

For Irina

a short play by Eddie Kohler

Cast

Ellen, Irina, Nat in their twenties

Stagehands moving or holding scenery, other characters on the street or in the bar, voices

Set

Abstract, made of large flat things — flats, reinforced cardboard, fabric — colored or patterned with broad strokes. Quick changes between scenes. The **Stagehands** can remain on stage holding up the set and sometimes participating in the action as peripheral characters.

(Ellen and Irina, in their apartment, at the piano.)

Irina: I thought of it last night at about ten, you were still at work, so I tried it on the piano. You know I can't play but it sounded exactly right. It sparkled in the air! I'm a bit obsessed. I tried to paint today, that portrait of David, you know that one?

Ellen: The one that's all green.

Irina: Yeah, the green one, I was trying to finish it but I couldn't stop thinking about the song, and next thing I knew I brushed on some light flesh tone instead of dark, and now there's this big white spot on his big black head. So I stopped.

Ellen: Why'd you have light flesh tone anyway?

Irina: It's a useful color. Around the eyes, the insides of lips, fingernails, palms, teeth, the whites of eyeballs. What do you think?

Ellen: It's three notes.

Irina: But they're *right*.

Ellen: I can't tell.

Irina: They're raindrops. They fall and break open and let out a little cry and that's what you hear. It's slow so you hear them individually. Tiny screams.

They're hiding something. Something happens later. I don't know

what it is yet but I will. They're falling, they keep falling, but I think they fall upward, right off the edge.

Ellen: Off the edge into what?

Irina: I don't know. Ice. Frozen things.

Ellen: Play it again.

Irina: I'm nervous.

(She plays D flat, C, B flat, starting 2 octaves above middle C. Pause)

It's silly, isn't it.

Ellen: It's three notes is what it is.

Irina: So it's not silly.

Ellen: It's not silly, it's not not silly, it's three notes!

Irina: They mean something!

Ellen: Don't mean anything to me.

Irina: Sometimes I think you don't care about me at all.

Ellen: Um, yeah.

Irina: Seriously, tell me what you think, this is really, really, really important.

Ellen: Okay – I love it! It's a work of genius! I've never heard anything so wonderful in my life! I'm hungry, let's go.

Irina: You're laughing at me, like always, one day soon you'll stop, you'll stop because it'll hurt you like stabbing yourself in the throat.

Ellen: Irina, I like it, it's a nice place to begin. But the music can't support what you want it to support. There are only three notes. I'm not laughing at you, I'm confused. You want them to mean something. Why? What?

Irina: I don't want them to mean anything. They just do. Thus far they've come to me.

Ellen: They came to you unbidden.

Irina: Yes.

Ellen: Were you playing the piano?

Irina: I was sitting on my bed with the lights off looking out the window, and holding my eyes open to see how long I could. It was all blue out and quiet, then it rained for a while, when it stopped it was quieter cause no one was on the street. My vision started going around the edges, tunnel vision. Everything except the window dissolved into

black. I thought the apartment was ending, like it was vanishing from the world. And it was. Then it got really really quiet and all I could hear was my heart beating for a long time. I closed my eyes and lay down on the bed and then I heard them, the notes. Now I'm waiting for the rest to come.

Ellen: Is that why you called them raindrops? Because of the rain?

Irina: Yes, partly, I think the whole thing was part of one experience. I think someone planned it all.

Ellen: Like God?

Irina: Yeah, if you believe in that, I don't. Like the universe planned it, or the spirits in the air. They chose me to receive this, they've set up my life to receive it; why not set up the rain?

Ellen: The spirits, like dead people?

Irina: No.

Ellen: Like what?

Irina: Like the tissues that connect us all together.

Ellen: You're very serious.

Irina: I am serious, this is why I am on this earth, I think. It makes sense. Everything needs to be just right for this to happen, but it will be, if I am not prevented.

Ellen: (*preparing to go*) Well, let me know what I can do.

