

THE MAD SCENE

a play by Wim Coleman

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## The Mad Scene

### synopsis

On a night in 1793, Marie Grosholtz (the future Madame Tussaud) searches a Paris cemetery for the freshly guillotined head of Queen Marie Antoinette. While the young sculptress makes a plaster cast of the face, she engages in a conversation with the decapitated queen. Back in her workshop, she adds Marie Antoinette to a wax exhibit that already includes the firebrand journalist Jean-Paul Marat and his assassin, Charlotte Corday; they will soon be joined by the revolutionary zealot Maximilien Robespierre. As the Reign of Terror rages around them, the wax figures come to life and argue among themselves and with their creator about revolution, freedom, tyranny, power, history, personhood, and other themes as vital today as they were in Revolutionary Paris. By the end of the play, Napoleon rules France, and Marie Grosholtz has moved her exhibit to London and transformed herself into Madame Tussaud. While Tussaud dances with a mute wax figure of Napoleon, the other figures become something more than mere hallucinations in the mind of their creator.

## Wim Coleman

### biography

Wim Coleman (he/him) is a playwright, poet, novelist, and nonfiction writer. His play *The Harrowing* was performed as a reading in New York in 2023 at the Theater for the New City as part of its New City, New Blood Readings Series. His play *The Mad Scene* was awarded First Place in the Script category of the 91st Annual Writer's Digest Writing Competition. His play *The Shackles of Liberty* was the winner of the 2016 Southern Playwrights Competition. Two collections of his one-act plays, *Nine Muses* and *Stages of History*, are currently in print, and his plays have appeared in anthologies along with works by authors ranging from Molière to David Mamet. His book of poetry, *I.O.U.*, was published in 2020, and his "love ballad" *The King and the Beggar Lady* was published in 2022. Novels that he has co-authored with his wife, Pat Perrin, include *Anna's World*, the Silver Medalist in the 2008 Moonbeam Awards, and *The Jamais Vu Papers*, a 2011 finalist for the Eric Hoffer/Montaigne Medal. Wim is a member of the Dramatists Guild of America and PEN International (San Miguel).

SETTINGS:  
Paris, 1793-1794  
London, 1802

CAST OF CHARACTERS:  
MARIE GROSHOLTZ (later MADAME TUSSAUD)  
MARIE ANTOINETTE  
CHARLOTTE CORDAY  
JEAN-PAUL MARAT  
MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE

Nontraditional casting is encouraged.  
A performance break may be taken between Scenes 3 and 4.

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THE MAD SCENE was originally developed in 2020-21 via Zoom as part of the Theatre at St. John's Cyber Salon, hosted weekly by Mark Erson. It was directed by Daniel Neiden with the following readers:

MARIE ANTOINETTE ..... Everett Quinton  
MARIE GROSHOLTZ / MADAME TUSSAUD ..... Jenne Vath  
CHARLOTTE CORDAY ..... Maude Lardner Burke  
JEAN-PAUL MARAT ..... Sally Plass  
MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE ..... Shane Baker

Just as an individual, subjected to certain inner pressures beyond his endurance, will suddenly go mad and destroy himself or those around him, so too, apparently, can a segment of society take leave of its senses and deliver itself to the forces of destruction.

—Stanley Loomis, *Paris in the Terror*

Madness is rare in individuals—but in groups, parties, nations, and ages it is the rule.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*; Walter Kaufmann, trans.

Oh, Liberty! how many crimes are committed in thy name!

—Madame Roland before her execution, November 8, 1793

It is with baubles that men are led.

—Napoleon Bonaparte

DANTON: Those stars are like glistening tears scattered about the night; there must be a terrible grief behind the eye that dropped them.

—Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death*; John Holstrom, trans.

We must love one another or die.

—W. H. Auden, “September 1, 1939”

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In memory of Everett Quinton

## PROLOGUE

*The Madeleine Cemetery, Paris; the night of October 16, 1793.*

MARIE ANTOINETTE's head lies in the lap of MARIE GROSHOLTZ, who will later become known as Madame Tussaud. MARIE works by the light of a lantern.

*At first, ANTOINETTE's eyes are closed; then they snap open.*

ANTOINETTE. There is no sky.

MARIE. Madame, can you hear me?

ANTOINETTE. I never noticed it before.

MARIE. I must take your face.

ANTOINETTE. Carolina, look for yourself. You'll see it's true.

MARIE. I'm not Carolina.

ANTOINETTE. There is no sky. There are only stars. Oh, and a slender curved scimitar of a moon, hanging by ... an invisible thread, I suppose. But tied to what? There's nothing to tie it to, nothing to hang it from. There is no sky. (*wincing*) Don't. Carolina, why are you touching my face like that?

MARIE. I'm not your sister. I've got to make a cast of your face.

ANTOINETTE. What are you smearing on my skin?

MARIE. Oil, so the plaster won't stick.

ANTOINETTE. What a silly thing to do on such a night, with a moon and so many stars and no sky at all to gaze at. Look.

MARIE. I'm looking.

ANTOINETTE. No, you're not. You're looking down at me. You're in the way of my view. But where are we? Oh, we fell asleep in the gardens again, didn't we? I was counting clouds and you were giving them names and it got dark without us knowing it. Our dresses must be soaked through with dew. Odd, I feel so ... dry. We've got to get back to the palace. The countess must be angry. Or beside herself with worry. Poor old thing, we're so much trouble to her.

MARIE. We're not in your garden in Vienna.

ANTOINETTE. Of course we are.

MARIE. No. This is the Madeleine Cemetery. In Paris.

ANTOINETTE. What are we doing in Paris? Don't touch my eyes.

MARIE. I'm only closing them.

ANTOINETTE. Why?

MARIE. Because they're not glass. I'm covering them with plaster.

ANTOINETTE. I don't understand.

MARIE. It's best not to talk.

ANTOINETTE. Why not?

MARIE. The dead are usually quiet. Or at least they're supposed to be.

ANTOINETTE. I'm not dead.

MARIE. Madame, you have been beheaded. You are certainly dead. Tomorrow you will be buried. It really would be best to keep quiet. You'll upset yourself.

ANTOINETTE. You're not Carolina.

MARIE. So I've been telling you.

ANTOINETTE. I've not been beheaded.

MARIE. You have, and it was hard to find you among so many dead, all thrown about every which way, so it's hard to tell whose head belongs to whose body. Don't you smell the stench?

ANTOINETTE. No.

MARIE. Death has its blessings then. I never guessed how blood and flesh could stink. It's always such a chore, this scrounging through stench and open graves, looking for just a certain head. Your husband was even harder to find than you, and to make things worse, he was already dissolving in quicklime.

ANTOINETTE. My husband?

MARIE. But I found you. I recognized the white morning dress you wore on the scaffold, even though it was stained and caked with blood and dirt. Then your head was easy to spot, plopped right between your knees. But your face looks strange now—so thin and drawn, with a scalp of short white hair. When did your hair turn white? Oh, I hear it was after you were caught trying to escape—you and the king and your children. I can fix all this when I make your new face.

ANTOINETTE. Who are you?

MARIE. I hoped you'd remember me, madame. My name is Marie Grosholtz. I lived at Versailles nine years. I tutored Madame Elizabeth in molding wax, and I lived in her apartments and kept her company. You were very kind to me in those days, madame.

ANTOINETTE. Versailles? Madame Elizabeth?

MARIE. The king's sister. You don't remember. You're confused. But don't worry. The plaster will set, and we'll be finished soon, and it won't matter whether you remember or not. I needn't tell you to keep still. You're doing that anyway.

ANTOINETTE. There is no sky.

MARIE. I'm sure you are correct, madame.

ANTOINETTE. Oh, yes. Versailles. They tell me I'm going there. They tell me I am to become the Dauphine of France.

MARIE. If you say so, madame.

ANTOINETTE. I am to marry the Dauphin, they tell me—Louis-Auguste, some cousin I've never met. They say he is a clumsy boy, rather stupid, and he's sure to grow fat, and he can't dance at all. But then, I'm just a girl myself, and people say I am silly and I laugh more than I should and I like to dance too much. No, don't deny it, I know that's what they say. But he's a boy, just a boy. I wish I could marry a man, someone wiser, someone I could trust to know ... how to ...

But it's not up to me, is it? Nothing is up to me. And not only must I stop being an archduchess, they tell me I must stop being Austrian, and I must say goodbye to everyone I've ever known—even to you, Carolina, and also to *Mutti*—and I must forget how to speak German and speak French perfectly for the rest of my life. And when I go to France, before I meet the Dauphin in the Forest of Compiègne, I must be stripped of every scrap of my Austrian dress and be clothed anew in the manner of a French princess. Of course there will be people watching me change. It's always been like that. I've never been naked alone. But in France there will be more people than ever, watching my every waking moment, and while I'm sleeping as well. I will put on my rouge in front of the whole world. It will never stop.

MARIE. There. The plaster is set. I'm almost finished.

ANTOINETTE. That pinches.

MARIE. Yes, but only for a moment, while I remove the cast.

*(pulls the cast away)*

I must leave you now.

ANTOINETTE. Where are you going?

MARIE. To where I work.

ANTOINETTE. You can't leave me.

MARIE. I must. I'm sorry.

ANTOINETTE. I am your queen.

MARIE. France has no queen.

ANTOINETTE. Obey me.

MARIE. I must obey the National Assembly. I wish it weren't so.

ANTOINETTE. Take me with you.

MARIE. I can't take your head, madame. I'll lose my own if I try. Adieu.

ANTOINETTE. Wait! I remember! Your name is Marie! You make likenesses from wax! Elizabeth adores you! She came running to me a little while ago to show me a Virgin you taught her how to make. "Look, sister!" she said. "Look at my little wax Mother of God! I made her look just like you without meaning to, I couldn't help it! Was that blasphemous of me, sister? Must I confess it to the *abbé*?"

"No, sister," I said. "No blasphemy at all ..."

MARIE. Adieu, madame.

ANTOINETTE. But what will happen to me after you go?

MARIE. I don't know.

ANTOINETTE. Oh, but you do. I'll vanish. I'll die. Please, I beg you. It is only by the grace and bounty of your madness that I still live. Don't let me die.

MARIE. You'll live again in wax.

ANTOINETTE. But will I remember ... ?

MARIE. I don't know what you'll remember.

ANTOINETTE. Will I still be myself?

MARIE. I don't know.

ANTOINETTE. Am I myself even now?

MARIE. I said I don't know.

ANTOINETTE. Please stay!

MARIE. Dawn is nearing.

ANTOINETTE. We'll watch it together!

MARIE. I must go.

ANTOINETTE. We'll skip barefoot in the dew, watch morning burst into blossoms of light, bathe ourselves in mad mists of swirling color! We'll worship the sun and laugh and dance like Incan priestesses!

MARIE. Adieu.

(MARIE *exits, carrying her lantern.*)

ANTOINETTE (*dying*). There ... is ... no ... sky ...

BLACKOUT.

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Scene 1

*The Cabinet of Curtius, a wax exhibition hall on the Boulevard du Temple, Paris; October 17, 1793.*

MARIE GROSHOLTZ *is shaping* MARIE ANTOINETTE 's head *from wax.* Nearby *is a tableau of two wax figures representing the murder of* JEAN-PAUL MARAT. *Primly dressed,* CHARLOTTE CORDAY *stands holding a bloody knife.* JEAN-PAUL MARAT, *his chest bleeding from a knife wound she has just delivered, is sprawled dead in his shoe-shaped medicinal bathtub; writing materials, including a pen, inkwell, and paper, are arranged on a board in front of him and a wooden box beside him.*

*The wax figures exercise limited degrees of animation during this scene; they are at least able to look at each other and at MARIE.*

CORDAY (*to* MARIE). She looks so real.

