak of it any more. *(Edouard tosses aside his brushes*

MORISOT RECLINING

and puts on his jacket. Berthe continues to look at the painting as he speaks.) In fact, I think we should both go to Giscard's. He's giving one of his famous Thursday afternoons. The reason they're famous, of course, is that it's the most dreadful entertainment one can possibly find in Paris. But the food is usually acceptable, if one isn't in too demanding a frame of mind. And we're sure to find someone we can laugh at. Perhaps, if we're lucky, Puvis de Chavannes will be there. I think it might be a decent way to kill an afternoon, don't you?

BERTHE. *(Referring to the painting.)* This...

EDOUARD. Is just an impression. We needn't do anything about it.

BERTHE. Edouard –

EDOUARD. We don't want to be late. If we're not there to burst his bubble, Puvis' self-regard will engulf all Paris. Come. *(Edouard waits for Berthe; they freeze, as Cassatt and Degas come to the downstage edge of their platform, looking out over the audience.)*

DEGAS. We should show them the painting.

CASSATT. Not yet.

DEGAS. Why not?

CASSATT. They're not ready. Let's let them imagine what it might be. Let's give them some time.

DEGAS. How long?

CASSATT. Oh, fifteen minutes or so.

DEGAS. Fifteen minutes. We'll see you then. *(Lights fade to black.)*

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