Irina: You can stop laughing at me for starters, just because I've found something real and you haven't.

Ellen: Are you coming?

Irina: No, I'm going to wait here, just in case.

Ellen: It couldn't come to you outside?

Irina: I don't know, maybe.

Ellen: I guess it's good you're not going, Nat told me today he'll be there. So.

Irina: Nat? Tell him hi.

Ellen: Are you sure that's a good idea?

Irina: Yes I'm sure, he loves me.

Ellen: Whatever. Good night.

Irina: (*to Ellen's back*) Wait, stop, stop!
You're good, aren't you?

Ellen: I want to be.

Irina: Yes you do. I love you.

Ellen: Can I go?

Irina: Good night.

(Nat and Ellen, at a bar with others, drunk)

Ellen: She's fucking nuts ass, man.

Nat: I've said that for years.

Ellen: She's getting worse. But still she's great.

Nat: Excuse me but I feel I must disagree, on that point.

Ellen: The court recognizes the gentleman from Puyallup.

Nat: What?

Ellen: Puyallup, that's you, dummy.

Nat: Is that kind of language, strictly necessary?

Ellen: Seriously, I like her. Make your case.

Nat: I don't know, she weirds me out.

Ellen: So what? If you hate weird people, you're like, a fascist, or something. You're like, Hitler, dude.

Nat: Fascists suck.

Ellen: You suck.

Nat: Yeah, but she weirds me out badly. You weird me out, but you're great. She's frightening, she frightens me. She calls me all the time and leaves these messages. And she says like, dude, where's my beer?

Ellen: She says that?

Nat: No, I say that. Dude, I'm like, starving.

Ellen: Dude, don't have a cow, she's coming.

Nat: But she says like, "You are empty and I know it, I can see it even if no one else can. You hear my voice and know I am right. You will be filled." and then hangs up. Or she calls and cries at the answering machine. And the weird thing is, the crying, it always lasts the same amount of time. I noticed this last week and I've been timing them. She always cries for like 15 seconds exactly, then hangs up, like she's got a stopwatch.

Ellen: It could be a coincidence.

Nat: It could be. It also could be she's a fucking head case.

Ellen: You know what? Since I moved in with her she is gradually totally monopolizing my life. I have to talk to her when I'm at home, you know, I can't go to my room without a half-hour talk at least, because she'll like, throw a fit, the next day. I talk about her paintings all the time, I pose for her, my friends have to pose for her, I have to talk about her progress. Of course she never talks about me. Now she's playing my piano and asking my help, or something, with some bullshit music fragment that God stuck in her brain personally with his personal God music transportation device, and I'm like "it's like three notes," and she's like, shut up, you're just jealous. Fuck. And I love her, I really do, she's great, she's paying a lot of the rent through the trust fund, she's more fun than most people I know, she's always unexpected, and you know, where we work, this is not often the case. But she's monopolizing my life and now look, we're in this bar, with the rest of the office, and what are we talking about, we two attractive twenty-somethings with the world as our oysterus, oysters, in this fascinating end of the millennium, we're talking about my roommate, Freakella. I'm sick of it, sick unto the death!

Nat: Dude, then stop.

Ellen: Dude, I didn't bring her up.

Nat: Dude, whatever!

Ellen: All right, I'll stop, if you stop.

Nat: I've stopped. Irina who?

Ellen: Not even her name!

Nat: You're one tough broad.

Ellen: Starting in three,

Ellen and Nat: two, one, zero/blastoff!

(Long pause)

Nat: See, this is why —

Ellen: I'll kill you.

Nat: Yessir!

(Long pause)

Ellen: Not many interesting people here tonight, are there Bob?

Nat: Certainly not at our table, Kathie, though we might get the gold anyway, given the competition.

Ellen: How did I end up doing this? I mean, this was not my plan. I didn't have a plan. So I guess that's trite, that it wasn't in the plan.

Nat: How'd *we* end up doing this?

Ellen: Yeah, how did you end up doing this?