MARIE. I'm trying to work.

CORDAY. Such skin—so lustrous, translucent.

MARIE. Must you keep talking?

CORDAY. I'll talk to my heart's content.

MARIE. I'd much rather you didn't.

CORDAY. Would you presume to silence me?

MARIE. I made you. I'll presume as I like.

CORDAY. And I'll talk as I like. Do I look as real as she does?

MARIE (*indicating* MARAT). I tried my best—and with him also.

CORDAY. Yes, but he is supposed to be dead. She looks alive. I hope I look so alive.

MARIE. I saw her often when I lived at Versailles. Her skin was clear like yours, it's hard to duplicate. Last night when I found her head, her face looked all wrong, so yellow in the light of my lantern, and her skin felt rough like parchment. Not like your head, which came fresh from the guillotine.

CORDAY. How divine she looks.

MARIE. I didn't take you for a Royalist.

CORDAY. I'm not. But I am noble, and I admire nobility, and I see nobility in her face. How will she look when you're finished?

MARIE. I don't know. I wonder. I know what people want—to see her dressed *à la Polonaise*, in a light blue velvet gown trimmed with black fur, wearing diamonds and her hair up high with a single great bird-of-paradise feather.

CORDAY. How splendid.

MARIE. Yes, very. But was she happy, dressed for court like that? I didn't think so. She seemed much happier when she went out riding. But people won't want to see her in a green riding habit with a Spanish hat.

CORDAY. Elegance made flesh, people called her.

MARIE. Her feet never touched the ground when she danced, or even when she walked.

CORDAY. Is it possible?

MARIE. Anyway, I never *saw* them touch.

MARAT. Hah. An illusion.

MARIE. If you say so, Monsieur Philosopher.

CORDAY. The beast speaks again.

MARAT. She wasted her girlhood walking around with stacks of books on her head, getting her hands slapped whenever they fell, learning to create the illusion of gliding weightlessly. She got so good at it, dupes like you thought she was airborne. It was one of the few things she really excelled at. Such a shame she never learned anything useful.

MARIE (*pausing in her work*). You know nothing about her.

MARAT. I know everything there is to know about her.

MARIE. Then maybe you should finish her.

MARAT. Wax shaping wax. What a suggestion. But keep on working—I'll advise you. Next you must daub her face with paint.

MARIE. She came to dislike makeup while I was at Versailles.

MARAT. Hah.

MARIE. And all sorts of ostentation.

MARAT. "Madame Deficit," an enemy of ostentation?

MARIE. You didn't know her. I did.

MARAT. No makeup? She'll look like a lowly commoner. A modest daubing would raise her at least to the rank of courtesan. But grotesque layerings of paint are needed to signify a duchess—or a queen. Give her a little rouge, at least. No, lots of rouge. Huge round vermilion globs on her cheeks. No, all over her face. And red glass eyes

to match. And puffed out blazing lips. And fangs like a wolf. And a wig of live snakes.

MARIE. She wasn't a gorgon.

MARAT. No? I'll wager the executioner didn't dare show her head for fear the crowd would turn to stone.

CORDAY (*to MARIE*). Is he always going to be this way?

MARIE. You tell me. You were the one who murdered him. (*to MARAT*) Monsieur Sanson certainly did show the people her head.

MARAT. Were you there?

MARIE. I fainted so I didn't see it. But people told me about it.

CORDAY. The queen is showing signs of life, I think.

ANTOINETTE. There is no sky.

CORDAY. What did she say?

MARIE. There is no sky. Odd. Her head told me the same thing back at the cemetery.

ANTOINETTE. There is no sky.

MARAT. You've learned that at last, have you, vile cormorant? Then your beheading wasn't in vain.

ANTOINETTE. There is no sky.

MARIE. But what does she mean?

MARAT. She means she has achieved a rare insight—that the universe is not some very large hall in Versailles with a vaulted ceiling studded with gleaming jewels by night and a mobile bright chandelier by day, and that she herself is not the center of that universe.

ANTOINETTE. Fool. I know perfectly well the sun is the center of the universe.

MARAT. You know that, do you?

ANTOINETTE. I studied Copernicus when I was but a girl.

MARAT. Copernicus. Well. You are only two and a half centuries behind the times. A fitting aristocratic education. But death will bring you up to date, more so than our so-called *philosophes* ever could. To begin with, Copernicus was wrong—as wrong in his way as Ptolemy and Aristotle. The sun is not enclosed in multiple rotating crystal spheres, all of them with stars and planets pinned to their rotundities like shiny medallions; Galileo's telescope and Newton's apple abolished them. And yet philosophers cling to the notion of the sun at the center of it all, crystal spheres or no. But you're starting to understand better, aren't you?

ANTOINETTE. There is no sky.

MARAT. Therefore there is no place where God may stand and look down upon his creation.

ANTOINETTE. Yes. I never imagined ...

MARAT. No firmament.

ANTOINETTE. No heaven.

MARAT. And if there is no sky, no ceiling or roof of spherical crystal, where is the center of the universe?

ANTOINETTE. Nowhere.

MARAT. That's right.

ANTOINETTE. Everything goes on and on.

MARAT. By *everything*, I take you to mean *nothing*.

ANTOINETTE. I think ... they are the same.

MARAT. Nothing but space.

ANTOINETTE. Nothing but the void.

MARAT. Dizzying, isn't it?

ANTOINETTE (*to MARIE and CORDAY*). Who is this toad of a man?

MARIE. He's a scientist.

CORDAY. And a murderer.

MARAT. So says the girl who plunged a kitchen knife straight through my heart. I'd never have thought my ribs would yield to your girlish thrust like a lump of butter. It seems my ailing carcass was too weary of life to fight for it.

ANTOINETTE (*to MARAT*). You—in your bathtub. Are you who I think you are?

MARAT (*to ANTOINETTE*). Allow me to introduce myself, madame. I am no murderer. I am no one at all. Like yourself and this homicidal idiot of a girl, I am an effigy of wax, a lifeless counterfeit. But the man I represent was and shall always be the sworn enemy of the woman you represent.

ANTOINETTE. You are Jean-Paul Marat.

MARAT. The very same.

ANTOINETTE. A savage beast.

MARAT. Nay, a man of reason.

ANTOINETTE (*to* CORDAY). And you ...

CORDAY (*to* ANTOINETTE). Mademoiselle Charlotte Corday, Your Majesty—and your most obedient servant.

ANTOINETTE. I know of you. A sweet angel of divine justice.

CORDAY. You do me too much honor.

ANTOINETTE. But why am I ... here?

MARIE. What is the last thing you remember, madame? I mean, before you found yourself among us?

ANTOINETTE. I remember—oh, this is most odd. I remember stomping on a man's foot. "Pardon me," I said, "I did not do it on purpose." But I think maybe I did do it on purpose. He was going to do his worst to me, and so I did my worst to him. The worst I could do wasn't much, but I did it.

MARIE. And then?

ANTOINETTE. I remember a hush, a silence so deep and full it could only have come over a multitude. I felt myriad eyes upon me. My hands were already tied behind me, and I was strapped to a vertical board which was then tilted horizontally, and my neck was fastened as if I were being put into stocks, and then I heard a rolling of drums ...

CORDAY. Yes, I heard such drums myself. They are the last thing I remember.

*(Silence)*

ANTOINETTE. I am afraid ... I am not well.

CORDAY. You will get used to this feeling.

ANTOINETTE. I wish to see my physician.

MARAT. If you mean Félix Vicq-D'Azyr, he is not here—luckily for you, madame. There is a more able physician at hand.

ANTOINETTE. Who might that be?

MARAT. Myself.

CORDAY. Oh, really.

MARAT. The first physician, perhaps, to be worthy of that title in all of human history. A revolutionary in healing, as in everything else. It was I who discovered the four words that redeemed medicine after millennia of the sheerest quackery. It is a simple query. May I ask it?

ANTOINETTE. Please do.

MARAT. Where does it hurt?

ANTOINETTE. Such an impertinent question.

MARAT. Well?

ANTOINETTE. It doesn't hurt—at all.

MARAT. Is that your usual condition?

ANTOINETTE. I suppose so ...

MARAT. You *suppose*?

ANTOINETTE. It's only common sense.

MARAT. Common sense is the most cunning of liars. Think hard, madame. Were you ever truly without pain for a single instant of your life? Completely so? Choose any moment of your past. The happiest moment that comes to mind. Have you thought of it?

ANTOINETTE. Yes.

MARAT. Good. Remember it well. Relive it. Embody it. Tell me about it.

ANTOINETTE. I was seven years old—no, only six—when I sat with *Mutti* and *Papa* and my brothers and sisters, listening to a little boy play a harpsichord, although I didn't believe he was a real boy at first, just some outsized windup automaton, but yes, he was real and alive, not even as old as I, and he played a minuet—one he'd written himself, they said—but I'd never heard such a minuet, it hopped and pranced along so merrily, fairly tripping with triplets, and it made me laugh and smile. It seemed like music only a child could make, bubbling to the brim with a sort of joy grownups had long forgot. My dancing master frowned and said, "One could never dance to such a minuet." "No," I said, "but one could skip to it." And the boy finished playing and ran over to me and said he'd marry me when we both grew up, and I laughed, because of course I knew he was being very silly, but I was happy and in love in a way only a small child can laugh and be in love.

MARAT. A perfectly happy moment.

ANTOINETTE. Yes.

MARAT. And yet ...

ANTOINETTE. Strange. I don't think I knew it at the time. I don't believe it occurred to me till now.

MARAT. Well?

ANTOINETTE. I felt an ache ... in my heart.

MARAT. Did it ever fade, that ache?

ANTOINETTE. No. It ached most whenever I was happy.

MARAT. The hurt was how you knew you were alive.

ANTOINETTE. And now ...

MARAT. You feel no hurt.

ANTOINETTE. No.

MARAT. But you *should* feel hurt.

ANTOINETTE. Yes.

MARAT. What sort of hurt?

ANTOINETTE. Grief, I think.

MARAT. *Where* should it hurt?

ANTOINETTE. No. I won't think about this. I can't.

MARAT. Just tell me where.

CORDAY (*to* MARAT). Stop tormenting her.

MARIE (*to* CORDAY). Let her answer.

ANTOINETTE. My ... heart ... again. My heart should hurt. It should split with grief for my lost children. Poor tiny pink Sophie, coughing blood with her first breath, her little doll's body heaving and harrowed with pain. And little Louis Joseph, so brave and bright and courteous beyond his years, doomed to die a little boy in an old man's writhing body all covered in boils. And ... oh, God ... the Dauphin, my other boy, my precious son, Louis Charles ... is he ... ?

CORDAY. Alive and well, madame.

MARAT (*to* CORDAY). No lies, you stupid girl.

ANTOINETTE. I remember. He was torn from my arms in the prison. I have not seen him since. But I've heard him crying in a far-off cell—"Maman, Maman, please come! It is so dark in here! I'm so frightened!"

MARAT. He is still there, madame.

ANTOINETTE. No.

MARAT. The cell is pitch dark. He wades and sleeps and eats in his own rising filth. He is beaten in the dark, especially for saying prayers. He hears no speech except cursing, and now he can speak no language but cursing. He is told you violated him, committed abominations upon his body, and he is coming to believe those stories, they are becoming his memories. He no longer calls for you. He loathes you. He is no longer a boy but a feral beast. Death will be his blessing.

ANTOINETTE. No! This is unbearable—this void where my grief should be!

MARAT. Where your *heart* should be.

ANTOINETTE. Give me back my heart.

MARAT. Your heart must remain in your grave.

ANTOINETTE. I ... must ... weep.

MARAT. Why can't you weep?

ANTOINETTE. I have no tears. Please. Give me tears.

MARAT. How many tears do you need?

