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ROGUE SCIENTIST

By

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(a play in eleven scenes)

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CHARACTERS

RICHARD BRONSTEIN age 60, pathogen scientist and professor, ironic, charming
TERRI BRONSTEIN age 54, social worker and Bronstein's wife, attractive
NORTON age 53, car mechanic, angular built, a bit uncouth
HARLEN age 60, high ranking FBI agent, unconventional, wry
AMANDA BRONSTEIN age 33, Terri and Richard's daughter, between careers

SETTING

A private home in Southern California. Time is Summer 2014. Action occurs over several weeks.

**SCENE ONE
(MONDAY, LATE SUMMER)
RICHARD IS ON THE PHONE)**

RICHARD

Yes, I took the week off, and I'll try to get in a few rounds of golf at the club.

(PAUSE)

No, this club accepts women members. I'm positive. Bylaws were changed 15 years ago. There are Amazon women teeing off all the time.

(PAUSE)

No, I don't know their names. But I see them all the time. Off the ladies' tee, that's right. Mostly blondes in halter tops with discreet breast implants and tattoos.

(PAUSE)

My darling, I would quit in an instant if that were the case.

(PAUSE)

I can't do that. No, I really can't do that. I have my reputation to consider. Yes, I still have a reputation.

(PAUSE)

I'll tell you what. I'll call the club director tomorrow and get you a roster of names. How's that? Happy?

TERRI

Who's on the phone?

RICHARD

(TO TERRI)

Your mother.

TERRI

On your cell phone? You're joking?

RICHARD

No.

TERRI

Is she giving you a hard time?

(RICHARD PLAYFULLY SHAKES HIS HEAD "NO")

Tell her I'll be over this afternoon to help her with the new drapes.

RICHARD

She doesn't want you to come by.

TERRI

Of course she does.

RICHARD

She said it to me loud and clear. She's pissed at you for missing her birthday party.

TERRI

Give me the phone.

RICHARD

I'm a diplomat. I can handle it.

TERRI

No you can't.

RICHARD

(TO PHONE)

Terri wants to help you with the drapes. She doesn't want you to fall or pull out your back.

TERRI

Richard!

(GRABBING FOR THE PHONE)

RICHARD

Hold on one second, Lydia. I got a second call coming in.

(HE HITS WRONG BUTTON ON THE IPHONE)

Christ, I just lost the call.

(TERRI TAKES PHONE FROM HIS HAND, BUT THE CONNECTION IS LOST)

TERRI

Never put my mother on hold.

RICHARD

She does that to me all the time.

TERRI

She's a divorcee. She feels entitled.

RICHARD

Are you sure?

TERRI

Are you wearing a new cologne?

RICHARD

It's subtle and keeps mosquitos at bay.

(HE TRIES TO KISS HER, SHE TURNS A CHEEK)

TERRI

I'm not in the mood.

RICHARD

And when are you ever *in the mood*?

TERRI

I'm so nice to your mother.

RICHARD

And you speak to her once a year. You prefer your father, Terri.

(PAUSE)

You look lovely today.

TERRI

Do I?

RICHARD

Too pastel? Your lipstick? You changed something.

TERRI

Yes. You've noticed.

RICHARD

An extreme make-over?

TERRI

Yes.

RICHARD

Your hair?

TERRI

Yes.

RICHARD

It's different.

TERRI

Yes.

RICHARD

It's a different color. Extremely different.

Yes. TERRI

You were a brunette. RICHARD

Yes. TERRI

Today you're blonde. RICHARD

Yes. TERRI

Oh my gosh. RICHARD

How observant. TERRI

Is this today's surprise? RICHARD

No. I told you last week I was about to go blonde. TERRI

I thought you said you were about to go *blind* and I thought it was a *metaphor*. RICHARD

I never speak in metaphors. TERRI

Au contraire. You speak metaphorically on the hour, every hour. You're the Diva of metaphor makers. RICHARD

You don't like my hair short. TERRI

My fingers once loved running through that gorgeous wooly mane. RICHARD

I scare you, Richard. TERRI

RICHARD

Yes, you do. Today you're like Grace Kelly in Hitchcock's REAR ENTRY.

TERRI

That's REAR WINDOW.

RICHARD

Yes, exactly. I was in the park this morning.

TERRI

Which park?

RICHARD

Do public parks have names?

TERRI

Were you in the village park?

RICHARD

Yes.

TERRI

That's called "The Village Park".

RICHARD

And there were many "Village People" singing. And there was that group of brilliant black kids playing chess. You know, by that large water fountain with the missing angel.

TERRI

I know the spot.

RICHARD

So this time, I sat down and one thing led to another . . . and this sixth grade kid beat me in 9 moves.

TERRI

(HALF LISTENING, BUSYING HERSELF OPENING THE MAIL)

6 moves?

RICHARD

Well maybe it was 12 moves, and I bought him a blue Gatorade from the vending machine.

TERRI

And this is how you spend your precious free time?

Why not?

RICHARD

You're asking for trouble playing chess with children.

TERRI

Always negative, cupcake.

RICHARD

Richard. Don't mess with street kids.

TERRI

You mean – don't mess with *black kids*.

RICHARD

Ginger had a run-in with a gang of black teens in the Westfield parking lot near the video arcade.

TERRI

Well, sure. Look how Ginger dresses. Like an overweight Vegas hooker on Ecstasy. Terri, the park makes me think creatively.

RICHARD

You said you would play 18 holes each week.