Nat: You're making massive stock option profits for like no work, it's like, perfect, in theory.

Ellen: Dude, profits suck.

Nat: Dude, shut up, I love them.

Ellen: Capitalist swine!

Nat: Dude, you're like, so not being listened to.

Ellen: That is just typical. That is my whole life. Well not most of it. But when I'm feeling maudlin that's my whole life.

Nat: Are you feeling maudlin?

Ellen: I am feeling maudlin, I'm fucking lost, my life is already out of my control. What can I do if I hate myself, write music? Music about hating myself, surely a great masterpiece. Quit my job? I'm making more theoretical money than my family had ever, and besides, anything else would suck just as hard. I hate this city, it's the only city that makes sense. My roommate — never mind. The whole god-damned world has been arranged to make me suck.

Nat: Dude, can I call you Gloomy Gus?

Ellen: No.

Nat: Sad Sarah?

Ellen: No.

Nat: Poopy Pete?

Ellen: No.

Nat: Eeyore?

Ellen: No, maybe.

Nat: Ellen?

Ellen: Umm — naww.

Nat: Well I think I'll call you Josie, after Josie and the Pussycats, because you rock. Dude, everyone feels terrible, why should you bother? I didn't know you felt this way, you out of all of us, the best, you know that. It makes me feel like I've done something wrong, should I do a little dance, dump beer on my head, make squishy-lip faces, get your nose — got your nose! What's wrong? Tell me!

Ellen: I love you.

Nat: Dude.

Ellen: In the not sense.

Nat: Nice save attempt, but it has failed.

Ellen: Fuck.

Nat: Don't leave.

Don't leave. Sit down.

Do you know who I am?

Ellen: Dude, are you like, an alien?

Nat: Dude, I'm from Vermont. My mother drank and my father cut down trees. They were liberal. I went to Dartmouth, I drank a lot, I slept with lots of girls, I nearly died once from passing out in the snow. I want you to know this.

Ellen: Why?

Nat: I don't know.

(They kiss)

(Irina in her room, Ellen and Irina's apartment, Ellen has just come in)

Ellen: Irina? Irina?

Irina: In my room, don't be so loud.

Ellen: What's going on? You all right?

Irina: I'm great. All right. Fine.

Ellen: Which one?

Irina: I don't know, come to the window.

I know another note, two actually.

Ellen: Have you eaten?

Irina: I went to the Third Avenue Grill, I know two more notes, don't you care?

Ellen: You know two more notes.

Irina: Yes, on the way back from dinner I was walking down Ford Street and this homeless guy started harassing me, and I turned and stared at him, like he was nothing, which he was, and he looked me in the

eyes and said “sorry, ma’am”, but he sort of sang it out, two notes, and they were absolutely perfect and right.

Ellen: Did you give him any money?

Irina: Twenty bucks. I haven’t played them on the piano, I was waiting for you to come home, so you could do it.

Ellen: Why me?

Irina: I want you to do it.

Ellen: I don’t want to do it, I won’t do it. This is disturbing, Irina, I don’t like it, I think you should see someone.

Irina: This is the best thing that has happened to me in my life. I’m connected. Everything is coming together and it’s centered on this, I’m finally awake enough to listen to the world, and now that I’m listening, it’s talking to me. I never thought spiritual things existed, now I look at things and they sparkle up, I’m seeing things I wanted to believe but couldn’t. I want you to play this, now.

Ellen: No.

Irina: You’ll understand.

Ellen: Okay, Irina, you’re trying to control me, and I’m sick of it, enough! I come home for five minutes to get my toothbrush, I say hi, and you’re trying to brainwash me into some spiritual state that for all I know could involve massive drug ingestion or just plain madness, and I have to do it now, because it’s very important, not for me, for you, enough, I’m getting my toothbrush, good night, see you tomorrow.

Irina: I’m not brainwashing you, I’m opening you up! I’ve needed this feeling my whole life, so have you, I know you too well, look out the window.

Ellen: What’s out the window.