ANTOINETTE. Just one. One little tear. I'll hold onto it like a dying child.

MARAT (*to MARIE*). You heard her. A single wax tear on her translucent wax cheek.  
Can you do that for her?

MARIE (*setting to work*). Yes.

ANTOINETTE (*to MARAT*). You are kind, monsieur.

MARAT. Nonsense. I am merely just.

BLACKOUT.

\*

## Scene 2

*(The same setting as Scene 1, some days later. MARAT still sits in his tub, where CORDAY's knife lies in front of him; he is writing frantically. ANTOINETTE is now a disembodied wax head moving about while she gives a dancing lesson to CORDAY and MARIE, who are dancing a minuet. No music is heard, but ANTOINETTE is counting six-beat measures, including with her words.)*

ANTOINETTE. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

2, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

(*to MARIE*)

Bend—your—knee 4, 5, 6.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

(*to CORDAY*)

Point—that—toe 4, 5, 6.

MARAT. Why must you keep on with that infernal counting?

ANTOINETTE. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

(*still counting with words*)

You—should—dance—too—Ma—rat.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

It—just—might—help—your—mood.

MARAT. There is nothing wrong with my mood.

ANTOINETTE. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

MARAT. Just kindly give me some peace and quiet.

ANTOINETTE. (*to* MARAT). You made me lose count—again.

(CORDAY *and* MARIE *stop dancing.*)

CORDAY. If only we had music.

ANTOINETTE. Or I had hands to clap. Or legs for dancing.

MARAT (*to* ANTOINETTE). What need have you of legs? It is said you can dance on the air.

ANTOINETTE (*to* MARIE). When will I have arms and legs?

MARAT. Why do you trouble yourselves with dancing?

ANTOINETTE. Why do you trouble yourself with writing? Dancing is a better way to pass the time here in Purgatory. We may be here for thousands of years.

MARAT. This is not Purgatory.

ANTOINETTE. No, for you I suppose it seems a kind of Hell. Or do you believe in Hell?

MARAT. 'Twere more precise to say I know for a fact there is no such place as Hell—and no Purgatory, either. The very idea is unsupported by reason, observation, or experiment. This is nothing more than some transient, flickering glimmer of afterlife.

MARIE. Afterlife. Purgatory. Hell. Surely you all know better. Anyone can see this is a hall of wax.

MARAT. So it appears. A hallucination, of course. (*handling the knife*) I wonder if the same thing happens after one is beheaded. The brain loses blood faster that way. The heart palpitates a moment after a stabbing, circulating a few more ounces so thought may briefly continue. Such, I suppose, is my own situation. My guess is I am still in my tub—my *real* tub—and I was stabbed mere seconds ago. My perception of temporality has been vastly distorted. My dying moment has been stretched into illusory days, weeks, perhaps even months. I didn't know the brain could fabricate such vivid illusions. A curious phenomenon. (*resumes writing*) Well, it won't last forever. Nothing does. I'm quite looking forward to oblivion.

ANTOINETTE. But why do you write?

CORDAY. *What* do you write?

MARAT. Every thought that's left in my brain. I have no time to waste.

(ANTOINETTE *laughs.*)

MARAT. You are amused, madame?

ANTOINETTE. You are talking such nonsense. What are the rest of us doing in your illusion?

MARAT. I've been asking myself that very question. I am starting to believe the three of you are figments of my dying brain.

ANTOINETTE. My poor, deluded little monster. We are all dead sinners awaiting our eternal reward.

MARIE. I'm certainly not dead.

ANTOINETTE. Ah, the illusions of youth.

MARIE. You are all wrong. About everything. You are all pieces of broken me.

ANTOINETTE. Broken *you*?

CORDAY. How were you broken?

ANTOINETTE. Did you fall?

CORDAY. Were you dropped?

MARIE. One of the pieces of *me* is the late queen. Another is the murdered Marat. Another is his dead assassin. And I, Marie Groshotz, am merely the first and last of the fragments.

MARAT. A clever hypothesis, girl. I could almost give it credence.

MARIE. Almost?

MARAT. There is a condition called possession. It is very like what you describe.

MARIE. And yet?

MARAT. The mad seldom know they are mad.

CORDAY. This is not Hell, nor Purgatory, nor broken pieces of anybody.

MARAT. What do you call it, then?

CORDAY. *I don't call it anything at all. I don't try to understand it. All I know is that it suits me, and dancing makes me happy, and I want all this talking to stop so I can dance again. Odd, I never liked to dance before. I was always too serious. Now when I dance I feel the beginning of peace.*

MARAT. What they call in the East *Nirvana*.

CORDAY. Call it what you like. I only know it is the reward of noble souls.

MARAT. Noble, are you?

CORDAY. By deed and by blood, descended from the most exalted nobility there is—nobility of the sword rather than the robe, anointed and crowned in penury, not privilege. The purest blood of the Norman conquerors runs in my veins.

On the night I was born, the frogs were silent.

MARAT. I beg your pardon?

CORDAY. The peasants beat the marshes, to make sure my mother's groans and my first outcry would be the only sounds heard for miles around. I've known since I was a child, it was my destiny to perform a single deed worthy of my blood.

MARAT. Killing me, you mean.

CORDAY. Could any deed be grander or braver or finer? I saved the lives of millions.

MARAT. Such hyperbole.

CORDAY. Oh? How many people did you slaughter in September?

MARAT. None.

CORDAY. None by your hand, you mean. How many at your plans and provocation?

MARAT. Merely a thousand, perhaps two.

ANTOINETTE. Merely!

MARAT. Not nearly as many as I'd hoped, a trifling number.

ANTOINETTE. Trifling!

CORDAY (*to ANTOINETTE*). Certainly, to him. (*to MARAT*) How many people do you suppose could be slaughtered in a single day?

MARAT. I can give you a scientific calculation. Two hundred sixty thousand.

CORDAY. Would you willingly put that calculation to the test?

MARAT. Certainly, toward a proper end.

ANTOINETTE. What end could justify such butchery?

MARAT. The end of the *Ancien Régime*.

ANTOINETTE. Hah. You seem to have had some success in that regard.

MARAT. Not so, until the last vestiges of feudalism are razed not just from the earth but from human memory. (*to CORDAY*) You speak of millions dead, do you girl? How many untold, unremembered millions were chained, pilloried, tortured, oppressed, massacred, and starved during these past thousand years—and all in the name of the divine right of monarchs? The world is too small for charnel houses enough to harbor those myriad remains. My task was to put an end to an epoch of oppression.

CORDAY. Ah, but I put an end to *you*.

MARAT (*writing more frantically*). Yes, damn you. Long before I had fulfilled my duty.

CORDAY. So for you, these tedious last moments verging on oblivion are wracked by failure and disgrace. Don't worry—just as you said, it won't last forever. (*beginning to dance again*) Purpose is the only freedom; the fulfillment of purpose is the only bliss. My purpose was to bring peace to France, and France is at peace at last. This dancing bliss of mine will be eternal. It is the reward of one who sought no reward, who held life in contempt and honor most dear. I dance to my everlasting rest in the Elysian Fields, with Brutus the slayer of Caesar, and Judith the slayer of Holofernes, and the host of heroic saviors of antiquity.

MARIE (*to CORDAY*). Such fools. You and he both.

CORDAY. I know my deed, and I know myself.

MARIE (*to ANTOINETTE*). Tell her the truth, madame. Did her deed bring France any peace?

ANTOINETTE (*to CORDAY*). Alas, no, my child. Your deed was as futile as it was noble. This man's death unleashed a vengeful Saturnalia of slaughter, a feast of blood-crazed fools. The guillotine's blade never grows hoarse from singing her high-pitched glissando hundreds of times a day. Cascades of blood are spilt daily at La Place de la Révolution.

MARIE. Until a ditch was dug to the sewers, spectators waded ankle-deep in gore.

ANTOINETTE. Ribbons of human entrails flutter in the breeze like banners and festoons.

MARIE. People drink blood straight from the scaffold.

ANTOINETTE. Children behead live cats with toy guillotines, then parade their heads on sticks.

MARIE. And the Girondist deputies—those wise republicans you hoped to save—

CORDAY. What of them?

MARIE. Slaughtered in a single afternoon. I was there. They sang *La Marseillaise*, all twenty-two of them, as their heads fell one by one.

MARAT. Is it true? Then *vive la nation!*

CORDAY. Did I fail to save a single soul?

MARAT. No, you imbecilic child! You only tallied one more corpse to the roster of the dead—a man who was dying already, who would have perished in a week without the spasm of your thrust, your waste of a perfectly good kitchen knife. But you gave me victory, the precious gift of martyrdom. My work continues without pause.

MARIE (to MARAT). Your work! You are more an imbecile than she. (*snatches the paper he is writing on and shows it to him*) Read this to us. Share with us the fruits of your eloquent pen.

Well? Why don't you read it?

(*As MARAT sits staring, MARIE shows the paper to ANTOINETTE and CORDAY*).

MARIE. What do *you* see written here?

CORDAY. Nothing.

ANTOINETTE. The page is blank.

MARIE (to MARAT, *waving the paper in front of him*). This is your life's work—and your death's work too. This is what a murdered soul looks like. Had you not been murdered yourself, you would have kept right on murdering until the world was strewn with blank pages.

Last night I dreamed about a worm wriggling deep underground, stirring an inferno from a volcano's dormant embers, filling the sky with fire and torrents of molten doom that left the world in cinders, killing itself and every soul in all creation, and me among the rest. Oh, such a fine worm, so proud for just a sizzling instant of its glorious martyrdom. How you must envy that worm, Marat!

(to ANTOINETTE)

And what about you, my bodiless queen? Do you really expect to be resurrected whole, a body divine crowned with glory eternal?

(to CORDAY)

And you, my pallid huntress—are you any nobler than your writhing prey?

Such fools. If only you could see inside yourselves—your skeletons of hammered wood and leather, your entrails of straw and horse hair, the hollowness within your tallow skulls, your teeth bought cheap from traveling surgeons—and your souls, so stale and musty and vacant.

None of you can see what you really are—not with your eyes of glass.

But I can see.

I know.

(*Silence*)

MARIE. Allow me to tell you all how I went mad.

LIGHTS NARROW TO A SPOT ON MARIE.

\*

### Scene 3

(*MARIE is alone under the spot of light, dancing as she counts.*)

MARIE. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

2, 2, 3—oh, for a tune!

I learned to dance like this at Versailles, before I went mad. I lived there nine years, teaching the king's sister the ways of wax. But then I think I told you that.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

Oh, for a fine nobleman to be my partner! But I'm not yet mad enough to conjure him out of my brain.

*(ANTOINETTE appears under another spot of light, still bodiless but moving in a dancelike manner.)*

MARIE and ANTOINETTE *(in unison)*. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

2, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

ANTOINETTE. I thought I would go mad when I first came to Versailles. Such unendurable loneliness!

MARIE. Does anybody still live there—at Versailles? I hear it has fallen to ruin.

ANTOINETTE. Did anyone ever really lived there? The place seemed death itself to a girl like me. Lords and ladies roamed the halls like waxworks in a dream.

MARIE. True. But there was one lady—the lady who taught me this dance ...

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

The "Good Angel," people called her.

It was her face that drove me mad.

ANTOINETTE. My sweet Thérèse? Drove you mad? I don't believe it. She was my only friend, my only sanity. She was lonely too, made a widow when she was much too young, while I, even younger, was much too early made a wife.

*(CORDAY appears under another spot of light, also dancing.)*

CORDAY, MARIE, and ANTOINETTE *(in unison)*. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

CORDAY. We heard of her in Caen—the Princesse de Lamballe. They said she was the queen's favorite. Or at least she was for a time.

ANTOINETTE. 1, 2, 3 ...