TERRI

And risk another bout of sciatica?

RICHARD

Play your violin.

TERRI

It's in the shop.

RICHARD

Go to a movie.

TERRI

There's nothing I want to see.

RICHARD

(DISTRACTED, BORED)

TERRI

We've a stack of new Blu-rays.

RICHARD

I can't watch crap on a home screen unless you watch with me.

TERRI

I'm too antsy to sit. Ask O'Reilly if you can go back next Monday.

RICHARD

He's not returning my calls.

TERRI

That's not like him.

RICHARD

I'll say.

TERRI

You must have pissed him off.

RICHARD

Ahuh. He's a classic Princeton prick. No sense of humor.

TERRI

Is it really that bad?

RICHARD

It is. I might be in trouble.

TERRI

(THE REALITY IS HITTING HER)

Shit. Another lab stunt Richard?

RICHARD

No. Not a stunt. But something strange is going on at the Institute.

TERRI

Is that why you took time off?

RICHARD

In part.

TERRI

Are you withholding?

RICHARD

Does it matter?

TERRI

What the hell's going on? Really?

(PAUSE)

You're in more trouble than you're letting on.

RICHARD

You have sublime radar, Terri.

TERRI

How long?

RICHARD

Several months.

TERRI

Since your trip to Kenya?

(HE NODS QUIETLY)

I knew you were running risks with the grant.

RICHARD

Funding accuracies are an issue. Proper record keeping, that sort of thing.

TERRI

Then it's an IRS audit. You used the funds inappropriately.

RICHARD

That's what I thought. I took the team out to the Marine Room and I billed the Institute.

TERRI

Don't make this a game.

RICHARD

It began like a game. I alerted the FBI that there were some missing vials of plague.

TERRI

Missing Vials? You love to press your luck.

RICHARD

My father was a gambler.

TERRI

Your father died penniless.

RICHARD

But he gave a fortune to the homeless.

Talk to a lawyer, Richard.

TERRI

I will.

RICHARD

When?

TERRI

Tomorrow.

RICHARD

A smart lawyer. Not that asshole Harry Simm.

TERRI

Harry's a member of MENSA and can recite The Iliad from cover to cover.

RICHARD

Harry's the biggest schmuck of the century.

TERRI

You once were friends with his wife.

RICHARD

Harry drove her into madness, Richard.

TERRI

That may be partly true, Terri. But Harry's wife was a kleptomaniac. I'll get a lawyer you will endorse. I'm now a person of interest to the FBI.

RICHARD

Did you call your senior colleagues from the Institute?

TERRI

I'm too embarrassed to call.

RICHARD

This is the time when you all need to band together. If you're at risk, they will soon be.

TERRI

You're right.

RICHARD

You guys love to make up the rules as you go along.

TERRI

RICHARD

Terri, Homeland Security doesn't understand the upper tier bio-research community. The Federal Government is naive in this pursuit.

TERRI

Why do you continue to work with weapons?

RICHARD

I'm working with *level Four pathogens*. The Pentagon works with weapons.

TERRI

And anthrax?

RICHARD

I don't go study anthrax.

TERRI

You don't study anthrax *this year*.

RICHARD

This isn't an anthrax case.

TERRI

And?

RICHARD

And?

TERRI

This isn't related to the Ebola outbreak?

RICHARD

No.

TERRI

You didn't bring back Ebola samples? Isn't that what ticked off O'Reilly?

RICHARD

O'Reilly is a big Republican supporter . . . has influence over the Center for Disease Control. His pals run the biggest biotech firms in California.

TERRI

What is it, Richard? A mafia of white coats?

RICHARD

Yes.

TERRI

It's about Kenya, isn't it?

RICHARD

Probably not.

TERRI

What the hell did you bring back from Kenya?

(NORTON ENTERS)

NORTON

I can fix the car.

TERRI

Who's car?

NORTON

Your car. The Lexus.

TERRI

Why?

NORTON

I test drove it. Nice baby. Definitely smells like a lady. I waxed and detailed it too.

TERRI

What's wrong with my car?

NORTON

Timing's off, you can hear a little knocking at low speeds. The brake line is cracking.

TERRI

Who asked you to . . .

RICHARD

I told him to take a look, Terri. Norton could use some extra work. The car needed a check up.

TERRI

Without asking me?

RICHARD

Norton's less expensive than the Lexus dealer. And your car is out of warranty.

NORTON

I used to work at Brackton Lexus before my wife died. Nobody likes Brackton Lexus.

RICHARD

Freelance is always better.

NORTON

Yeah, really. One hell of a year. Doris died from a brain aneurism.

TERRI

I'm sorry about your wife.

NORTON

Thank you. Ghosts can be friendly.

TERRI

I need the car now.

NORTON

No problem, Mrs. Bronstein.
(HE EXITS)

TERRI

Richard?

RICHARD

What?

TERRI

Charity?

RICHARD

It's a long story, but I like him . . . I feel sorry for the guy.

TERRI

Let him have your car, if you have to throw him work. He's a little weird.

RICHARD

He says his wife's haunting him at night in his kitchen.

TERRI

Amanda called from Paris.
(SILENCE)

She's miserable.