Irina: Look! See that man? He’s going to stop and look right at us in ten seconds.

(They do not move.)

Ellen: Well, he did. Congratulations.

Irina: Play the piece.

Ellen: No.

Irina: Do you know how I knew, he was going to stop?

Ellen: You paid him.

Irina: No. I’m connected to the world, at last.

Ellen: I am not going to play your piece because outside waiting in the car is a chance to be happy, simply happy, simply quietly happy, for one night, and I am not letting it go, although I'm fucking worried about you, and I hate it. Do you understand? I hate this, I can't wait for it to be over and for us to have a drink and laugh and laugh.

Irina: We can have a drink if you play it.

Ellen: You aren't listening to me, Christ, you sound like a pod person, I'm leaving, good night, please go to sleep and wake up in the morning and live in the world that exists.

Irina: I'm sorry, Ellen, I'm sorry.

Ellen: It's all right!

(Ellen goes and gets her toothbrush. As she is leaving:)

Ellen: Promise me you'll be all right.

Irina: I'm telling you, I'm better than that.

Ellen: Promise me!

Irina: I'll be all right.

Ellen: Promise?

Irina: Promise.

Ellen: Good night.

Irina: *(under her breath)* Drop the toothbrush.

Ellen: *(drops the toothbrush as she reaches for the doorknob)* Damn. *(she picks it up and leaves)*

(Irina watches out the window for a moment, gets up and goes to the bathroom, picks up a razor, holds the razor pointed at her face, does not move)

Irina: Drop the razor.

Drop the razor.

(She does not move)

(Nat on the bridge over the Wehatchee River, eating pistachio nuts, throwing the shells into the river. Irina comes in)

Irina: Hi, Nat.

Nat: Irina, hi. Want a pistachio.

Irina: No thanks.
How is Ellen in bed?

Nat: You have no right to know.

Irina: I know already.

Nat: You mean you've slept with her?

Irina: Yes.

Nat: Bullshit.

Irina: In all the important ways.

Nat: Except physically, that's not important to you, I guess, it's too real, it's too common. Too dirty. So what, you fucked her in your mind? We all know how special your mind is!

Irina: Shut up, shut up, shut up.

Nat: I'm sorry.

Irina: Shut up.

Nat: What did you want to say.

Irina: You love me.

Nat: I don't.

Irina: You do, I can feel it in every particle in the air, stop lying to yourself, let go, you need me.

Nat: I don't.

Irina: Then stop calling me.

Nat: I never call you.

Irina: You call me all the time, you ring the phone three times and if I pick it up you just breathe. I feel you on the other end of the line.

Nat: That's an obscene caller, Irina, I'm sorry, it's not me.

Irina: It is you! I used star six nine!

Nat: You're delusional.

Irina: And even if it wasn't you it was you, because we're all connected. You're ruining my life, why won't you leave me alone, you've paid Ellen to sleep with you, she's mine, she's mine more than she's yours, I've known her for years, you've fucked her for days, you can't take her away. You're using her to get to me, you're testing me, I'll pass the test, I have already, now that I know it's a test. It's a game, I'll win the game, but why are you playing. Do you like this, the power you feel, you can make me dance like a marionette, look, I'm your

puppet, tell me what to do next, you want me to jump? I'll jump.

Nat: Don't! Come on now, let's go.

Irina: Don't touch me!

Nat: Come off the bridge.

Irina: Don't touch me you worthless piece of shit! I hate you and everything you stand for, you're the worst kind of person in the world, your whole body stinks like death, you won't even talk to me, I hate you, I'll kill you, you and everyone you think about! (*she attacks him savagely, the pistachios go off the side*)

Voice: (*from below the bridge*) Hey, what's your problem!

Irina: (*stopping suddenly, rushes to the side*) I'm sorry, I'm sorry, did it hit anyone, I'm a little messed up —

Nat: (*looking over*) Bob?

Voice: Nat! What's up with this shit?