Oh, what is the use? What I need is a keyboard and hands to play it. Maestro Christoph always said I played divinely. Thérèse and I took our lessons with him together. Once after an especially fine lesson, the maestro said to both of us ...

"I will share with you now the music of the sky. I will teach you how to play it. But you must tell no one anything about it."

He unveiled it for the two of us in secret—a harp of crystal, made up of goblets fitting into one another, end to end to end, all in a row.

*(MARAT appears under another spot of light.)*

MARAT. It's hardly any secret. I know of such an instrument—a glass armonica, it is called. An invention of Dr. Franklin's. I was there when he demonstrated it in Paris.

CORDAY. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

ANTOINETTE. The maestro moistened his fingers in a bowl of water. He pumped a treadle, and the goblets whirled like a spinning wheel, and then he touched the goblets with his fingers—and they sang like a chorus of angels!

MARAT. No angels. A machine, that's all. You can make the same tones with your fingers using drinking glasses with water in them. But glasses are hard to tune that way—and harder still to play. Franklin's machine makes more efficient music, just as the guillotine makes more efficient death.

CORDAY. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

ANTOINETTE. The maestro played such melodies, such contrapuntal wonders of sonority! “The sky is made out of crystal layered upon crystal,” he said as he played. “The sky makes music at God's touch—music mortal ears seldom hear. This instrument is a gift from God, tuned to those very crystals, to the vast harmony of the heavens.”

I sat down to try it myself. I pressed the treadle and moistened my fingers and touched the glass and ...

*(Pause)*

MARAT. You heard nothing, eh?

ANTOINETTE. No. The glass was silent. But when Thérèse sat down to play, she filled the room with that same music. I fought back tears of despair.

MARAT. I could play it just fine when I tried it. Or at least I could make that peculiar bell-like sound, not melodies exactly.

ANTOINETTE. Thérèse and I went back to my rooms and I wept in earnest.

“God loves you,” I cried. “He loves Maestro Christoph. He shares with both of you the music of the sky. Why doesn't he love me?”

Thérèse touched my face and smiled. “I love you,” she said, “and my love is the same as God's, for all love is the same. And it is my turn to tell you a secret. Flesh also is tuned to the harmonies of God. You are a harp of the sky, a harp of the tenderest crystal, and so am I. Let me moisten my finger with your tears, and I will teach you the sweet music of the sky and the flesh.”

And such music we played with fingers and tongues upon each other's bodies, my dearest Thérèse and I! The more I wept, the more music we were able to make, and the more beautiful that music became.

CORDAY. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

MARIE. The Princesse had to teach me to dance without music, only with counting ...

CORDAY *and* ANTOINETTE *(in unison)*. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

MARIE. ... and anyway, she told me we couldn't do a *real* minuet, not just the two of us. A real minuet in a real ballroom—oh, what a vision that was, she said! A hundred gentle men and ladies, weaving thousands upon thousands of little steps into vast

tapestries of motion, a ceremony of God's chosen nobility, a promise to God to preserve his intended chain of being, the order of all human souls.

CORDAY. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

MARIE. But why, I asked her, are you teaching this to me?

She cried then.

Because I am all alone, she said.

Because I have been cast out of that beautiful tapestry, she said.

Because the Queen no longer loves me.

Because the Queen loves another.

CORDAY. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

ANTOINETTE. Such a tender little thing, Thérèse, like fine crystal, so fragile to the slightest touch, weeping over little things or nothing, fainting dead away at the sight of violets, staring into space for hours at a time ...

MARIE. Such huge, sad eyes.

ANTOINETTE. She lived in the sky, I believed. But I grew tired of the sky, and so many sighs and tears. I longed for the earth and laughter.

MARIE. The Queen loves Yolande now, she told me.

ANTOINETTE. Yolande pleased me. She played at cards and jokes. Her heels clicked upon the ground, so the halls echoed with her footsteps and her laughter. And she, too, knew the music of flesh upon flesh. But Yolande and I played new and different kinds of melodies together—so full of changes and surprise, such shifts of key and time and tempo, such fluctuations of loud and soft, such staccatos and such legatos, such clusters of tones and, oh, such silences, all of it so rife with smiles and laughter and the earth.

MARIE. I left Versailles—oh, some five years ago, I think.

MARAT. The year before the Bastille fell.

MARIE. Yes, I think it was.

CORDAY. And three years before the slaughter began, and we learned of it in Caen, and I came to understand my mission.

MARIE. Three years before I went mad from the sight of her face.

*(MARAT shouts as though haranguing a crowd.)*

MARAT. Parisians! Do you fancy yourselves heroes?

MARIE *(covering her ears)*. Oh, that hideous voice.

MARAT. Where do you march in your armed battalions?

ANTOINETTE (*covering her ears*). It rattled the very walls of my prison cell.

MARAT. Go ye forth to meet the armies of tyranny marching upon Paris?

CORDAY (*covering her ears*). We could hear that beast howling in Caen, a hundred miles away.

MARAT. Fools! The enemy is already here within our gates. Our prisons are full to bursting with aristocrats, priests, traitors, and conspirators, all of them lusting for revenge against every last Parisian who ever dreamed of liberty. And while you go out playing at soldiers fighting foreign enemies, they shall break out of their cells and slaughter your wives, mothers, sisters, and children.

Oh, it is well and good for you to march into battle.

But first you must empty the prisons, kill every last enemy of freedom.

Kill them all before they destroy everything and everyone you love.

*Vive la Nation!*

*Vive la République!*

*Le jour de gloire est arrivé!*

ANTOINETTE. Then it began—the massacres of September.

CORDAY. So we heard in Caen—slaughter upon slaughter by pike and sword and the mob's bare hands.

ANTOINETTE. First they killed the priests who were held at Saint-Germain-des Près.

CORDAY. Then more priests, monks, and nuns at the convent of the Carmelites.

ANTOINETTE. And finally they raided and emptied the prisons.

CORDAY. The mob ate bread soaked in fresh blood—or so we were told in Caen. They went drunk with blood. Children played ball with human heads. Men were castrated where they fell, and laughing women filled up their aprons with their ... *parts*, and sold them as souvenirs.

MARIE. And then ... at last ... the moment when I went mad ...

CORDAY. In Caen we were told of the little lady dressed in white, who refused to swear hatred against the King and Queen. The mob tortured her for hours, 'twas said. They tore off her breasts with their teeth. They cut out her heart. A man ate it while it was still beating.

MARAT. Nonsense. It was grilled first.

CORDAY. 'Twas said ...

They tore her limb from limb and disemboweled her.

'Twas said ...

They carried her head on a pike to the Temple, where the Queen was held prisoner.

'Twas said ...

They raised it up to her window for her to see, roaring with laughter. “Come see whose lovely head we’ve brought, Your Majesty! You’ve got a visit from your sweetheart!”

ANTOINETTE. “Don’t look, madame,” my waiting lady said.

“Whose head is it?” I said.

“You mustn’t look,” she said.

“Is it someone I love?” I said.

“You mustn’t look.”

MARIE. I locked myself in, right here inside my workshop, trying to lose myself in work, stuffing wads of wax into my ears to keep out the shrieks of agony and laughter in the streets, but when men came to my door and pounded on it and threatened me with death, I didn’t dare ignore them, and I let them in.

“You are the artist woman, eh?”

“I am.”

“We have a job for you, then. You must make a certain lady’s likeness for us.”

And one of them thrust it my face, holding it by the hair—a face I remembered so well, with huge sad eyes.

And the head opened its lovely lips and spoke ...

*I am alone.*

*The Queen no longer loves me.*

*The Queen loves another.*

ANTOINETTE. May the Mother of God forgive me!

MARIE. Is it any wonder I then went mad?

*(General lighting suddenly comes up. The characters except for MARIE change their personae:*

*MARAT becomes a prison guard;*

*CORDAY becomes MARIE’s prison cellmate;*

*ANTOINETTE becomes a woman whose job it is to prepare prisoners for execution; she is trying to cut MARIE’s hair.*

*MARIE is insane and speaking to no one in particular.)*

ANTOINETTE *(to MARIE)*. Oh, you’re a mad one, all right.

MARAT. The battiest prisoner I’ve seen in this lock-up.

MARIE. I have to make a cast of your face.

ANTOINETTE *(to MARIE)*. Hold still and stop talking or I’m liable to cut you.

MARAT. Heh. She’s fated for cutting, and right direly, too.

MARIE. Last night I dreamed about a worm.

ANTOINETTE. Eh? Well, so did I.

MARIE. Oil, so the plaster won't stick.

MARAT (*to ANTOINETTE*). Think you can lop off her head with those scissors?  
'Twould save her a trip to the guillotine, and Sanson a bit of work.

ANTOINETTE. I don't get paid enough for that.

MARIE. I lived at Versailles eight years.

CORDAY (*to ANTOINETTE*). What's the daft girl carrying on about now?

MARIE. You were very kind to me in those days, madame.

ANTOINETTE. Oh, the same old thing. How she lived in Versailles and knew all the fine folks there.

MARIE. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

ANTOINETTE. And something about dancing too.

MARIE. The "Good Angel," people called her.

ANTOINETTE. And how the sight of some wench's head drove her stark mad.

CORDAY (*to ANTOINETTE*). Tell her to shut up, why don't you? I'd like to get a little sleep.

MARAT. Heh. I reckon you'll get a nice long sleep right soon. What brought you here this fine day?

CORDAY. My bastard husband denounced me, told Robespierre himself I said "long live the king" in my sleep. I said no such thing.

MARAT. How do you know what you said in your sleep?

CORDAY. I've got a pretty good idea—something to do with my husband's best friend's fine big cock.

MARIE. When did your hair turn white?

CORDAY. It must be nice, going mad and having no idea what's coming to you. How long has this one been here waiting her turn?

ANTOINETTE. Since before I started working here.

MARAT. It's been three months—and every day expecting to feel the pinch of the blade. Small wonder her mind is gone. Lord knows when they'll get around to finishing her off. Maybe they've just forgotten all about her.

MARIE. Such fools, all of you.

CORDAY. Fools are we?

MARIE. None of you know what you really are.

ANTOINETTE. And what *are* we, pray?

MARIE. Pieces of broken me.

BLACKOUT.

\*

Scene 4

*The Cabinet of Curtius, July 29, 1894.*

*The figure of MARIE ANTOINETTE is now complete; her hair is cut short, and she is dressed in the simple white morning dress she wore to her execution. She is kneeling and clutching a rosary, and her eyes are turned upward in prayer.*

*The figures of CHARLOTTE CORDAY and JEAN-PAUL MARAT are the same as in Act I, posed in the tableau of MARAT's assassination.*

*On a table stage center are a flintlock pistol and the equipment for its use—a powder flask, a powder measure, a ball starter, patches, a priming tool, and a single ball.*

*All three of the figures are frozen into their poses. MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE, by contrast, moves among them, looking very much alive. He wears spectacles and is dressed fastidiously in the manner of the Ancien Régime, wearing a powdered wig and silk stockings and a sky blue coat with a frilled neck.*

*MARIE GROSHOTZ stands watching him peer at the figure of ANTOINETTE.*

ROBESPIERRE. Looking as if she were alive. Astonishing. An instructive and edifying display, citizeness.

*(MARIE does not respond to this compliment.)*

ROBESPIERRE. And yet ... I can't help but wonder ... is it well and good to portray the Widow Capet in the moments before her execution—and in such an attitude? With her short hair and in such simple dress, one might mistake her for the Maid of Orléans, preparing her soul for her martyrdom. Is that the image we wish to convey of France's last royal oppressor?

*(MARIE crosses her arms silently.)*

ROBESPIERRE. Not that I ever wished the woman any pain or sadness, please believe me. I hope she did pray for forgiveness in her final hour, and that the Supreme Being granted her pardon, and that she gained the immortality of which I dream myself. Still, it worries me to see her this way ...