Is that news?
RICHARD

She broke up with the boyfriend.
TERRI

Good. He's such a little shit.
RICHARD

I never liked him either.
TERRI

See, we do know how to agree with one another.
RICHARD

She wants to come home.
TERRI

Now?
RICHARD

Yes. I told her that the door is open.
TERRI

She really must be miserable.
RICHARD

I felt things were turning for her.
TERRI

What do you think?
RICHARD

You know what I think.
TERRI

OK.
RICHARD

I fixed up her bedroom for her. Your stuff.
TERRI

My stuff . . .
RICHARD

TERRI

All your boxes and books are in the garage.

RICHARD

Fine.

TERRI

Richard, she's hurting badly.

RICHARD

I don't want her to hurt. Honest to God.

TERRI

Good.

RICHARD

We'll help her.

TERRI

She could have asked her friends, but she prefers us. That should tell you how bad it really is.

RICHARD

I get it, Terri. I wished she had phoned me first.

TERRI

(STILL MAKING THE CASE)

You know she's suicidal.

RICHARD

She's not suicidal.

TERRI

Her therapist told me that.

RICHARD

You called her therapist?

TERRI

Of course.

RICHARD

Her therapist is suicidal. Use your own judgment, Terri.

TERRI

She once created a wedge between us.

Don't credit her for our difficulties.

RICHARD

It's true.

TERRI

Last year I told her to go to Columbia's graduate program.

RICHARD

She hated the idea.

TERRI

You know that she thrives in schools. She's starving for a better education, so why should we deprive her?

RICHARD

I wish it were that simple, Richard.

TERRI

She's blessed with a photographic memory.

RICHARD

She missed her period.

TERRI

Did her therapist tell you that?

RICHARD

No, Amanda did.

TERRI

Is she ready to be a mother?

RICHARD

Richard . . . do you love me?

TRISH

Are you ready to be a grandmother?

RICHARD

I'd prefer a better arrangement for Amanda.

TERRI

I understand.

RICHARD

TERRI

It's too hard to do this alone.

RICHARD

She has options.

TERRI

I hate that word.

RICHARD

I know you do.

TERRI

It's a reptilian word. Do you love me, Richard?

RICHARD

I'm not a reptile.

TERRI

Sometimes you are, Richard. When you leave a room, I can still see your green tail slink along the corner wall.

RICHARD

Thank you.

TERRI

In marriage you see everything. I love you, Richard. I wish we could fix a lot of things at once. Do you hear me at all?

(PAUSE)

She really doesn't have any choices. She's inclined to nest at this age.

RICHARD

Nesting is a very ornithological word.

(PAUSE)

You'll end up raising the baby, Terri. That's fatal.

TERRI

And with all the biological wonders in your travel bag, you'll end up threatening the entire planet.

RICHARD

Highly unlikely.

(PAUSE)

And if she wants to abort?

TERRI

I'm superstitious, Richard.

RICHARD

What does that mean?

TERRI

It means that logic doesn't always prevail.

RICHARD

Oh?

TERRI

I fear that for young women like Amanda, once they have one abortion - they never bear children.

RICHARD

Medical science would dispute that claim.

TERRI

And you married medical science. You're a bigamist.

RICHARD

We are still a couple.

TERRI

We don't act like a couple.

RICHARD

What exactly do you mean?

TERRI

We don't sleep together.

RICHARD

Many successful couples function that way. Look at the Clintons.

TERRI

You're not over your prostate cancer, darling. And I'm still worried sick over you.

(PAUSE)

Richard, this is terribly awkward. Your doctor told me you can have sexual relations again.

RICHARD

(DRYLY)

He should have told me too, Terri.

TERRI

I'm sorry.

RICHARD

I'm sorry too. You know I love you. We still share a bed. We knew how to read each other's mind in bed.

TERRI

I want to kiss you.

RICHARD

Then kiss me, Terri.

(SHE APPROACHES SLOWLY, CAUTIOUSLY)

TERRI

I used to know you so well.

RICHARD

I'm nearly 65, but I feel older than a winter's frost.

(SHE CARESSES HIS FACE AND KISSES HIM LOVINGLY)

END OF SCENE

**SCENE TWO
(ONE WEEK LATER.
AT THE FRONT DOOR)**

HARLEN

Dr. Bronstein?

RICHARD

Yes.

HARLEN

I hope I'm not intruding.

RICHARD

I'm late for an appointment.

HARLEN

Please . . . We met briefly downtown. I gave you my card. You said I could come by today.

RICHARD

Did I?

HARLEN

I should have called ahead. You have a very lovely home.

RICHARD

We should reschedule this.

HARLEN

I like the Spanish wood detail of your vestibule. Your wife's good taste at work?

RICHARD

I'll tell her.

HARLEN

I think homes should distinguish themselves with natural wood and earthy accents. Particularly in these exclusive beach neighborhoods. Cactus lawns save water. At my home, I've a neighbor three houses down with a beat-up RV sitting on cinder blocks. All the neighbors are pissed. This guy hoses junk down in the heat of the day. He owns a string of Jiffy Lube, and Platinum Blonde strip clubs from here to Orange County. I guess that's the meaning of *synergy*.

RICHARD

Did you really have to send 60 FBI agents to scour the city?

HARLEN

We didn't call out 60 agents, Dr. Bronstein.

RICHARD

There was no catastrophe on this campus.

HARLEN

I thought there was. So did your campus president. We kept the media out of it.

RICHARD

This should have gone no further than an internal campus investigation.

HARLEN

There was an internal campus investigation, Doctor. Please don't underestimate the situation.

RICHARD

No one's immune system was compromised, Mr. Harlen. These things happen all the time in our nation's laboratories.

(GIVING SOME GROUND)

Yes. I know. The university was in a state of shock.

