ACT ONE

LIGHTS UP on the interior of a French Villa in Cannes, 1976. A long wooden table takes up one side of the stage.

JACQUES MONOD enters, followed by JERZY KOSINSKI. MONOD is a handsome man in his sixties, while KOSINSKI is in his mid-forties - and clearly inebriated. KOSINSKI has a large camera hanging around his neck.

MONOD pulls off his jacket and throws it over a chair as he turns up the lights.

MONOD
Did you enjoy it?

KOSINSKI
Let's see. It was decadent. Obscene. And pointless. I loved it.

MONOD
Welcome to the Cannes Film Festival.

KOSINSKI
Will you invite me again next year?

MONOD
No.

KOSINSKI
Why not? Didn't I take enough pictures?

MONOD
You took plenty. Keep taking them. Take one now.

MONOD lights a cigarette, posing. KOSINSKI takes his picture, and the FLASH goes off.

Well done. Thank you.

KOSINSKI
All right. Come clean.
What do you mean?

KOSINSKI

You ask me to come to France. With my camera. “To document the occasion”, you say. But what occasion is this? You couldn’t mean the Festival.

MONOD

No.

KOSINSKI

There’s something else.

MONOD

Yes. There is.

KOSINSKI

Well?

MONOD

Let’s hear your DeNiro again.

KOSINSKI

Don’t change the subject.

MONOD

Just once more. Maybe it’s improved.

KOSINSKI

“Talkin’ to me? Are you talkin’ to me?” How’s that? Any better?

MONOD

No. Still terrible.

KOSINSKI

Should I add you to my list of critics?

MONOD

Of what? Your writing?

KOSINSKI

That’s old hat, Jacques. There are new kinds of critics out there. They don’t care about the books. Now they’re coming after my life.

MONOD

Your life? What about it?

KOSINSKI

Apparently … I’m a total fraud.
MONOD
Are you?

KOSINSKI
Possibly.

MONOD
Interesting. I’ll open some wine.

KOSINSKI
He searches for a bottle.

Maybe it’s time for me to start a whole new career. Warren Beatty grabbed my arm this morning between screenings. He’s doing a movie about the early days of Communist Russia. He wants me to play a Bolshevik.

MONOD
Play one? Or be one?

KOSINSKI
“There’s no one else here.”

MONOD
I take it you liked that movie. “Le Chauffeur de Taxi.”

KOSINSKI
“Taxi Driver”. Yes, I rather liked it. How about you?

MONOD
I don’t equate slaughter with entertainment.

KOSINSKI
It’s very American.

MONOD
You and your America fetish.

KOSINSKI
I can’t help it. I’m from Poland – the newest democracy, if you haven’t heard.

MONOD
I’ve heard.

KOSINSKI
That’s probably why they gave it the Jury Award.

MONOD
Well, what do I know about it?

KOSINSKI
That’s so typical. You have a Nobel Prize and you’re asking me what you know.
A prize doesn’t mean I know anything.

You know everything. Women were throwing themselves at you all night.

You’re drunk.

Maybe. But I know what I saw. You’re twenty years older than me -

Twenty-three, actually.

All right. You’re in your mid-sixties -

That’s unnecessary.

- and you still have the sexual appeal of a young man. Everyone thought you must be a movie star. What else would you be doing there?

It’s an easy drive from my house. I thought you might find it entertaining.

It was fun. I was just hoping to get laid, that’s all.

Maybe next time …

MONOD suddenly reaches into his pocket, pulls out a white handkerchief, and coughs into it.

There is a surprising amount of blood on the linen as he pulls it away from his face.

Jacques?

Get your camera.

This isn’t …
MONOD

Do it. I want you to.

KOSINSKI reluctantly pulls up his camera, and takes MONOD’s picture while he holds the bloody handkerchief.

Good. Don’t leave anything out.

KOSINSKI
This is why you won’t invite me next year … there is no next year. Is there?

Pause. MONOD looks at him.

MONOD

Not for me. I’m sorry, Jerzy.

He pours wine for KOSINSKI into a glass.

Say when.

MONOD’s hand begins to shake uncontrollably. KOSINSKI takes the wine bottle from him.