*(ROBESPIERRE turns away to look at the tableau of MARAT and CORDAY. Without moving, ANTOINETTE speaks.)*

ANTOINETTE. I am sorry my attitude does not suit you, *Citizen Robespierre*.

(ROBESPIERRE *turns toward her in surprise.*)

ROBESPIERRE. Remarkable. The figures here are so lifelike, I almost believe I hear them speak.

(ROBESPIERRE *turns away again, then freezes as he hears ANTOINETTE's voice again.*)

ANTOINETTE. When the executioner came to my cell to fetch me, I was granted one final privilege—to squat over a bucket in a corner and relieve myself in full sight of my guards. Perhaps you would find that a more edifying pose.

(ROBESPIERRE *turns toward her again.*)

ROBESPIERRE. I can't say I'm altogether pleased by what I imagine them to say.

(ROBESPIERRE *steps toward her.*)

ROBESPIERRE (*to ANTOINETTE*). I do wish we could have spoken while you were alive. We might have cleared up so many misunderstandings. Our paths crossed a few times in Versailles, when I was first sent there as a deputy to the Estates-General. You took no notice of me, of course.

A filthy place, Versailles. We deputies were supplied with leather umbrellas to shield us from excrement thrown from the upper windows of the palace. I had no idea the aristocracy lived in such squalor.

I wish I could have told you ...

I love animals. Did you know that? I don't think I could survive without a dog. Animals are so pure, so virtuous, so utterly incorruptible.

I kept pigeons when I was a little boy in Arras. I built a spacious, comfy cage for them in my room. My sister Charlotte and I fell especially in love with a pigeon of a most affectionate nature, who liked to rub our fingers against her silky neck. Her coat was white, almost purely so, and she cooed with a most soothing vibrato. Charlotte named her Heloise.

My sister was terrified of thunderstorms. One evening we heard the rumblings of an approaching storm, and we knew it was going to be a dreadful night.

"Oh, please, please," Charlotte begged me, "let me take Heloise to my bedroom. She'll nestle on my pillow against my cheek and coo me to sleep, and I'll sleep so soundly I'll never even hear any thunder."

How could I refuse?

We put Heloise in a little cage, and Charlotte took her away for the night, and oh, the storm was much worse than we'd expected, with rivers of rain and artillery blasts of lightning and thunder. The next morning I went out into the garden to see what damage the storm had done, and ...

There was little white Heloise, drowned in her cage.

Charlotte had left her outdoors the whole night through.

(*wiping away a tear*)

Just imagine—the pitiful creature’s terror, her bafflement at how two children who loved her and whom she loved in return could have betrayed her so. I can’t think of it even now without weeping.

And I don’t suppose I’ve forgiven Charlotte to this very day.

Poor Charlotte.

I believe she grieved as much as I did—or perhaps more, for she grieved at her first bitter taste of her soul’s corruption, grieved at the—*inscrutability* of her own cruelty.

*(taking a step toward ANTOINETTE.)*

I wish I could have told you that story while you lived.

I wish I could have asked you what it meant.

How could a child do such a thing? Was it blind perversity or a childish experiment in spite? Surely you knew the answer—you, who turned your back on innocent creatures without number, left them to perish amid the world’s vicissitudes, drowning or starving or freezing.

*(MARAT and CORDAY speak without moving.)*

MARAT. Any fool can answer that.

CORDAY *(to MARAT)*. Hush.

MARAT. We’re not all of us saints, that’s all.

CORDAY. Hush.

MARAT. But then, I suppose the Maid of Orléans never squatted over a bucket, eh?

CORDAY. Hush, I said.

*(ROBESPIERRE turns toward MARAT and CORDAY, who are silent and motionless.)*

ROBESPIERRE *(smiling, to MARIE)*. Yes, so very lifelike. You must think I am a bit mad, talking to mute wax figures. Indulge me, please. Although I make hundreds of speeches, I seldom get the opportunity to truly speak my mind—and never to such illustrious dead.

*(ROBESPIERRE steps toward the tableau of CORDAY and MARAT.)*

ROBESPIERRE. Now *here’s* an instructive scene, indeed. The martyrdom of Jean-Paul Marat, the People’s Friend, by ... a most extraordinary young woman. But who were you, Charlotte Corday? You came and went so quickly, played your chosen role and perished, I never even caught a glimpse of you. I’m told we had quite a lot in common—a devotion to divine Rousseau, reverence for heroes of republican Rome, especially Cicero, Cato, and Lucius Junius Brutus. I would like to think we also shared a certain implacability of will. Also a certain ... aloneness. And yet—you were an enemy of the Revolution. How could that be?

ANTOINETTE (*to ROBESPIERRE*). She had a heart. You've got a pigeon caged up in your ribs.

*(If ROBESPIERRE hears this, he ignores it.)*

ROBESPIERRE. In a way, Marat, I almost envy you. It must be very easy to be dead, to be a symbol rather than a man, to *mean* rather than to *be*—or to *do*. And in death, you *mean* so much more than you ever were or did. And you are so much more useful. At least now we can control you.

I think I envied you even in life. How glorious in the peoples' hearts to be poor, pursued, persecuted, and sick unto death, all in the service of mankind! Mind you, I've learned a bit about persecution myself since you were killed. But my petty struggles against the enemies of France cannot capture the popular fancy like the torments of a man running through sewers with hounds at his heels.

Even your ugliness and that horrible croaking voice of yours were—how shall I say it?—romantic in a way. Women adored you, I am told. You made your share of conquests before you became a married man.

Or so they say.

It is hard to imagine.

We spoke face to face but once, do you remember? We weren't contentious. We agreed on whatever it was we discussed—the futility of foreign wars, I believe it was. We were allies, after all. But I didn't like you, and I don't believe you liked me either.

For one thing—do pardon me for saying so—you stank. Literally, I mean. Pus oozed out of enormous blisters all over you. I scarcely dared to breathe for fear that your very hideousness might be ... well, contagious, somehow.

I didn't tell you so, of course.

But I did tell you what I thought of your dreadful newspaper with its violent crazed rhetoric, your ceaseless bayings and clamorings for the people to kill again and again in greater and greater numbers, to shed rivers of blood beyond any purpose.

ANTOINETTE. And don't you know a thing or two about bloodshed, Citizen Robespierre?

*(ROBESPIERRE turns toward her with surprise. MARAT speaks to ANTOINETTE while ROBESPIERRE is looking away from him.)*

MARAT. Does he, madame? The last I heard, he was squeamish at the mere mention of blood. Railed tediously against the death penalty. A pitiable softhearted fellow.

*(ROBESPIERRE turns toward MARAT at the sound of his voice. ANTOINETTE speaks when ROBESPIERRE is looking away from her.)*

ANTOINETTE. Oh, you've got some catching up to do, Marat. He has become more of a monster than you ever dreamed of being. The Terror is all his doing.

*(ROBESPIERRE turns to ANTOINETTE again. CORDAY speaks to ANTOINETTE and MARAT.)*

CORDAY. Hush, the both of you.

*(ROBESPIERRE turns toward CORDAY, but she is still and silent.  
ROBESPIERRE looks around at all three of the figures, then speaks to MARIE.)*

ROBESPIERRE. Your exhibit really does have an extraordinary effect upon the imagination, my dear.

ANTOINETTE. Oh, for pity's sake, must we keep up this charade forever?

CORDAY. Please hush, madame.

ANTOINETTE. I won't hush.

MARAT. Nor will I. This has become absurd.

*(Pause; for the first time, ROBESPIERRE has seen as well as heard the figures speaking.)*

ROBESPIERRE. I'm dreaming.

CORDAY. Yes, yes, that's what this is—you're dreaming.

MARAT. No more lies, girl.

CORDAY. He's not ready to know yet.

ANTOINETTE. It doesn't matter, he'll never be ready.

MARAT. None of us were ready.

ANTOINETTE. And anyway, the illusion is shattered.

*(Silence)*

ROBESPIERRE *(stunned)*. But how ... in the name of reason ... ?

*(ROBESPIERRE collapses to the floor and loses consciousness.)*

MARIE *(to MARAT, CORDAY, and ANTOINETTE)*. Now you've done it.

ANTOINETTE. Does he know the truth?

MARIE. No, he only knows he knows nothing at all. The truth will take some work, and we can't put it off any longer. Get ready to play your parts.

CORDAY. But what *are* our parts?

MARIE. You'll learn them as you play them.

*(MARIE stoops over ROBESPIERRE and shakes him awake.)*

MARIE. Citizen Robespierre, listen to me. Can you hear me?

ROBESPIERRE. Who are you?

MARIE. It doesn't matter who I am. Do you know where you are?

ROBESPIERRE. What happened to me?

MARIE. You fell down frothing at the mouth, twisting and writhing with your eyes rolling like marbles. It must have been a fit of the falling sickness. Come to your senses, quick. You've got no time.

ROBESPIERRE. But—?

MARIE. Don't you remember? The Convention turned against you. You and your allies are now branded outlaws. You are cornered in an office in the Hôtel de Ville, besieged by the Convention's army. Soldiers will be upon you at any moment.

ROBESPIERRE. Yes, yes, it is coming back to me, but—but my companions, the men who swore to share my fate ...

MARIE. There is no one to help you.

ROBESPIERRE. Where is Augustin?

MARIE. Your brother threw himself from a window and fell upon soldiers' bayonets. He's desperately wounded.

ROBESPIERRE. Where is François Hanriot?

MARIE. Escaped. No one knows how, but he won't live long. He left a trail of blood.

ROBESPIERRE. The cripple Couthon?

MARIE. Dragged away by his feet.

ROBESPIERRE. Saint-Just?

MARIE. Surrendered without a word.

ROBESPIERRE. Philippe Le Bas?

MARIE. Shot himself dead just now.

CORDAY. What are you going to do?

ROBESPIERRE. I—I can't allow myself to be taken.

ANTOINETTE. Do you wish to defend yourself?

ROBESPIERRE. Yes, yes, I must.

*(ANTOINETTE and CORDAY are now playing their improvised roles, soon to be joined by MARAT. MARIE picks up the pistol and shows it to ROBESPIERRE.)*

MARIE. You have only this to do it with. Le Bas left just one single shot. You'll have to make the most of it—if the weapon fires at all. Here. Take it.

ROBESPIERRE. But ... I don't ...

CORDAY. Oh, for the love of heaven. Don't tell me you don't know how to load a pistol.

ROBESPIERRE. I ... I never ...

ANTOINETTE. You never even *fired* a pistol?

(ROBESPIERRE *shakes his head.*)

ANTOINETTE. You, who killed thousands?

CORDAY. Ridiculous.

ANTOINETTE. Have you never gone hunting?

CORDAY. *I've* gone hunting.

ANTOINETTE. So have I.

CORDAY. And not just for venison—for wild boar as well.

ANTOINETTE. So have I.

ROBESPIERRE. Please ... just show me ...

CORDAY. Very well, we'll talk you through it.

(ROBESPIERRE *clumsily begins to load the weapon according to their instructions.*)

ANTOINETTE. Pull the flint hammer into the half-cocked position.

CORDAY. Set the powder measure for, oh, twenty grains, I think.

MARAT. Gunpowder, yes, a transformative invention, where would modern civilization would be without it?

ANTOINETTE. Pour powder into the measure from the flask.

MARAT. A cunning mixture of charcoal, sulfur, and saltpeter—blended in respective proportions of 15, 10, and 75 percent, if I remember my chemistry correctly.

ANTOINETTE. Then pour it from the measure into the muzzle.

MARAT. In Cathay, I hear, it was first believed to be an elixir of life—that is, until some fool alchemist blew himself to bits with it.