HARLEN

And so was the FBI. We all believed a sophisticated terrorist had taken over your lab. Or a madman.

RICHARD

A madman?

HARLEN

Well, this will become a closed file by the end of the month. Better safe than sorry.

(PAUSE)

How much do the homes go for here? Two million and up?

RICHARD

More.

HARLEN

Depending on your wide ocean view?

RICHARD

We have no view.

HARLEN

(GAZING OUT OF ONE WINDOW)

I see blue water, Dr. Bronstein. Nothing under two million, that's for sure.

RICHARD

Thinking of moving here?

HARLEN

Not this year.

RICHARD

Great school system and a top flight PTA.

HARLEN

I own a small condo downtown. Downtown's very nice. Our building has an asthmatic doorman, a dozen miniature poodles with gout, and a heart-shaped swimming pool on the roof, but I have an unforgiving fear about heights. Vertigo.

RICHARD

So do I.

HARLEN

What a coincidence.

(PAUSE)

My wife wanted to live near Petco Park. A Padres fan. She thought we needed a doorman for security. And safety issues plague my wife. She likes the pool. She thinks she's Darryl Hannah in the film SPLASH. Her favorite mermaid movie. The sides of the pool have murals of dolphins and Beluga whales dancing for Matisse. The sound system plays music from FREE WILLY. My wife takes a trashy paperback and a bag of pistachios - spends half the day up there. God, I wish she'd get a job. No one can get to her on the roof, unless they pass the doorman downstairs. The doorman's from Malaysia, has a set of gold teeth, and smiles like a morning flower from Ft. Knox.

(PAUSE)

I know you answered taxing questions at headquarters, Dr. Bronstein, but . . .

RICHARD

Why?

HARLEN

We were given a grave misperception. That doesn't serve you at all.

RICHARD

My attorney said I shouldn't add to my official statement.

HARLEN

Who's your attorney?

RICHARD

You met him.

HARLEN

No.

RICHARD
Harry Simms.

HARLEN
Simms. Ran for mayor six years ago?

RICHARD
That's right.

HARLEN
Isn't he a colossal asshole? Simms is right. You don't have to add a word to your statement.

RICHARD
Then what's the point of this visit?

HARLEN
I don't agree with the guys on my team. They're younger than me, more vicious, more Darwinian . . . they sense your hubris.

RICHARD
Hubris?

HARLEN
They think you've fucked yourself royally.

RICHARD
Mr. Harlen . . .

HARLEN
Let me help you, Dr. Bronstein. We're running out of time.

RICHARD
Help me?

HARLEN
Christ Almighty, use your intuition. Smart, high profile scientists like you are often in danger. Dr. Benito Que in Miami, Dr. Don Wiley in Memphis, Russian Dr. Vladimir Pasechnik in Britain, Dr. Robert Schwartz in Virginia, Dr. Set Van Nguyen in Canada? All had died mysteriously in the span of 18 months, fifteen years ago. They were all experts in infectious diseases and DNA sequencing. The FBI sees a recurring pattern.

RICHARD
All these researchers had pet monkeys fluent in French?

HARLEN

I'm sure you had e-mails about the newest "elite death league".

(RICHARD NODS NONCHALANTLY)

Sixteen years ago we had that Chinese guy in New Mexico, Dr. Lee Wen Ho, who went rogue.

RICHARD

Wen Ho Lee. Taiwanese.

HARLEN

Yes – the arrogant scientist who downloaded classified files on his laptop and skipped back to the Chinese mainland.

RICHARD

After federal investigators failed to prove these accusations, Dr. Lee pleaded guilty to improper handling of restricted data, one of the original 59 indictment counts, all due to a plea settlement. In 2006, Lee received \$1.6 million from the U.S. and five media organizations as part of a settlement of a civil suit he had filed against them for leaking his name to the press before any formal charges were pressed.

HARLEN

If the FBI gets its way, my friend, you risk going to a federal pen for 20 years.

(PAUSE)

Where's your wife?

RICHARD

At work.

HARLEN

She makes a nice salary at Prescott Group Financial. I understand that she's a Prescott partner. My file states that she buys Italian shoes each week. \$400 a pair. Is she trying to get into the Guinness Book of Records? Who's the mechanic outside? The guy under your car?

RICHARD

Norton.

HARLEN

What's he doing?

RICHARD

Fixing the car.

HARLEN

Norton has a police record. Petty larceny

RICHARD

I didn't know that.

HARLEN

Do you let him use your bathroom?

(PAUSE)

Are you Jewish?

RICHARD

My father was Jewish.

HARLEN

Outside your front door is a Mezuzah. I noticed it right away. Do you go to synagogue anymore?

(SMILING)

You know so many secrets about the crap that inhabits a Petrie dish. This is a serious age. Extremely serious. We've transcended the nuclear war horrors because of stateless terrorism. We have two real threats to extinction, Doctor. Either Chinese hackers will destroy our digital network or our nation will be undone by level 4 biohazardous attacks. We cannot threaten an invisible enemy like we had with nuclear deterrents against Russia.

RICHARD

I understand.

HARLEN

I'm supposed to bring you in for another polygraph

RICHARD

I took the polygraph and passed.

HARLEN

That's right and we want you to fail it.

RICHARD

Many scientists travel with plague samples.

HARLEN

For the pleasure of it?

RICHARD

It's far safer, and more convenient than using commercial carriers. Professionals know how to handle samples.