Another symptom, I’m afraid.

KOSINSKI
Were you going to tell me?

MONOD

I was hoping I wouldn’t have to. But this … (indicating the handkerchief) makes that impossible, I suppose.

He looks at KOSINSKI.

You’re repelled. That’s okay. I know the feeling. I used to feel that way watching Camus with his tuberculosis attacks. Blood from the lungs. He always assured me it was painless. Ironic, isn’t it? Now I join the club.

KOSINSKI
What club?

MONOD

The club of those who find themselves dying – yet who still feel obliged to reassure their friends.

KOSINSKI
Seriously - are you all right, Jacques? Do you need to lie down?
It’s what happens. Don’t be alarmed.

How long do you have?

A few days. Maybe less. That’s what I want you to document. My death.

Fuck!

You’re sounding like that movie again. Very American.


There is no pain. Hemolytic anemia isn’t that kind of illness. The white blood cells simply replace the red blood cells. Until they’re gone. You don’t feel it happening.

Surely there are specialists.

And I’ve seen them all.

How can you accept this so calmly?

I’m a biologist, Jerzy. What would you expect?

I’m not drunk enough for this.

You remind me of Albert. When you talk like that.

I don’t want to talk about Camus.

What do you want to talk about?

Nothing.
Don’t lie to me, Jerzy.

Why not? I’m full of lies. I’m drowning in them.

Okay. I’m listening.

Pause.

I … don’t want you to be ashamed of me.

I’m not your father, Jerzy.

Oh, but you are. In my dreams you always have been. Ever since we met. You’ve lived an amazing life. Filled with courage and admiration. And I’ve spent all that time seeking your approval. Like a child.

I’m not who you think I am.

I don’t believe that.

I need you to. We’ll make this a night of revelations.

Jacques. You’re telling me that you have some dark secret to get off your chest? Before you …

Precisely. Get out your notebook.

What, you want me to write about this?

It would make a good story. You decide. When I’m done.

First things first.

None for you?
MONOD shakes his head.

Bad for your health?

MONOD

Something like that. Where should I start?

KOSINSKI pulls a small pad out of his pocket, and a pen.

KOSINSKI

That depends. What’s this story going to be about?

MONOD


KOSINSKI

Those aren’t secrets.

MONOD

And a woman.

KOSINSKI

Naturally. Your wife.

MONOD

No. Another woman.

Kosinski raises his head.

There you are. I may have only a few hours left, but I’m still capable of surprise. What do you feel about your so-called father figure now?

KOSINSKI

Relief. That he’s only human.

MONOD

That’s just an excuse. For a lack of discipline. And laziness.

KOSINSKI

You? Lazy?

MONOD

One of the laziest. And I never had any reason for it. My childhood was right here in Cannes. One of luxury and exploration. Not like yours. I spent my days climbing rocks, sailing yachts, hunting for fossils. Reading Greek. Playing the cello.

He goes to retrieve his cello case.

KOSINSKI
You’re right – not much like mine.

Dissecting cats.

That sounds a little closer.

When I reached sixteen, I developed a desire to explain how living things work. So I immersed myself in natural sciences and biology. But when I got older, I replaced that passion with afternoons on the beach, trying to impress girls and playing the cello.

He takes out the cello, and plucks a few strings.

So what? You were young.

I was lazy. But I somehow managed to talk my way into the Sorbonne. Where I only wasted more time. Until one day in 1940. I was in the biology lab, playing a little Bach cantata.

MONOD removes his wig and glasses, miraculously transforming his appearance to the young and vital age of 28 years old.

He begins to play.

LIGHTS shift and recede on KOSINSKI, as he watches – always watches - from the side of the room.

MONOD continues to play, until a KNOCKING interrupts.

I’m busy.

The KNOCKING continues.

Go away.

The DIRECTOR enters.

Can’t you see I’m –

MONOD turns to see him.

Oh. Professor. I was just …
DIRECTOR

Just what, Monod?

MONOD

Contemplating molecular structure.

DIRECTOR

With a fiddle.

MONOD

It’s a cello, actually.

DIRECTOR

Let’s call it a fiddle. Since you are apparently fiddling your time away here at the Sorbonne.

