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A UNIVERSE FOR TWO

by Barys Paulau

A Play in One Act

CHARACTERS

ELENA (40s) — A translator and writer. She has spent years living in the margins of someone else's story. She is tired of being the one who understands everything and has stopped trying to forgive.

TOMASZ (50s) — A poet who once had a career. He now has a reputation. He drinks to keep the silence at bay, and he waits for a phone call that will restore meaning to his life.

THE WAITRESS (30s) — She is always there. She never explains herself. She moves through the room like a thought that refuses to settle. She knows everything. She will not save anyone.

THE MAN (*voice only*) — He may or may not exist. When Tomasz speaks of him, there is unease in his voice—not the unease of rejection, but the unease of being recognized for what he truly is.

SETTING: A small apartment in an unnamed city. Winter. The furniture is worn, the bookshelves overstuffed. Stage left: an old desk, a telephone that has not rung in weeks, and a bottle of whiskey. Stage right: a window revealing only gray. Center: a table with two chairs. Coffee, untouched, cooling.

(The play begins in silence. ELENA is reading. TOMASZ is staring at the telephone. The WAITRESS stands near the window, as if she has always been there and always will be.)

TOMASZ (*finally*): It didn't ring.

ELENA (*without looking up*): No.

TOMASZ: It should have rung by now.

ELENA: What did you expect him to say? This time.

TOMASZ: That he had finally read the poem.

ELENA: He's not going to read it.

TOMASZ: He's busy.

ELENA: He's not going to read it because you have been telling him for six years that you are writing the definitive poem about the death of the American century, and he knows you have been drinking since 1979. People who drink that long don't finish poems. They finish themselves.

(She turns the page. Her voice is flat, without cruelty—only exhaustion.)

TOMASZ: You used to believe in me.

ELENA: I used to believe in you the way a woman believes in a man who looks at her like she is the beginning of something. You looked at me that way. Once.

TOMASZ: I still do.

ELENA *(finally looking up)*: No. You don't. Now you look at me like I am the furniture. The woman who waits. And you look at that telephone like it is the only thing in this room that can save you.

(She stands. She moves to the chairs. She picks up her chair and moves it—deliberately, slowly—away from the table, closer to the window. She sits down. The space between them has grown. She says nothing; she looks at him.)

TOMASZ: What are you doing?

ELENA: Creating distance. Physical distance. Since emotional distance doesn't seem to matter to you.

(She looks at his books on the desk. She picks up a volume of his poetry. She holds it for a moment, weighing it. Then, she places it face down on the floor. A small, deliberate gesture. She does not explain it.)

TOMASZ *(watching her)*: I saw that.

ELENA: I know.

TOMASZ: What does it mean?

ELENA: It means I'm not going to reflect you anymore.

(He stares at the book on the floor. He does not pick it up. He cannot move.)

ELENA: I wrote a story once. About a woman who was waiting for a man to leave his wife. She waited for seven years. And one day she realized she didn't love him anymore. She had simply become a machine for waiting. It was the only function she had left. When she stopped loving him, she stopped waiting. And then she didn't know what to do with her hands.

TOMASZ *(looking down at his own hands)*: What happened to her?

ELENA: She went to the window and looked out. She watched a bird fly into a tree. She thought: That is something. And she began to write again.

TOMASZ: It's a lie.

ELENA: It's a story.

TOMASZ: No. It's a lie. People don't stop waiting. They transfer the waiting. The object changes. The waiting remains. If I stopped waiting for this phone call, I would start waiting for something else. Maybe I would start waiting for you to be different. But that is also waiting. And it would also be a lie.

ELENA: Then what's the alternative?

TOMASZ: There isn't one.

(The WAITRESS crosses the room. She is carrying nothing. She simply moves from one side of the stage to the other, like a thought that refuses to settle.)

TOMASZ *(watching her pass)*: Who is she?

ELENA: She's the one who brings the coffee.

TOMASZ: We didn't order coffee.

ELENA: We never order coffee. She brings it anyway. It's always there. Cooling. We just never drink it.

TOMASZ: Is she real?

ELENA: She's as real as we are. Maybe more. She actually moves.

(The WAITRESS stops. She looks at both of them. Her voice is calm, almost clinical.)

WAITRESS: You've forgotten what you're waiting for.

(She exits.)

(The telephone rings once. Then silence.)

TOMASZ: You could have answered it.

ELENA: It's never for me.

TOMASZ: It could have been for you.