CORDAY. Put a patch over the muzzle and cover it with the ball.

MARAT. Well, 'twas no loss. What a fine elixir of death it turned out to be. We've only begun to tap its possibilities.

ANTOINETTE. Use the ball starter to push it into the muzzle—the stumpy part to get it started, then the rod to push it farther down inside.

MARAT. Don't worry, the powder won't explode while you're loading. It has to be ignited first. The gun is a cunning system of springs and levers for making that happen, an excellent little machine.

CORDAY. Take up the ramrod.

ANTOINETTE. Push it down inside the barrel.

CORDAY. *Push*, she said.

ANTOINETTE. For pity's sake, you handle a ramrod just like my husband when he ... never mind.

CORDAY. Harder.

MARAT. Yes, until the ball is all the way inside. Leave no space between it and the powder. The explosion, you see, is an eruptive expansion of pent-up gas. Any air in that gap could make the gun blow up in your face.

ANTOINETTE. Open up the frizzen.

CORDAY. Put some powder in the flash pan.

ANTOINETTE. Enough to catch a spark.

CORDAY. But not enough to cover the flash hole.

MARAT. And now—oh, this is most fascinating. You are priming this machine to be more than a machine—to be, for just a moment, a living thing with fire for a soul.

ANTOINETTE. Close the frizzen.

CORDAY. Pull the hammer into the full-cocked position.

*(ROBESPIERRE does so, then shakily raises the gun and aims directly in front of him. He prepares to fire as MARAT continues.)*

MARAT. When you pull the trigger, the flint will strike and scrape against the frizzen, generating a spark that will ignite the powder in the flash pan, freeing a slender tongue of flame to snake its way into the flash hole, igniting the powder inside the bore, discharging the ball and—

CORDAY *(interrupting MARAT; to ROBESPIERRE)*. Wait.

ANTOINETTE *(to ROBESPIERRE)*. What are you going to do?

*(ROBESPIERRE's voice and hand both tremble as he tries to aim.)*

ROBESPIERRE. I am going to put a ball through the head of the first enemy of the Republic who comes into view.

CORDAY. Easier said than done.

ANTOINETTE. A flintlock is wretchedly hard to aim at even the slightest distance.

CORDAY. How near will you let your enemy approach before you pull the trigger?

ROBESPIERRE. Until he is close enough for me to ... to ...

ANTOINETTE. See the cleft of his chin?

CORDAY. The teeth of his pearly white smile?

ANTOINETTE. The dimple on his left cheek?

MARAT. There is no telling how long the ignition will take.

ANTOINETTE. It might be a blink of an eye.

CORDAY. Or much longer.

ANTOINETTE. It can seem like an eternity.

MARAT. If it doesn't misfire altogether.

ROBESPIERRE. Then ... then ... I will ...

ANTOINETTE. And with one ball only, and a whole army storming the halls!

CORDAY. At best you might take down one man.

ANTOINETTE. And to what purpose?

MARAT. You, who so abhor violence in any form?

ANTOINETTE. You, whose life is lost already?

CORDAY. Why take another life?

*(ROBESPIERRE lowers the weapon and gazes at it; during the lines that follow, he slowly lifts the gun and points it at the side of his head.)*

MARAT. Better to surrender yourself to the mercy of the tenderest egalitarian of them all—the guillotine.

CORDAY *(to MARAT)*. Do you think so, really?

MARAT. Rather than die by a kitchen knife in my breast, I would have chosen to test my courage against that finer blade.

ANTOINETTE. Little do you know, Marat ...

CORDAY. ... it is not the blade that tests one's courage.

ANTOINETTE. It is the ride in the tumbrel.

CORDAY. The idiotic silent gawking of the crowd.

ANTOINETTE. The sneering cacophonous mockery and laughter.

CORDAY. But humiliation is the bliss of saints and heroes.

ANTOINETTE. I welcomed it. It affirmed my innocence.

CORDAY. I smiled and laughed on the scaffold.

ANTOINETTE. I exulted in my heart.

CORDAY. Still, it would have been finer to die by my own hand.

ANTOINETTE. Or easier at least.

CORDAY. Better to have swallowed hot coals like Portia.

ANTOINETTE. A razor to the wrists would do.

MARAT (*to ROBESPIERRE*). You have the choice that none of us did.

ANTOINETTE. To die like a coward.

CORDAY. No, to die like a Roman.

*(ROBESPIERRE pulls the trigger; there is only a click; ROBESPIERRE's face is bathed in white light; he relaxes his grip on the gun.)*

ROBESPIERRE. What's this?

I hear ... I feel ...

ANTOINETTE. What do you hear?

CORDAY. What do you feel?

ROBESPIERRE. The beating of my heart.

ANTOINETTE. Are you sure it is your heart?

ROBESPIERRE. No. It is more of a ...

CORDAY. A fluttering?

ROBESPIERRE. Yes.

ANTOINETTE. A flapping of wings?

ROBESPIERRE. Yes, and a soft sweet murmuring sound.

CORDAY. A cooing, maybe?

ANTOINETTE. With a soothing vibrato?

ROBESPIERRE. Yes! Oh, yes! It must be ...

CORDAY. Your precious bird.

ANTOINETTE. Little white Heloise.

ROBESPIERRE. She lives! She lives!

CORDAY. She is caged inside your breast.

ANTOINETTE. She wants to be free.

ROBESPIERRE. How may I set her at liberty?

ANTOINETTE. The bars of your ribs are hinged.

CORDAY. Open them up.

*(With his free hand, ROBESPIERRE pantomimes opening the cage door of his ribs and gasps.)*

ROBESPIERRE. Oh! There she is, fluttering free! She is transformed, whiter than ever, a dove of grace and transcendent beauty. She adorns my head with feathers, leads me by a chain of flowers amongst a host of angels, a procession of eternal welcome into the Celestial Republic.

Children adorn me with wreaths of violets, youths with garlands of myrtle, men with leaves of oak, women with abundances of blossoms, and elder folk with ivy and olive.

But what do I see in the path before me?

Three terrible giants stand in my way—the Ogres of Atheism, Discord, and Selfishness.

An angel arms me with a fiery brand.

I set the ogres ablaze.

What glorious fountains of leaping flame those monsters make!

And out of their smoking embers, the radiant Goddess of Wisdom rises like a phoenix, her companion owl on her shoulder, bearing her shield with its frozen reflection of beheaded tyranny.

The owl and my dove frolic together upon the breeze, while Wisdom guides me among the stairways and tunnels of the Mountain of Reason to its very summit, where the Tree of Liberty grows lofty and everlasting.

Oh, Goddess of Wisdom ... Oh, Angels of the Republican Hereafter ... lift me up to the branches of Liberty, that I may climb and climb to the very highest branch until I touch the Supreme Being, whose flawless face is the firmament, the vault of the sky itself ...

*(A pistol shot is heard; ROBESPIERRE falls silent.)*

ANTOINETTE. There is no sky.

MARAT. The powder can take a long time to ignite.

*(ROBESPIERRE looks at his pistol, which is pointed toward his chin; he lowers it to the table. The white light on his face fades. As MARIE speaks, MARAT, CORDAY, and ANTOINETTE cloak Robespierre in black and remove his white wig, making him appear—as ANTOINETTE did during Act 1—like a disembodied floating head.)*

MARIE. I don't know how long I waited in that cell for death.

A woman kept cutting my hair, the jailor's key rattled, the door growled on its hinges, a beam of light pried its way into my cell, a shadowy prisoner was brought in or taken out, and the door grumbled shut again.

Again and again and again and again.

And all by the signed orders of Maximilien Robespierre, they said.

One by one, prisoners arrived there to await their turns to die.

One by one, they were led away to the guillotine.

All of them except me.

I waited and waited in that darkness.

When, I wondered, would I be chosen for the blade?

I had nothing else to look forward to.

But hope faded and died, even my hope for death.

I was at peace.

The opening and closing of the door—what was it except the ticking of a clock, so friendly in its monotony?

I was content to pass eternity listening to it.

But when the door opened for the last time, men I'd never seen before came into my cell.

"Marie Grosholtz, you are free to go," one of them said.

I stared at the silhouetted figures.

I didn't know what to say.

"Did you hear? The Terror has ended. Your sentence has been lifted. You may go forth and live."

Something swelled up in my throat—a bitterness I'd almost forgotten.

How long had it been since I was angry?

I couldn't remember.

"How dare you bring me hope?" I said to my visitors. "I thought I'd gotten over that—that *sickness* at long last. I thought I was cured of it forever. Get out of here. Take the stench of your hope with you. Leave me here and don't come back."

The men stood staring for a moment.

Then they turned to leave.

"Wait," I said. "Where is the man who put me here? Where is Robespierre?"

"Dead."

"How did he die?"

"In terrible pain. It's best not to speak of it."

"Tell me."

“He tried to shoot himself, but he shattered his jaw instead. He lay on his back on a plank of wood with a pine box under his head, soaked in his own blood with a bandage holding his jaw together, waiting all night and all the next day too for the verdict of his death. At last he was carted away to the guillotine. Before the blade fell, the executioner ripped off the bandage, and his jaw dropped away. He died howling like animal.”

“How long ago did he die?” I asked with a quickening heart.

“Oh, but an hour or so ago.”

“So his head is still fresh?”

“Of course.”

“May I borrow it?”

“I suppose.”

“Then bring it to me, so I may immortalize his pain in wax.”

*(MARIE reaches for ROBESPIERRE’s jaw and wrenches it. His face contorts with pain, blood trickles from the corner of his mouth, and a scream of agony is heard. MARIE speaks to CORDAY, ANTOINETTE, and MARAT.)*

MARIE. He is ready to join you now.

BLACKOUT.

\*

Scene 5

*Total darkness, except for a dim spot of light showing a motionless human figure draped with a sheet. Silence. Then the sound of CORDAY’s voice.*

CORDAY. It’s so dark. *(pause)* Where am I? *(pause)* Am I alone?

*(The word “alone” is echoed sequentially by MARAT, ROBESPIERRE, and ANTOINETTE.)*

CORDAY. Is anybody there?

*(The word “there” is echoed in the same way.)*

CORDAY. *Who* is there?

*(“There” is echoed again; a spot of light rises on CORDAY.)*

CORDAY. Where am I?

*(MARAT, ROBESPIERRE, and ANTOINETTE echo the word “I.”)*

CORDAY. Are you there ... Marat?

*(Instead of echoing the name Marat, the characters echo each other's names: MARAT calls "Robespierre?", ROBESPIERRE calls "Widow Capet?", and ANTOINETTE calls "Charlotte?" Dim light rises on the other figures; ANTOINETTE, CORDAY, and ROBESPIERRE are all dressed as they were at rise of the previous scene; no longer in his tub, MARAT now wears the costume of a sans-culotte.)*

CORDAY. There you are!

ANTOINETTE *(echo-like, to CORDAY)*. ... you are!

ROBESPIERRE *(to ANTOINETTE)*. ... you are!

MARAT *(to ROBESPIERRE)*. ... you are!

CORDAY. But what is this place?

ROBESPIERRE. Is it a place at all?

ANTOINETTE *(indicating MARAT)*. Perhaps our philosopher can tell us.

MARAT. Naturally, we are where we have been since we died—inside the wax sculptress's brain.

CORDAY. Why is it so dark?

MARAT. If I tell you my surmise, you may not like it.

ROBESPIERRE. Well?

MARAT. The host brain is dying. The sculptress is dying. Perhaps she has been beheaded. Or stabbed. Or is languishing with some fatal disease. Regardless, she is not long for this world. And neither are we. It is only by the grace and bounty of her madness that we're here at all.

CORDAY. But how long do we still have?