MONOD

Yes sir.

DIRECTOR

Perhaps I should check on the progress of your experiments.

MONOD

This isn’t a good time.

DIRECTOR

It is for me.

The DIRECTOR pushes his way past MONOD.

He finds a flask among MONOD’s home clutter, and holds it against the light.

What are you growing here?

MONOD

Bacteria. In glucose.

DIRECTOR

Your results?

MONOD

Nothing unexpected.

DIRECTOR

Have you tried ciliates?

MONOD

Too unexpected.
DIRECTOR
In other words, too difficult.

MONOD
Yes.

DIRECTOR
Then you’ve made a discovery, haven’t you? Animals are complicated. And unpredictable. Even single-celled ones. Maybe if you had less distractions, you’d be more aware of that.

MONOD
Yes sir.

DIRECTOR
Jacques – we still expect you to make a useful contribution at the Sorbonne. Learn to focus.

He takes the cello from MONOD, sadly strums it, and hands it back to him.

But for now, you’d better pack up as much of this as you can. The Governor has closed all the schools.

MONOD
Why?

DIRECTOR
My God, Monod. You really do have a way of keeping reality at bay. Look out the window. For once in your life.

The DIRECTOR exits.

MONOD hears a chaos of voices and footsteps, and steps forward.

He is almost run down by CLAUDE, a younger student who precariously carries a stack of files and scientific equipment.

MONOD calls after him.
MONOD

Claude! Wait!

CLAUDE stops.

What’s happening?

CLAUDE

The German army has turned East. They’re marching toward Paris.

MONOD

Jesus. How long do we have?

CLAUDE

About two weeks.

MONOD

What will we do?

CLAUDE

Your wife is Jewish, Jacques. Get out while you can.

And you?

MONOD

CLAUDE

Some of us have alternate plans.

CLAUDE runs off.

A LOUDSPEAKER is heard from a passing vehicle in the street.

LOUDSPEAKER (Offstage)

Please evacuate in an orderly fashion. There is no need for panic. All those whose work does not require them to stay in Paris should leave the capital.

KOSINSKI

Did you save your work?

MONOD turns back to KOSINSKI, still watching.

MONOD

What I could manage of it. I was a 28 year old biology student. Whose heart was really in music. That’s who I was. That’s all I was. And all I would have been, if not for the events of that day.

KOSINSKI

I was six years old when they invaded Poland.
I know. You were a child. I had one of my own. I can imagine what it must have been like for you.

KOSINSKI

No you can't. There's no comparison.

MONOD

Is that what you want to tell me about? Jerzy?

Pause.

KOSINSKI

Not yet.

ODETTE, MONOD's wife, enters with a baby carriage.

ODETTE

I've made all the arrangements. We'll drive to Brittany. My brother knows someone who will take us to England on his fishing boat.

MONOD

You never fail to amaze me. You're so efficient.

She feels inside the baby carriage, checking the forehead temperature of their unseen infant.

How is Philippe? Any better?

ODETTE

No. He's burning up.

MONOD

It's now or never. They're too close to Paris.

ODETTE

I won't put him on a boat. Not like this.

MONOD

We may not get another chance.

ODETTE

What about Philippe? He deserves a chance too.

MONOD turns to KOSINSKI, as ODETTE leaves.
MONOD
And there it was, without warning. “Chance.” A word that I had used a thousand times before – but now it held new meaning. I was beginning to understand the power of random events.

KOSINSKI stands and looks for another wine bottle, eventually succeeding when MONOD points him in the right direction.

I tried reading your book, you know.

I know.

Why “Chance And Necessity”? Why not “or”? You can’t have one without the other.

Tell me why - again.

It refers to the connection between biochemistry and ethical choice.

So in order to be ethical beings, we have to overcome the obstacle of our physical impulses and limitations. Something like that?

You’re not as drunk as you think.

Alcohol makes me more perceptive. That’s how I get most of my ideas nowadays.

Even “Being There”? No. That came from you. I even named the gardener “Chance.”

I’m flattered.

He sips his wine.

Peter Sellers wants to do the movie.

MONOD

Peter Sellers?