ELENA (*bitterly*): Who would call me? My lover? I don't have one. My agent? I don't have one. My mother? She's dead. The only person who ever calls me is you. And you are sitting right there, staring at that phone, waiting for a ghost to call you back. Do you know how many years I have spent being the only person who calls you? Do you know what that does to a woman?

(She does not wait for an answer. She stands. She moves to the desk. She picks up a stack of papers. She leafs through them.)

ELENA: Where is it? The poem.

TOMASZ (*alarmed*): What are you doing?

ELENA: I want to read it.

TOMASZ: It's not finished.

ELENA: It's been six years. It's finished. You just don't want to see it fail.

(She finds it. She reads it silently. Her face changes. She reads again.)

TOMASZ: Well?

ELENA (*slowly*): ...It's good.

TOMASZ: What?

ELENA: It's good. It's actually good.

(She looks at him. Then she looks at the poem again. A shadow crosses her face. She is about to say something—then stops. She puts the poem down. She moves to the window. She stands with her back to him. Silence.)

TOMASZ: Elena. What else did you see?

ELENA *(quietly, without turning)*: I am so tired.

TOMASZ: Of what?

ELENA: Of being the one who sees everything and says nothing.

(She turns to him. Her face is not angry—only exhausted, as if she has been carrying something heavy for a very long time.)

TOMASZ: What do you want me to say?

ELENA: I don't want you to say anything. I wanted you to write. I wanted you to finish your own poem. Not his poem. Yours. The one you have been afraid to write for six years.

(A long pause.)

TOMASZ: Elena.

ELENA *(without turning)*: I spent my whole life learning to love a man who would never really see me. You are not the first. You are not even the worst. But you are the last. Because I finally understand something.

(She turns to him.)

ELENA: Love is an act. And you haven't acted in years.

TOMASZ: And what would you have me do?

ELENA: I would have you open the window. That's all. Just open it.

(She crosses to the desk. The telephone rings once. She picks it up.)

ELENA: Hello?

(Pause.)

ELENA: No. There's no one here by that name.

(She hangs up.)

ELENA: They were looking for someone else.

(She looks at him. She does not say, "They always are." She does not need to.)

TOMASZ *(softly)*: Were you ever going to leave? If he never called?

ELENA: I already left. I just didn't know it.

TOMASZ: Then why are you still here?

ELENA *(looking at him, not unkindly)*: Because leaving is not a location. It's a decision. And I think I just made it.

(She walks toward the door. The WAITRESS enters, holding a single piece of paper.)

WAITRESS: You left this.

ELENA *(taking it)*: Thank you.

(She reads it. A small smile.)

ELENA: It's the first page of something.

(She folds it and puts it in her pocket. She looks at TOMASZ.)

ELENA: Maybe tomorrow.

TOMASZ (*rising*): Or maybe not.

ELENA: Maybe not. But I hope you finish it.

(*She exits.*)

(*The WAITRESS stands in the center of the stage. She looks at TOMASZ. He looks at the telephone. The telephone does not ring.*)

WAITRESS: She left the coffee.

TOMASZ: I know.

WAITRESS: It's still warm.

TOMASZ: It doesn't matter.

WAITRESS: She won't come back. You know that. But you'll wait anyway. Because waiting is easier than becoming someone else.

(*She picks up the coffee cups and exits.*)

(*TOMASZ is alone. He moves to the desk. He picks up the telephone. He holds it to his ear. There is nothing. He puts it down. He looks at the window. He looks at the empty chair. He looks at the poem on the desk. He looks at the book on the floor. He does not pick it up.*)

TOMASZ (*quietly*): It was finished. The poem was finished. And she saw it. She read it. She said it was good.

(*He looks at the bottle of whiskey. He picks it up. He stares at it. He moves to the window. He opens it. Cold air enters. He pours the whiskey out into the night. The window stays open.*)

(He sits down. He looks at the empty chair. He looks at the telephone.)

(The telephone rings. Once. Twice. Three times. He does not move. He stares at it.)

TOMASZ *(to the telephone)*: I know.

(He does not answer. He stays where he is.)

(The lights begin to fade slowly. The telephone continues to ring—faintly, insistently, as the stage goes dark. In the darkness, the ringing stops. We hear a click. TOMASZ has picked up the receiver. Silence. Then, his voice, barely a whisper:)

TOMASZ *(from the darkness)*: Hello? ...

THE MAN (V.O.): Tomasz.

TOMASZ: Oh. It's you.

(A long pause. Then the soft click of the receiver being replaced. Nothing. Silence.)

(The lights are out. The stage is empty. Only the cold air from the open window remains.)

END OF PLAY