HARLEN

So when you change planes with two or three hours to kill, you go with your hand luggage to the nearest Brass Rail pub for a few beers?

RICHARD

Plastic luggage is harder than a cement block. I handcuff my bag, Mr. Harlen, with a thick nylon braided plastic bracelet.

HARLEN

Not metal?

RICHARD

Metal detectors are inconvenient.

HARLEN

And when you go to the airport toilet?

RICHARD

I wash my hands upon exiting. For thirty seconds with soap and hot water.

HARLEN

Yersinia pestis. The black plague. Lost vials are very serious.

RICHARD

Indeed.

HARLEN

30 missing vials.

RICHARD

Yes.

HARLEN

Extremely serious stuff. For two weeks you couldn't account for 30 missing vials. You know panic . . .

RICHARD

Panic induces hysteria.

HARLEN

Hell. One or two missing vials would take out a city.

RICHARD

Yes.

HARLEN

It makes no sense that you didn't file an accident report, Doctor.

RICHARD

Eventually my lab did.

HARLEN

I thought all scientists use major air couriers for hazardous shipping.

RICHARD

That depends on the circumstances. The materials could be diagnostic. The Center for Disease Control knows exactly what researchers like me are doing.

HARLEN

And the 30 vials?

RICHARD

Not that unusual. Ask the CDC.

HARLEN

30 bubonic missing vials?

RICHARD

I could have inadvertently sterilized an entire batch that was mislabeled.

HARLEN

Certainly not *30 fucking bubonic vials?*

RICHARD

Are you going to arrest me, Mr. Harlen?

HARLEN

I don't know.

RICHARD

I have to blame my own lab apparatus.

HARLEN

You failed to submit "hazardous materials" travel forms when you had left Kenya.

RICHARD

Yes.

HARLEN

Yes?

RICHARD

I had forgotten some documentation. My crew and I raced off due to a hotel fire.

HARLEN

These actions make you appear unprofessional and cavalier. If you were the FBI, wouldn't you be curious about your behavior?

RICHARD

Look, I filed reports with the lab director, the campus police . . . filed with CDC.

HARLEN

I can't reconcile your reports, Dr. Bronstein.

RICHARD

There's nothing to reconcile. I came up with the study on two known antibiotics to counter bubonic plague. The FBI agrees with my findings.

HARLEN

The language in your report is defensive.

RICHARD

Defensive?

HARLEN

Like Woody Allen's syntax without a crisp punch line.

RICHARD

You're aware that my campus engages in discreet bio-research for the US army.

HARLEN

So? One third of all top tier research universities in the county are doing military bio-research

RICHARD

We're not oriented toward treating disease. There are at least 21 active contracts between my campus and the Department of Defense.

HARLEN

You allude to enemies in your field, Dr. Bronstein. Three individuals you do consider "adversarial" and they are affiliated with your campus or the Institutional Review Board. It's in your closing statement. Aren't you embarrassed that The Review Board had barred you from conducting human research.

RICHARD

In fact, I am embarrassed. These individuals are jealous of my work.

HARLEN

We found one e-mail that you sent to an East Coast colleague about a new pathogen to be genetically-altered slated to infect a certain group of people. Ethnic targeting.

RICHARD

It was a worry of mine, yes.

HARLEN

You believed that Dr. Wiley's research was used for that goal? That was in your email.

RICHARD

Yes.

HARLEN

You believe in ethnic cleansing.

RICHARD

No. Never.

HARLEN

You have a lot of provocative things on your mind.

RICHARD

As do you. Please answer my question.

HARLEN

What was the question?

(PAUSE)

No, I don't plan to arrest you today.

(NORTON, HANDS BLACK WITH GREASE,
ENTERS WITH A SMALL ENGINE PART)

NORTON

I have no idea what the hell this thing is doing under your wife's hood. It looks like a transistor. Your car runs ten times better without it.

RICHARD

When are you going home?

NORTON

In a hour.

RICHARD

Leave the car keys under the floor mat. Thank you, Norton.

NORTON

Sure thing, Dr. Bronstein.
(EXITS)

HARLEN

What's wrong with his leg?

RICHARD

Army disability.

HARLEN

Iraq?

RICHARD

He's on OxyContin every day. .

HARLEN

Do you supply him? What are you on?

RICHARD

I've had chemo therapy for the past three years. I can't drink booze, Mr. Harlen.

HARLEN

A nervous man sweats profusely, crosses his legs more than Sharon Stone, looks at odd angles to avoid eye contact.

RICHARD

Were you watching? Behind the mirror?

HARLEN

Does your attorney know what's true and what's not? What does your wife think about this?

RICHARD

She's upset, obviously.

HARLEN

Is your daughter upset with you? Amanda? Your dean said vials missing were not weaponized in any way.

(SILENCE)

How many individuals had authorized access to the pathogens? Did your graduate students have access?

RICHARD

You know, Mr. Harlen.

(STONE FACE REACTION FROM HARLEN)

No one besides me had access.

HARLEN

You were in the military, Doctor?

RICHARD

Air Force. I was a pilot.

HARLEN

That's where you met your wife. Did your wife leave for a couple of days, Doctor?

RICHARD

My wife goes to Chicago a lot. She's visiting her father who is struggling with assisted living.

HARLEN

Why are you fascinated by pestilence?

RICHARD

Pestilence is one of the oldest, *great diseases* known to mankind. To me, bubonic plague transcends its historical importance . . .