KOSINSKI

He keeps calling me about it. Are you surprised?

MONOD

A little. I didn’t think your book was all that … funny.

KOSINSKI

Oh. Anyway, no one will let him do it. He’ll probably be stuck doing that French gendarme for the rest of his life.

MONOD

Why not? Clouseau is an excellent character.

KOSINSKI

You don’t find it insulting? As a Frenchman?

MONOD

Any man should be able to point to a single moment in time and know that he did the very best – in that moment – that anyone could do.

Pause. MONOD stares at him.

LIGHTS shift to LIEUTENANT HELLER, followed by an armed GESTAPO OFFICER.

HELLER addresses the audience as though they were students at the Sorbonne. He is a strange combination of effete mannerisms combined with German gruffness.

The DIRECTOR and CLAUDE enter as witnesses to the event, along with MONOD (and KOSINSKI). They stand behind and to the side of Heller and his bodyguard.

HELLER

Esteemed students of the Sorbonne, my name is Lieutenant Heller of the Propagandastaffel.

CLAUDE whispers to MONOD.

CLAUDE
The Propaganda Minister. This should be amusing.

HELLER
We are thrilled to be your guests in such a beautiful and historic city. I am here to reassure you not to be frightened by our presence. We are here only to restore order, and to deliver you from the corruption of your own government and the pernicious influence of England. That is why we have approved the appointment of your brave Marshal Petain, the hero of Verdun, as the new Head of State. This should prove our sincerity to you. Please consider us your friends and protectors, by all means continue to study hard, and maintain the Sorbonne as the European center of learning. We thank you for your hospitality.

CLAUDE (who has taken a few steps from the others) throws a tomato, which hits HELLER squarely in the back.

The GESTAPO OFFICER raises his rifle, but HELLER smiles and gestures for him to lower it.

I suggest you save your food for better uses. Rationing begins immediately.

HELLER and the OFFICER exit.

The DIRECTOR throws a newspaper (the “Paris-Soir”) on the ground in disgust, as he and Claude leave as well.

MONOD is startled by a headline he notices in the discarded paper. He picks it up, quickly reads it, and shows it to ODETTE, who enters with the baby carriage.

He reads the headline out loud.

MONOD
“Fishing boat sinks in English Channel – Refugees Drown."

He looks up at ODETTE.

That was your boat. You would be dead – if not for Phillippe’s fever.

ODETTE
We had good luck.
MONOD
Luck? Don’t be so sentimental, Odette. It was chance. Utterly random, meaningless chance. There’s nothing benevolent about that.

ODETTE
You should be relieved. What’s wrong?

MONOD
They’re checking identity papers against the city records. Birth certificates. Wedding licenses.

ODETTE
Why?

MONOD
You know why. There’s talk of deportation.

ODETTE
For Jews.

MONOD
They’ve set up checkpoints at the Free Zone. I was hoping we could get across, but now I’m not so sure.

ODETTE
Be more sure. We just need a little luck.

MONOD
I told you. You can’t count on luck.

ODETTE
Then don’t count on it. Go find it.

ODETTE exits, as LIGHTS SHIFT back to KOSINSKI, staggering towards MONOD.

KOSINSKI
I already know all this, Jacques. You did your research, kept your Jewish wife and children out of sight, and received your Doctoral Degree. It’s just not that …

MONOD
Interesting?

KOSINSKI
I didn’t say that.
MONOD
Not compared to the adventures of a seven year old boy, abandoned by his parents, hiding in the remotest villages of the Polish countryside, tortured, abused and even raped by his own countrymen, while keeping out of sight of the Germans. Now that makes a good story. I believe it’s called “The Painted Bird.”

KOSINSKI
What have you been hearing?

MONOD
Apparently, the same things a lot of people have been hearing.

KOSINSKI
I lived that book. You don’t believe it?

MONOD
No one ever believed it, Jerzy. The relentless cruelty would be unimaginable in medieval times – and the only sympathetic character is a Nazi soldier who saves the boy’s life!

KOSINSKI rises.

KOSINSKI
I’m leaving.

MONOD
And I’m dying. So you might as well tell me the truth. I’ll take it to the grave. Literally.