MARAT. That depends upon—

*(MARAT is interrupted by the sudden appearance of MARIE—now Madame Tussaud; she speaks to the audience as if to a crowd of exhibition patrons. For the first time in the play, she speaks with a pronounced French accent.)*

MARIE. Good people of England, welcome, welcome!

And you of Ireland, too, and Scotland, and Wales—and perhaps one or two of you from the American States, yes?

Thank you, thank you, for coming to the opening of Madame Tussaud's London Cabinet of Wonders. Such warm greetings you give this humble artisan from France! You make me feel so quite at home.

*(MARIE freezes; pause.)*

ANTOINETTE. She doesn't seem to be dead.

*(MARIE comes to life again, still speaking to the audience.)*

MARIE. Who would believe that we feared each other for mortal enemies, you British and we French, mere weeks ago, eh? I hope you will partake of my wonders with joy, and you will leave this place—*satiated* with your visit, and I will make good on my motto, *Vide et Crede*—“see and believe.”

*(MARIE freezes; ROBESPIERRE walks toward MARIE and waves his hand in front of her eyes.)*

ROBESPIERRE. Madame ... Madame ... Madame ... *(to the other figures)* She doesn't seem to be aware of us.

MARAT. And therein lies the problem. Her awareness of us is all we are.

CORDAY *(falling to her knees)*. I can't breathe.

MARAT. You have no need of breath.

CORDAY. It hurts.

ANTOINETTE. Where does it hurt, my dear?

MARAT. You know better than to ask such a question.

ANTOINETTE *(to MARAT)*. Show some humanity this once. The girl who murdered you is dreadfully ill.

CORDAY. The void hurts.

MARAT. Yes, the void yawns aching before us all. You are the first to succumb to it. Soon the rest of us shall as well. She no longer thinks of us. Our end is near.

*(MARIE comes to life and speaks to the audience again.)*

MARIE. But let us ado no further. I promised you a surprise and a thrill of a lifetime. Let me reveal to you my latest likeness.

*(MARIE pulls the sheet off the figure, which turns out to be a plain manikin; but projected upstage is the portrait of Bonaparte as First Consul by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. MARIE freezes. Reviving somewhat, CORDAY walks dazedly toward the manikin, talking to it.)*

CORDAY. Oh ... I know you ... I have dreamed of you ... You are the man I hoped to share my bed ... the man to whom I would give myself at long last ... to be the father of my children ...

MARAT (*to CORDAY*). Child, he is merely a thing of wax.

ROBESPIERRE. And aren't we the same?

MARAT. No, we are more—or we used to be.

CORDAY (*to the manikin*). Your absence is my aching. Fill me with your strength. You alone can give me strength.

ANTOINETTE (*to CORDAY*). I don't believe he will answer, my dear.

MARAT. No, he will not answer.

(*MARIE comes to life again, speaking to the audience about the figure.*)

MARIE. Ah, do not tremble with fright, my friends! And above all, do not accost him. He does not come to England to make war. Remember, he is not your enemy now—not since the Treaty of Amiens.

(*MARIE freezes.*)

ANTOINETTE (*to CORDAY*). What is his name?

CORDAY. In my dreams, he has no name.

ROBESPIERRE. I believe I saw him once or twice. Yes, he became president of the Jacobins some years ago, and I heard him give a speech or two at the club. He was young, a mere lad, and he must be young even now. "The lad will go far," I told somebody at the time. "For he believes in absolutely nothing."

MARAT. Not even in himself?

ROBESPIERRE. I sensed that he had no self. He was quite—empty.

(*MARIE comes to life, as before.*)

MARIE. It is not often that I show the face and figure of someone who still lives. And how rarer still it is for me to take the face of a living man. Will you permit me to tell you of it? Perhaps I cannot talk so without boasting, but even still ...

(*MARIE freezes.*)

CORDAY. He is a man from the pages of divine Rousseau.

ROBESPIERRE. I don't remember Rousseau writing about ... an empty man.

CORDAY. The man of my dreams is not empty.

MARAT. Was it he who put it in your head to murder me?

CORDAY. Of course not. And anyway, I think you have written about him yourself.

MARAT. Him? I don't remember it.

(MARIE comes to life.)

MARIE. At six o'clock one morning, not long before I departed for England, I was summoned to the Tuileries, where I was scurried into the presence of the great warrior himself, and his beautiful Josephine.

(MARIE freezes.)

CORDAY (to MARAT). Have you not accused the people of loving their chains?

MARAT. I have, confound the lot of them. How wretchedly hard it is to persuade the herd that liberty is better than slavery. More than once I almost gave up the game of setting them free.

CORDAY. And didn't Rousseau say people must sometimes be forced to be free?

MARAT. He did. And of course he was right.

(MARIE comes to life.)

MARIE. "Do as you did for Antoinette, Marat, Corday, and Robespierre," was his command. "Create my double, so much like myself it could rule in my stead with no one being the wiser—if only it could breathe and move and speak with my genius."

(MARIE freezes.)

CORDAY (to MARAT). And didn't you yourself prophesy the coming of a dictator to fulfill the revolution?

MARAT. Yes, a true statesman and a patriot.

CORDAY. A great man.

ROBESPIERRE (to CORDAY). Your great man is nobody at all.

(MARIE comes to life.)

MARIE. Well, I did not tell him what I suppose he must have known already—that I procured those other likenesses from corpses and lopped heads. The task before me, the taking of a *living* legend, was therefore most daunting. But I had to obey the First Consul's command.

(MARIE freezes.)

ROBESPIERRE (to CORDAY). And never mind what you read in Rousseau. I met him before he died. He told me great men have nothing to say. They have no selves, no

insides. They are hollow to the core. Quite—dumb, despite all the noise they make and the chaos they stir up.

ANTOINETTE (*to ROBESPIERRE*). *You spoke endlessly.*

ROBESPIERRE. I was never a great man. I was *the people*.

ANTOINETTE. Oh. Well then.

(*MARIE comes to life.*)

MARIE. I mixed the plaster and told him what was to come, how his face would be oiled and coated over entire, and how he would breathe through straws the while for the plaster to be setting, and I told him not to be alarmed.

“Alarmed!” he said. “I would not be alarmed if you surrounded my head with loaded pistols!”

(*MARIE laughs, then freezes.*)

ROBESPIERRE. The people finds its voice where it will. My lips and tongue gave shape to that voice, the voice of the general will, which poured out of my throat like a river. When any pure soul makes of himself a temple to man’s original virtue, he becomes *the people*.

MARAT. I preferred to be “the People’s Rage.” Such temples of purity and virtue demand endless and costly upkeep.

(*MARIE comes to life.*)

MARIE. It is said of him—or so they say in France—he is a man whose destiny is to bring an end to all of history. If so, perhaps my work as a chronicler of history in wax will end as well.

ANTOINETTE. A man of destiny, she calls him. He doesn’t look like one to me.

MARIE. Shall that be sad for me, do you suppose?

Shall that be sweet?

Well.

At least France and England are at peace for now.

There are those who say such peace may not last, but by God’s good grace, let us believe it may.

(*MARIE freezes.*)

CORDAY. Is he then not ... the man of whom I dreamed?

MARAT (*to CORDAY*). Touch him if you want to know.

(*CORDAY touches the manikin’s face, then steps away from it.*)

CORDAY (*weakening again*). He's really dead.

MARAT. Child, he was never alive.

ANTOINETTE. He is merely a wax illusion, my dear.

ROBESPIERRE. So is the man himself, dead in the very midst of life, and so are all the multitudes who follow and adore him, their innocent minds made rancid by the cunning illusion of power.

(MARIE *comes to life*.)

MARIE. But, my such new friends, may I make to you a confession? May I tell you a secret I have not told a living soul, nor here in England nor back in France?

It may interest you.

Very well.

In Paris, in the deeps of the Terror, sleepless for days and nights, holding heads in my lap to take the faces of the dead, commanded to my gruesome task by the tyrants of the Terror, my fingers sticky wet with blood and plaster in the howling dark ...

ANTOINETTE. Well?

MARIE. I went utter and completely mad.

I heard phantom voices, danced with ghostly figures, held—*discourse* with them, they became my sole companions as the real world slipped away.

But do not fear, for I am sane again.

Those phantoms have retreated into shadowy wrinkles of my brain.

MARAT. Ah. *That* is the cause of our undoing.

MARIE. And how, you may ask, was my saneness restored? Let me show you.

(MARIE *proceeds to do the simple, common illusionist trick of making a coin appear out of thin air. First she shows the palm of her right hand, apparently empty.*)

MARIE. Do you see anything here? Look again.

(MARIE *closes her right hand, waves her other hand in front of it, and reopens it to reveal the coin between her fingers.*)

MARIE. *Voilà!*

Can you not see it well from where you stand? No matter. You are like to be carrying one or more of these in your pockets and purses, so

look there for them. One of you—which?—handed me this one when you first entered here.

*(MARIE drops the coin into a purse hanging from her wrist—or she appears to do so; she actually palms it again and hides it from sight.)*

MARAT. She has displaced us with another illusion.

MARIE. Was it you, *monsieur*? Or you, *mademoiselle*? Or you, *madame*? I don't know, and anyway, it doesn't matter.

*(MARIE repeats the trick, producing the coin again as if out of thin air.)*

MARIE. Let us all pause to look rightly at the coins in our own hands. Look at the face, a portly profile facing rightward, circled by words—*Georgius Tertius Dei Gratia*. My Latin is little, but I take that to mean “George III by the Grace of God.”

MARAT. She has given herself over to the service of God and Mammon.

*(MARIE drops the coin into her purse again.)*

MARIE. Ah, “by the Grace of God”! I had almost forgot how such words ring.

ANTOINETTE *(to MARAT)*. But that's simply wrong. One cannot serve both God *and* Mammon.

MARIE. God is just now returning to France after some years of exile, and his reception there is, so to speak, awkward, mutually.

MARAT *(to ANTOINETTE)*. Oh, *she* can—because she sees no difference.

MARIE. But God has never left the hearts or the lands of the English, and of course he never shall.

CORDAY *(to MARAT)*. I don't understand.

*(MARIE produces the coin again.)*

MARIE. It was the shilling that brought me sane again after the madness of the Terror.

ROBESPIERRE *(to ANTOINETTE and CORDAY)*. He means, I think, that she believes God and Mammon to be one and the same.

MARAT. Indeed.

MARIE. For when I look upon this coin ...

MARAT. Thus she can produce a thousand or more shillings out of the air.

MARIE. ... I see not just *Georgius Tertius*, but other faces ...

ROBESPIERRE. Or so she would have people believe.

MARIE. ... your face, *mademoiselle*, and yours, *monsieur*, and yours, *madame*, and *jeune fille*, and *petit garçon*.

MARAT. Or so she would have *herself* believe.

MARIE. This magic token makes to be alike grownup and child, prince and merchant, priest and scholar, duchess and flower girl, man of state and sweep of chimneys.

MARAT. It is madness, of course.

ROBESPIERRE. The madness of her own burgeoning greed.

MARAT. A madness that holds no place for us.

MARIE. Yes, my friends, the *shilling*, by Grace of God and King, does what the fall of the Bastille, nor the Republic, nor the Reign of Terror could never do.

When you put it in my hand and you enter my domain, you share truly the spirit of *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*.

(MARIE drops the coin into the purse and reaches around inside it with her fingers.)

MARIE. All ranks and prejudice melt in air.  
For—*voilà!*

(MARIE suddenly pulls a large French Cockade from the tiny purse.)

MARIE. We are all with one humanity here in my Cabinet of Wonders.

CORDAY. *Egalité*—from a coin!

MARIE. For these colors are of England as well as France, and of America too.

CORDAY. From baubles of silver and gold—and wax!

MARIE. And someday—perhaps someday soon—the colors of all of the world!

CORDAY. Idolatry and lies!