Irina: Fuck you! One day soon you'll feel what I feel, and it will kill you, you are weak, and I am stronger. I control my life, you control nothing. Don't touch me! Don't you dare! (*she runs off the bridge*)

Voice: Nat!

Nat: What?

(*the Voice tosses up the bag of pistachios; Nat catches them*)

(**Ellen and Nat, at a bar**)

Ellen: I called Mount Henderson, apparently it's hard to get someone committed.

Nat: I don't care, I want her gone.

Ellen: It's not that easy, she's still pretty much functioning, she has to commit herself, maybe her parents could manage it, but they're both in Europe.

Nat: You call this functioning? She was threatening suicide and homicide both, she fucking attacked me on the bridge, we could've both gone over.

Ellen: You're exaggerating.

Nat: Maybe a little.

Ellen: And should she be committed anyways? She says she feels amazing,

better than she's ever felt. What if she's right?

Nat: Ellen, she assaulted me. I'm afraid of her.

Ellen: Come on, she's harmless.

Nat: She hit me.

Ellen: So what? I'm sure that's happened to you before.

Nat: Shut up.

She has been harassing me over the phone for almost nine months. She has made me afraid to go out on the street. She demands that I love her. I don't. She's selfish and hurtful. I never want to see her again. I never want to hear her name.

Ellen: If she's going crazy, we have to help.

Nat: If, like there's an if. And you know what? We don't have to help.

Ellen: You want her to die, don't you.

Nat: No, of course not.

Ellen: That's one choice. We stop helping, she kills herself. Sound good?

Nat: Very manipulative. You know what, Ellen? You're sounding like her.

Ellen: So are you.

Nat: I am. She's poisonous, she's poisoning us.

Ellen: She's my friend, I have to do the right thing.

Nat: She's not your friend, she's your enemy. And I guess right now, so am I.

You know what? She's killing you, you have to choose. Her or me.

Ellen: I want both.

Nat: Good night. (*he leaves*)

(**Ellen and Irina, at their apartment**)

Irina: What are you doing here?

Ellen: I live here.

Irina: You do not, someone I used to know lived here, I loved them with my whole heart, now I live alone.

Ellen: Please try to be fair.

Irina: Fair, what does that mean? How's Nat's penis? Don't answer that. I

know five more notes.

Ellen: That's good.

Irina: It is good, it keeps me alive, but not for much longer. When I know them all, that's it, I don't need to stand the pain any more. I'll hear it, that will change the world, and as it ends I'll end too.

Ellen: You'll kill yourself?

Irina: Nothing that obvious. I'll just stop hurting.

Ellen: So you'll kill yourself.

Irina: You want me to say that so I'll be commitable, don't think I don't know your game.

Ellen: All right, you know my game, congratulations, you win the prize, and the prize is nothing.

Irina: A great big nothingburger, just what I deserve. At least you're not taking anything away, I guess you don't have to, you've taken it all already.

Ellen: You mean Nat.

Irina: He loves me, can't you see that, why are you putting yourself in the way, you're testing me too, why I don't know, but my faith is stronger, I'll prevail.

Ellen: He does not love you, he never loved you, this isn't a test, stop it.

Irina: Well you can stop it, just give him back to me.

Ellen: You know I can't stop it, you can. You are going insane. I said it out loud.

Do you know how hard this for me? You're my best friend, and you're destroying me. And you're diseased, that's most of it, but no, I look back and you've always been this way, more or less. You've never listened. I can't put up with it, but I can't leave you either, this is the worst time of your life and I want to be good.

Irina: This is not the worst time of my life, this is the best, it's an awakening. There is one thing wrong and that's you, you won't join me and you've stolen Nat, but that will be overcome.

Ellen: The best time, bullshit. But what if it is? How do I know?

Irina: Play it, play the song.

Ellen: I won't. I can't. You won't take me over. But mostly, I don't think it will help.

Irina: All right, live on, empty. Keep on not knowing. Get out.