HARLEN

. . . existing as a perfect trope for civilization's eternal sins?

RICHARD

Yes.

HARLEN

That's what you published. Could you not say the same about cancer and smallpox?

RICHARD

Cancer isn't contagious and smallpox can travel without fleas or rodents. You see, Mr. Harlen, it's the manner in which the contagion spreads that is poetic and figurative. Nature supplies a host and nature supplies a parasite. Moreover, fleas and rats bring to mind the unseemly side of our living habits.

HARLEN

Are you concerned about the return of small pox?

RICHARD

As an instrument of war, yes.

HARLEN

Who mailed the anthrax letters to Capitol Hill thirteen years ago? Only two dozen people in the U.S. know how to handle high grade anthrax.

RICHARD

I have no idea.

HARLEN

So imagine a cool dawn October with no wind, no electric fan, no A/C running. In a tight room, you could open the jar. Stick a spatula in the jar, scoop out some high grade shit, tip it off, and then right into an envelope. Then you seal the envelope with a wet cotton ball. You wouldn't want to put your face near the envelope - even if you had on a respirator. Some of the powder gets airborne, but provided you hosed everything down, and you knew exactly what you were doing, you'd be okay. Say it's Dr. Steven Hatfill. We certainly have enough evidence to believe this. What do you think?

RICHARD

Not enough to make the arrest.

HARLEN

It's very frustrating, Dr. Bronstein. You don't assume it was Dr. Hatfill?

RICHARD

It was thirteen years ago. I have no way of knowing.

HARLEN

Some of our investigators still question whether there was also a foreign conspirator. For example, one of the 9/11 hijackers - Ahmed al-Haznawi - was treated in a Florida hospital due to severe black lesions on his leg. The doctor who treated him was convinced al-Haznawi had the first signs of an anthrax outbreak. Several germ experts concurred after they reviewed al-Haznawi's file. Yet the molecular signature of this particular anthrax was undeniably American. When my team interviewed other research scientists, they all believe it was Hatfill. He had lied about his university background, his personal contacts, and his flying licenses. He had a few beefs to settle with his superiors. He became *a person of interest* to us.

RICHARD

The Austrian Robert Musil wrote a splendid novel, *The Man Without Qualities*, which asked the question – can essential identity be described accurately in the 20th Century?

HARLEN

Hatfill was studying in Zimbabwe, lived in a village called Greendale. The return address on the anthrax letters was “Greendale School, New Jersey” which doesn't exist.

RICHARD

You can't hang a man based on a coincidence thirteen years ago?

HARLEN

Five were murdered and seventeen became infected from the anthrax mailings.

RICHARD

A coincidence is God's way of testing our intelligence.

HARLEN

Friendship is the root of a great civilization, Dr. Bronstein.

(PAUSE)

Did you ever run into Hatfill at the Army Research Institute in Fort Detrick?

RICHARD

No.

HARLEN

He told one of our agents that he knew you, Doctor.

RICHARD

I doubt that Hatfill ever said that.

HARLEN

What if it were true?

RICHARD

But it isn't.

HARLEN

He said you played a considerable role in his life.

RICHARD

Nonsense.

HARLEN

I see these biohazard cases entwined like venomous snakes on a tree.

(PAUSE)

Do you cheat on your wife, Doctor?

RICHARD

What?

HARLEN

I cheat on my wife, Doctor.

RICHARD

Something we have in common.

HARLEN

Politically and scientifically, it all comes down to hosts and parasites, Dr. Bronstein

END OF SCENE

SCENE THREE
(THE NEXT DAY)

AMANDA

I took the shuttle home. Somewhere from the airport gate to baggage claim, I lost my wallet. Maybe it was a pickpocket. I just don't know. Didn't have much cash, but my license and a few credit cards were inside. You know I suffer when I travel alone. But I read a book about the nature of accidents and the belief that all accidents have their special nature.

(PAUSE)

I know you're curious about Dylan. He's a shit, Daddy. This was the big trip for us. He had a ring in his pocket for two weeks. He told me he did. It was a Tiffany setting. Two and half karats. I did get to see it.

(PAUSE)

You painted the front of the house? Sort of a warm Provencal yellow.

(PAUSE)

Say something, Daddy. I hate when you're this quiet.

RICHARD

Welcome home, baby.

AMANDA

So tell me, Daddy, what the hell's going on here? What the hell are these black sedans cruising every ten minutes?

RICHARD

I'm in trouble with the government.

AMANDA

You always are. Either it's a tax audit or you broke a lab declassification.

RICHARD

It's worse this time.

AMANDA

Much worse, Daddy?

RICHARD

They can ream me off Point Loma on the U.S. Nimitz with a 21 inch cast iron marine cannon.

AMANDA

That ought to get rid of your piles. Are you going to prison?

RICHARD

Maybe.

(PAUSE)

Did you really want to get married?

AMANDA

Yes.

RICHARD

To this Dylan moron? Is that his real name? Is this love?

AMANDA

Yes. Mom always said that love is never romance.

RICHARD

What happened? Catch him with another girl?

AMANDA

Another boy.

RICHARD

I'm sorry, pumpkin.

AMANDA

And twice his age. It was the owner of the hotel spa in Italy.

RICHARD

How did you catch him?

AMANDA

Didn't Mom tell you any of this?

RICHARD

No. Your mother is mad at me.

AMANDA

Really?

RICHARD

For the last two months.

AMANDA

I sensed it. You're not looking very healthy, Daddy.