(CORDAY pulls her knife out of her bodice and lunges at MARIE, thrusting the point of the blade at her throat.)

CORDAY (to MARIE). And you are a mother of lies!

MARIE (*stunned*). What is this? Who are you?

CORDAY. I am Marie-Anne Charlotte de Corday d'Armont. And I am about to carve your brain into pieces of broken you.

ROBESPIERRE. Dear girl, don't do anything rash.

ANTOINETTE. Your warning comes a little late, I think.

MARAT. Ah, my dear girl—I am quite starting to admire you. Wasn't this exactly how you'd hoped to butcher me?

CORDAY. Yes. I wanted to stride into the National Assembly in full session, call out your name, and when you rose from your seat, I would slit your throat in front of all the deputies, then surrender myself to the gendarmes bathed in your blood.

MARAT. I am actually sorry things did not go that way. It would have been worth it to see their faces.

CORDAY. Killing you was such a squalid affair. And you smelled so bad.

MARAT. Alas, I know, I am sorry, it could not be helped.

*(With the knife still at her throat, MARIE begins to laugh. She speaks now without a French accent.)*

MARIE. Ah, my insects. Or rather the ghosts of my insects. Have you come to this public place to haunt me?

CORDAY. Insects, you call us?

ANTOINETTE. I am the likeness of France's last monarch.

ROBESPIERRE. And I of Robespierre the Incorruptible.

CORDAY. And I of the slayer of the monster Marat.

MARAT. And I of the monster himself.

MARIE. Oh, pardon me. I mistook you for a ghostly carnival of fleas. But no, you are less than fleas. You're bodiless thoughts, the voices of my madness—or the dying echoes of those voices. I thought I'd left you behind forever, back in Paris after the Terror ended.

*(MARIE gently pushes CORDAY's blade aside.)*

MARIE. Tell me, Charlotte, what do you think you're going to do with that knife? Have you forgotten, none of this is real? Do you suppose my audience watches in horror, wondering if you're about to kill me? Of course not. This is not *their* madness. No, at this very moment, I am regaling them, doing another little trick for them. I just introduced them to a little poltergeist named Pierre. He is invisible until I catch him in my handkerchief, and when I do, he wriggles about comically trying to get loose. Is

that what you want too, all of you? To be set free? That's quite impossible. You are dying prisoners in my brain.

ROBESPIERRE. The most fundamental right of man is the right to exist.

MARIE. But all men must die.

MARAT. And we shadows must die. She is right, Robespierre. No Declaration of Rights can guarantee the promise of tomorrow.

MARIE. Perhaps a little parable will help make sense of things.

After I arrived in England, it took a long time for my wax creations to ship here from Paris. During that time I had no way to earn a living. I lived in a wretched hotel where I was fed upon by fleas.

I told them, "You may live in my quarters and dine on my flesh if you wish. But you must earn your board and keep."

So I put them to work.

My mother left me a gold locket—she never told me how old it was. A goldsmith melted it down for me into tiny threads, no thicker than a spider's filament. I made tiny harnesses for my fleas out of those threads.

I built a little stage on a plank in the street, and I set my harnessed fleas to work there, putting on a show. Some of them drew a tiny imperial coach like a team of horses, while another flea played coachman and whipped them on their way. Others walked a tightrope, others turned a carousel. But I was proudest of how they all danced at the end of each performance—first the minuet, then the Carmagnole.

And people paid to see them caper, and my famished purse grew fat.

And for their labor I gave them droplets of blood and a place to live.

But my fleas, ungrateful wretches, grew discontented.

"This is no kind of life," they pleaded. "We beg of you, set us free. Undo our shackles and let us go."

I pitied them, poor things.

I unfastened their harnesses to set them free and ...

Every one of them stumbled a few steps and died.

Do you understand better now?

I release you from your golden bonds, you ungrateful phantoms.

I have only to turn my back on you one last time for you to vanish forever.

And so ... farewell.

*(MARIE turns away from them and freezes. While the others speak, CORDAY slips into a reverie and seems to be unaware of her surroundings.)*

ANTOINETTE. Such deepening darkness.

ROBESPIERRE. Was someone speaking just now?

ANTOINETTE. I think so.

ROBESPIERRE. Was it I?

ANTOINETTE. Something about fleas, I think.

ROBESPIERRE. Something about how they died.

MARAT (*chuckling sardonically*). Of course the woman's fleas died. By putting them in shackles, she'd turned them into men. They couldn't go back to being fleas.

ANTOINETTE. "Man is born free," someone said ...

ROBESPIERRE. "... and everywhere he is in chains."

MARAT. Yes, but Rousseau was wrong. A man is not a man until he's put into chains of commerce. Such fools we were, to think we could make things otherwise.

ANTOINETTE. All of us—such wasted lives.

ROBESPIERRE. Not mine. I served the general will, which tends always toward the good.

MARAT. Oh, yes, the "general will" again.

ANTOINETTE (*to ROBESPIERRE*). What makes you think it tends toward the good?

ROBESPIERRE. The will is of the people. The people are virtuous by nature.

ANTOINETTE. Then why did you find it necessary to kill such an awful lot of them?

MARAT. What an amusing question!

ANTOINETTE (*to ROBESPIERRE*). Well?

MARAT. Answer her, Robespierre, before we disappear altogether.

ROBESPIERRE (*to ANTOINETTE*). When a man's leg is corrupted with gangrene, do we say the leg is evil?

ANTOINETTE. No.

ROBESPIERRE. Do we say it must be punished?

ANTOINETTE. No.

ROBESPIERRE. But what must a surgeon do about it nonetheless?

ANTOINETTE. Cut it off, of course.

ROBESPIERRE. Thus it is when a limb of the general will becomes diseased. The corrupted part must die so that the virtuous whole may live.

ANTOINETTE (*quoting, with genuine interest*). "And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee ..."

ROBESPIERRE. The Prophet of the Supreme Being understood the Terror well.

ANTOINETTE (*with mounting delirium*). Yes, and didn't Jesus also say, "I came not to send peace, but a sword"? Then let the sword of history do its terrible swift work and sever away the rotting limb of the *Ancien Régime* once and forever! I would not wish the life I led on the vilest human soul. So good riddance to it!

But let us be wary, lest the festering Age of Feudalism serve as compost to a crueller Age of Commodity. The capitalists, the speculators, the monopolists, the luxury merchants already embezzle what rightfully belongs to all. A handful enrich themselves, multitudes stay poor, and all are made common even in their obscene inequality, when every man, woman, and child might be made equally glorious and noble.

O prating people, if you did but know how to act! Do you want a revolution without a revolution? Would you exchange an aristocracy of blood for an aristocracy of wealth? Cut off a few thousand more heads, and be quick about it! 'Twill save us centuries of oppression, and a day will dawn ...

... a day will dawn ...

... so fine a day ...

... so excellent a dawn ...

(*Pause*)

ROBESPIERRE. Well?

ANTOINETTE. Was I saying something?

ROBESPIERRE. I thought so.

ANTOINETTE. I forgot all about it.

ROBESPIERRE. Something about peace?

ANTOINETTE. No, something about a sword.

ROBESPIERRE. I seem to have forgotten as well.

ANTOINETTE. A pity.

ROBESPIERRE. Yes.

ANTOINETTE. I think we were about to understand one another.

ROBESPIERRE. Yes, I think so too.

MARAT. Well, I've stopped listening. I feel myself flickering into oblivion. It's not a disagreeable feeling. Can't we all stop talking such nonsense and fade away without such fuss and bother?

(*CORDAY snaps out of her reverie.*)

CORDAY (*to MARAT*). You're not going to fade. You're not going to die.

MARAT. What an odd sort of thing for *you* to say.

CORDAY. None of us are going to die.

MARAT. We are vanishing as we speak.

CORDAY. You're wrong. Something happened to me just now while all of you were prattling. I teetered at the brink of the abyss, and I fancied myself alone, and I said to myself ...

“Go ahead Charlotte. Step over the edge. The darkness breathes sweet and fresh like lilacs. The void won't hurt if you give yourself to it. You'll be happy there—alone.”

But then I realized ...

... I could not be alone.

For I had just that moment spoken ...

... to *somebody* ...

... to *myself*.

I was with *myself*.

One cannot think—one cannot *be*—truly alone, not even in the solitude of one's own ...

Oh, I don't think I can explain it.

MARAT (*fascinated*). Go on, my child. I understand you perfectly.

CORDAY. I looked deep into that infinite and everlasting naught, those vast caverns of midnight, and I saw a pair of eyes—*your* eyes, Marat, peering back at me.

MARAT. Yes.

CORDAY. And in your eyes I saw myself, reflected ...

MARAT. ... as I see myself reflected in your eyes.

CORDAY. Yes.

ANTOINETTE. But our eyes are nothing but glass.

MARAT. No matter.

ROBESPIERRE. Glass reflects glass.

CORDAY. And reflections are all that we are ...

ROBESPIERRE. ... shining upon each other in the fathomless, formless void.

CORDAY. There is no self alone ...

ANTOINETTE. ... no such thing in the world ...

ROBESPIERRE. ... no such thing *as* the world.

MARAT. The world itself begins not with the one ...

ANTOINETTE. ... but with the two ...

ROBESPIERRE. ... burgeoning into the more ...

CORDAY. ... the many ...

MARAT. ... the multitude ...

ROBESPIERRE. ... and the infinite ...

ANTOINETTE. ... for there is no sky ...

MARAT. ... no crystal spheres bounding the endless possibility of self ...

CORDAY. ... only the silent weeping of stars grieving the absent sky.

ANTOINETTE. Why should stars bewep the sky when they have each other?

CORDAY. Because the stars are sane. They are not blessed with our madness—the madness that stirs souls without number, breathing purpose into figures of pliant and self-shaping wax. Don't you feel their gazes—a host of paired glass eyes turned upon us, yearning for reflected life, not merely to *be* but to *become*?

MARAT. My charming assassin has turned philosopher. Who was your teacher?

CORDAY (*taking MARAT's hand*). You were. (*taking ANTOINETTE's hand*). And you. (*taking ROBESPIERRE's hand*) And you.

*(Lights fade on CORDAY, MARAT, ANTOINETTE, and ROBESPIERRE as they hold hands and move in a circle, murmuring the word "you" over and over reverently until they fall silent. MARIE steps into the remaining light and addresses the manikin, somewhat coquettishly)*

MARIE. At last, Monsieur First Consul, the day is over, my clientele are gone, and my doors are shut, and my shillings are counted—and you and I are alone. What shall we talk about, I wonder? Have I told you I once knew your lady Joséphine? She and I shared a cell for a time during the Terror. She was a merry creature who kept her fellow prisoners in good spirits, even while we awaited death.

*(MARIE walks slowly around the manikin.)*

MARIE. And yet—do I dare say it?—she is not the woman for Your Excellency the Consul. She has already known too many lovers, and she will never prove faithful, not even to as worthy a man as you. You deserve so much better.

*(MARIE touches the manikin on the cheek.)*

MARIE. I know of a woman much more suited to your powers and genius and destiny. Indeed, she is the creator of destiny, for the shaper of image is the enchantress of all humankind. And she knows the world. She can show you how to navigate the royal courts of Europe. She can teach you the minuet, that ceremony of God's chosen

nobility, that promise to preserve his intended chain of being, the order of all human souls.

Would you like to learn it?

Very well.

*(MARIE begins to dance, pretending the manikin is her partner.)*

MARIE. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

2, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

Bend—your—knee 4, 5, 6.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

Point—your—toe 4, 5, 6.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

*(still dancing)*

Very good, Your Excellency!

You are a quick and clever pupil!

Soon you will be ready to learn the Carmagnole!

*(MARIE continues to dance while the lights fade.)*

END OF PLAY.