Ellen: Nat told me that it was you or him. Basically, that's what he said. He said you'd kill me, and I had to choose. And I said, I want both.

Irina: You can't have both, you can have neither, if you choose wrong.

Ellen: I'm afraid I'll feel guilty for the rest of my life.

Irina: You won't if you choose me.

Ellen: I choose Nat.

Irina: Get out.

Ellen: Promise me you'll be okay.

Irina: Oh, I'll be okay, when you and Nat are dead. You petty empty bitch, I shit in your eyes. Get out.

Ellen: All right. I'll be back.

(Ellen leaves, Irina does not move)

(Nat and a Stagehand as his sister, on the street. Irina comes in)

Irina: Nat.

Nat: Irina. Stay back.

Irina: Dropped Ellen, got a new bitch already?

Nat: This is my sister Alice. Don't come any closer.

Irina: I'm sorry, I didn't know, hello Alice, how do you like our fair city, my name's Irina. I won't hurt you, either of you, really I won't, I'm just a little extreme. Nat, I'm so sorry about Friday night, forgive me, please.

Nat: Have you been served yet?

Irina: What?

Nat: *(takes a paper from his pocket)* This is a restraining order. I got it yesterday. It should be served on you today. Go home, you need to be there when they come by.

Irina: On me.

Nat: Yes, on you. You've threatened me, you've injured me, I have sought legal redress. You may not phone me on penalty of jail time. You may not knowingly approach within fifty yards of me. If you find yourself within fifty yards of me, you must retreat to fifty yards away or more as soon as humanly possible. All of this is on penalty of serious jail time, effective as soon as you are served. And I am authorized to serve

you, by informing you of your obligations, so it is effective as of now. I'm sorry it's come to this, but I will not waste my life dealing with someone whose only purpose in life is to hurt me and the people I love.

Irina: I love you.

Nat: You don't. And anyways, I don't care.

Irina: I'm sick.

Nat: You are sick.

Irina: Help me.

Nat: I can't. Go to the hospital.

Irina: Go to the hospital? Then I'll lose. You're testing me again, I will not fail, fuck the hospital, you love me, come here.

Nat: If you come one step closer I'll scream for the police.

(She does not move)

Goodbye. Don't kill yourself, it might hurt Ellen.

(She does not move, then he and the Stagehand leave)

(Long pause)

(Music: György Ligeti's Étude pour piano no.16: "Pour Irina". This is a piano piece, about 3 minutes long. It is in three sections, the first in slow, measured time, each successive section twice as fast as the one before — the last section is lighting-fast, frenetic. One recording is available: track 25 on BIS-CD-983, György Ligeti complete piano music vol.2, Fredrik Ullén, piano. On this recording, the first section lasts from 0'0" to 1'53"; the second section, 1'58" to 2'31"; the third section, 2'31" to 2'50". The music should be quite loud in the auditorium, the stage action as silent as possible. The action is as follows:

First section. The **Stagehands** begin to move slowly, set pieces representing the city pass by. After a while, **Irina** takes out her wallet, walks through the city, dropping her credit cards, ID, money, piece by piece. From time to time she stops and looks at something. She drops the wallet, her bag, anything inessential. By the end of the section, she is offstage, or far up.

Second section. The **Stagehands** move more quickly. Almost immediately, **Irina** reappears, running downstage, where the bridge over the Wehatchee is recreated. She cannot get there because the **Stagehands** are in the way, with set pieces or without, but at the end of the section she is center stage, unobstructed, staring at the river, or straight ahead.

Third section. *Light on the bridge grows dazzlingly bright, everything else grows dark, great commotion upstage: Stagehands moving in the half-light. Slowly Irina moves forward, climbs onto the railing, prepares to jump.*

Five seconds from the end Ellen runs on stage. On the last chord, as Irina is stepping off, Ellen grabs her, pulls her down. Irina does not resist. In the silence after, they stare at each other, panting, they do not move. Then Ellen slaps Irina in the face.

End of play)