RICHARD

I lost a few pounds.

AMANDA

God, I wish I could. I had loved him so much, Daddy. He was always vulnerable. Because he was so kind to me . . .

RICHARD

Are you staying the night, Amanda?

AMANDA

Home makes me feel safe. You make me feel safe. Maybe you'll play the violin for me tonight?

RICHARD

If you like.

AMANDA

You would play for me when I couldn't go to sleep as a child.

RICHARD

I'm glad you remember those things.

(PAUSE)

I need to get some groceries.

AMANDA

We can order up a pizza.

RICHARD

Sure.

AMANDA

My period's late, Daddy.

RICHARD

Your mother had texted me

AMANDA

She wasn't supposed to. Fuck. It was a secret.

RICHARD

How late?

AMANDA

Six weeks.

Does Dylan know?

RICHARD

No.

AMANDA

I think you should tell him.

RICHARD

I don't want to give him any satisfaction.

AMANDA

What are you going to do?

RICHARD

Nothing.

AMANDA

You want the baby?

RICHARD

Yes. I think I can be a wonderful mother.

AMANDA

I know you can be too.

RICHARD

AMANDA

And I will work part time once the baby starts to walk. I can be a journalist or a consultant.

RICHARD

You can be an excellent journalist, darling.

AMANDA

You hate the idea.

RICHARD

I'm uncomfortable with you being a single parent.

AMANDA

I think this is a gift from God. And I think having the baby is the perfect way to punish Mom.

RICHARD

Why punish her?

AMANDA

I could ask the same of you?

RICHARD

I don't understand the philosophy of punishment.

AMANDA

There is no philosophy, Daddy. Mom told me too that I was unplanned.

RICHARD

Did she say that?

AMANDA

You married Mom months after she conceived me.

RICHARD

I don't really remember.

AMANDA

You don't remember your wedding anniversary?

RICHARD

April 1. April Fools. Always before Passover or Easter.

AMANDA

Why are you and I so accident prone?

RICHARD

I don't know.

AMANDA

I've fallen off ladders, escalators, bar stools, window ledges, ski lifts, chiropractor tables, water beds, bandstands . . .

RICHARD

Forgive yourself.

AMANDA

That's not what I asked.

RICHARD

Can you visualize your child becoming a teenager?

AMANDA

I wasn't that hard on you.

RICHARD

You were, you just have no memory.

AMANDA

You know there are fascists running the federal government.

RICHARD

Yes, I know that.

AMANDA

Why would you want to piss them off when you are just five years away from retirement?

AMANDA

The FBI wants blood.

RICHARD

Literally.

AMANDA

Are you scared?

RICHARD

Yes.

AMANDA

You look pale, Daddy.

RICHARD

The FBI can ruin my career.

AMANDA

If you've done something very dumb, Daddy, tell me.

RICHARD

No. I've done nothing very dumb.

AMANDA

Some people have death wishes, Daddy.

RICHARD

I hope you're wrong, sweetie.

AMANDA

All martyrs torture other people.

END OF SCENE

SCENE FOUR
(THE NEXT DAY IN THE KITCHEN)

RICHARD

(MAKING BREAKFAST)

I missed you, Terri.

TERRI

I'm not hungry.

(AWKWARD SILENCE)

Did the cleaning girl come Tuesday?

RICHARD

Ahuh.

TERRI

The place is a mess.

RICHARD

I was going to tidy up, but you came back a day early.

(TURNING PAGE OF NEWSPAPER ON THE KITCHEN COUNTER)

Here's something fascinating – "A man in Berlin who taught his dog to raise its right paw in a Hitler salute will not be prosecuted for the pet's trick . . . but he faces other charges of violating Germany's anti-Nazi laws."

Stop it, Richard.

TERRI

I thought you liked dogs?

RICHARD

I do.

TERRI

“The dog, a German shepherd . . .”

RICHARD

Stop it, Richard.

TERRI

“ . . . named Adolf, is said to have performed the trick at its master’s request - ‘Adolf, sit. Give me the salute.’ The man faces three years in jail.”

RICHARD

I thought Amanda would cook for you.

TERRI

She has, but it’s not the same.

RICHARD

Where is she?

TERRI

At the health club. I got her a rental car for the month. How’s your father doing?

RICHARD

Not well. Very despondent.

TERRI

I’m truly sorry for him. Do you want to move him here?

RICHARD

No.

TERRI

You’ve thought about it?

RICHARD

Yes. It wouldn’t make sense. He has friends there and my brother’s an hour away.

TERRI

RICHARD

They took all my computers. They have a warrant.

TERRI

But no arrest? That's strange.

RICHARD

It's virtual house arrest, Terri.

TERRI

What are your friends thinking?

RICHARD

They're worried about a lawsuit and that's why the FBI is taking its sweet time. They wanted to impound our cars too. Yes, I can see you're upset.

(BACK TO THE NEWSPAPER)

Another fascinating tidbit, darling. "Garfield, New Jersey. MAN FOUND DEAD IN WINDOW. A 375 pound man was found dead on Monday, lodged partway through the bathroom window of his first floor apartment, the police said. Edward Mills, 29, was trying to re-enter his locked apartment without a key. Detectives said Mr. Mills may have suffocated when he got stuck." I think the cops got it all wrong. Mr. Mills was probably trying to *get out of his apartment*. He was afraid to go out the front door. I know that feeling.

TERRI

Can you fight back, Richard?

RICHARD

I intend to.