KOSINSKI stops.

KOSINSKI
It’s a novel. I never said it wasn’t fiction.

MONOD
But you never stopped anyone from believing it was true. Am I right?

Pause.

KOSINSKI
It doesn’t matter. It will all be over soon.

MONOD
Don’t be so sorry for yourself. You’re a great liar. And a great writer too.

KOSINSKI
No. That’s a lie too.

MONOD
Then we have something in common. You lied to the world. And I lied to myself. Which is worse?
LIGHTS SHIFT as Andre Lwoff (38) enters and approaches MONOD.

LWOFF
I believe you, Jacques. But there’s nothing we can do here at the Institute to help your research.

MONOD
Please, Andre. They think I’m wasting my time at the Sorbonne. And they’re right.

LWOFF
Every month you ask me the same thing. And I always give you the same answer. We don’t have the room. Or the money. We’re not endowed like the Sorbonne. My advice is to stick it out and get the degree. Be glad they’ve reopened your school.

MONOD
I don’t like it.

LWOFF
Why not? Do you feel threatened there? By the Germans?

MONOD
Just the opposite. Lieutenant Heller seems to think the Sorbonne is the epitome of French culture. Another reason to leave. Don’t you think?

Pause. LWOFF examines MONOD’s face.

LWOFF
Perhaps. All right. I’ll talk to the admissions committee about a transfer. But I’ll probably get the same answer as usual.

MONOD
At least you believe in me.

LWOFF
Don’t rely on that, Jacques. People believe what they want to believe. Take Marshal Petain. He believes that France is still free. The senile old bastard.

MONOD
How free is it?

LWOFF
I don’t know.

MONOD
Then how free is the Resistance?

Pause.
LWOFF reaches into his desk, and pulls out a revolver, which he aims at MONOD.

Why would you ask me that?

I need help, Andre. For my wife.

So you didn't come here for a transfer.

No. It's my second priority. I just mentioned it first.

What makes you think I know anything about the Resistance?

Claude told me.

Pause. LWOFF replaces the revolver in the desk.

Claude's a fool.

He knows I'm desperate. To find a way out for Odette.

I can see that. But you should be more careful. Walls have ears, even here at the Institute.

I don't need to know any secrets. I only want to help my wife.

They'll want something in return.

I have some money.

Maybe that. Maybe something else.

Anything it takes.

Pause.
All right.

MONOD

What happens now?

LWOFF

Maybe nothing. I don’t make these decisions. Just be patient. And wait.

MONOD turns to KOSINSKI, as LIGHTS SHIFT, LWOFF exits, and a group of men enters in shadow, carrying candles to the long table.

MONOD

That was the hardest part of the war. The endless waiting. Trying to keep out of sight.

I remember.

KOSINSKI

Do you?

MONOD

Of course.

KOSINSKI

Tell me the truth, Jerzy. Once and for all. Your parents didn’t abandon you.

Pause.

KOSINSKI

No. They protected me. And kept me close. Me and my brother.

MONOD

You have a brother? You never told me.

KOSINSKI

I’ve never told anyone. Because once he’s discovered, the truth will follow.

MONOD

Which is?

KOSINSKI

I’m a Jew.

MONOD

Oh. I see. And you had to deny it.

KOSINSKI

Every day. From the age of seven.
MONOD
So what? A lot of people did that. It was necessary to survive.

KOSINSKI
We changed our name. From “Lewinkopf” to “Kosinski”. More Polish-sounding. Then we left Lodz to take refuge at the Eastern border of German-held Poland. And passed ourselves off as Gentiles. While every Jew in Lodz was rounded up and shipped off to Auschwitz. But not us.

Thank God for that.

Everyday was a lie. It still is … for me.

Your parents did what they had to do. What hundreds of other parents did. And children. There’s no shame in that.

That’s right. No shame. That’s my life in a nutshell.

You’ve read Anne Frank. Do you think she was any less brave, for spending her days in hiding?

She was a child.

Jerzy. So were you!

I was never a child. Too aware of death.

Just like Albert.

You still miss him, don’t you?

Every day.

LIGHTS shift to the wooden table, lit only by candles.