TERRI

Jail arrest or house arrest. They're destroying your career and ruining our lives.

RICHARD

How does a man reach 375 pounds?

(PAUSE)

I haven't told you everything, Terri.

(PAUSE)

I am a terrorist. I am a scientist who can incite terror.

(PAUSE)

A naive medical scientist who weighs 175 pounds in stocking feet.

(PAUSE)

I broke lab protocol in a way that cannot be explained.

TERRI

I know.

RICHARD

You don't know, Terri O'Reilly had piss me off about new campus bylaws and my revenue stream. I always transported vials nonchalantly which was fine. I had transported vials like chocolate truffles. But this time I destroyed vials illegally. No supervisor does everything by the book. O'Reilly was turning my lab into a joke and I wanted to return the treatment in spades. He began to question my expertise. The vials made him feel very powerful. So I acted out.

(PAUSE)

And because of O'Reilly I wrote angry, sarcastic letters to the Center for Disease Control on his stationery. Those letters raised eye brows. At the time, I didn't give a shit.

(PAUSE)

Last month I was overheard in the faculty club bad mouthing O'Reilly. It was well into the afternoon and I two or three beers. I joked about my pranks.

TERRI

So you dragged the authorities to our front door.

RICHARD

These little shits like O'Reilly kill innovation. My discoveries have saved thousands of lives in Africa.

TERRI

So why the hell do you sabotage yourself?

RICHARD

It's my lab. Not James O'Reilly's. These are my grants and contacts. When I came back from Kenya, I wanted to see how the network of research labs handled security. I did not set about stunts just to embarrass my supervisor.

TERRI

How stupid can you be, Richard? And what does the FBI think you did?

RICHARD

They think I'm working with a foreign government.

TERRI

Are you?

RICHARD

No.

TERRI

Can I believe you, Richard?

RICHARD

The FBI found large consulting fees paid to me from Kenya and Tanzania. For this they can crucify me. The FBI has already leaked things to the media.

TERRI

Oh Christ!

RICHARD

Harlen knows we're having marital difficulty.

TERRI

And how relevant is that? Who the fuck is this guy Harlen?

RICHARD

Didn't he contact you?

TERRI

Yes. Several times.

RICHARD

What did he ask?

TERRI

Some questions about your work habits, your students, your friends . . . he said that one of your assistants is a co-conspirator or at least might have compromised your medical lab.

RICHARD

Did he say it was Calhoun or Jackson?

TERRI

He didn't say.

RICHARD

Stay tonight, Terri. Please.

TERRI

What about Amanda?

(PAUSE)

I can't stay here, Richard.

RICHARD

Why not?

TERRI

It feels too uncomfortable. You may have run out of luck with the government. I know you're not a terrorist but you are unbearably arrogant.

RICHARD

I saved so many lives in the last 30 years Terri. Don't let me face this alone.

TERRI

I already made up my mind, Richard.

END OF SCENE

SCENE FIVE
(LATER THAT DAY)

NORTON

I'd buy you beer, Doc, I know the situation. I don't watch TV but I read the papers. I know. What can I say? I was audited by IRS. The fucks there wanted to camp out in my living room. The government's climbs up your ass and the world laughs. I know, Doc, I really do know. America's second Civil War has started and we take the crap from Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, India, ISIS, the Taliban, China . . . We The People, Dr. Bronstein, We The Fucking People . . .

RICHARD

I don't follow your track of thought, Norton.

NORTON

The damage is done. Ted Kasczynski found his happy haven in a little Montana shack, because he was a volunteer in mind-control tests by the CIA at Harvard in the late '50s. And now I understand. We can go back to Vietnam, back to Desert Storm, and back to the future . . . You know Bin Laden's family was allowed to fly out of the country? I don't believe Bin Laden's really dead. No, no, the war in Afghanistan was a joke.

RICHARD

Norton, I need to be alone.

NORTON

But you're pissed off.

RICHARD

Yes.

NORTON

While that FBI asshole is laughing at you.

RICHARD

He's harmless.

NORTON

No, Doc. This guy's going to bust you like a piñata in Tijuana.

RICHARD

My lawyer has it covered.

NORTON

Lawyers can't stop this shit. He's following your daughter around town.

RICHARD

How do you know?

NORTON

I know. I see.

RICHARD

Norton . . .

NORTON

Swear to God. And she's not comfortable about these Feds.

RICHARD

I know I'm in a lot of trouble, Norton. Things are very unpredictable. On the plus side, the Academy of Science is sympathetic and helping out.

NORTON

Helping you?

RICHARD

Yes. They have a very prestigious network of members and a petition is in the works. That might sway public opinion and even law enforcement.

NORTON

I can sneak you out of here.

RICHARD

No you can't. Half the FBI in California is circling the neighborhood.

NORTON

We head to a carwash, do a switch with your decoy during the suds cycle, so simple Doc. I'm your height and weight. I would bleach your hair, shave off the beard, buy a facial tattoo and run off into the mountains with a used jeep with two weeks of supplies. Hell, they probably want you to make a run of it.

RICHARD

(QUIETLY LAUGHING)

Make a run of it and become road kill?

NORTON

You think they got you by the balls. Kind of like Mel Gibson in CONSPIRACY THEORY. He was crazy and sleepless and fucking paranoid but now Mel's got religion and he's more screwed up than a wine cork.

RICHARD

You're too much, Norton.

NORTON

I served time.

RICHARD

How long?

NORTON

Two years at a minimum security jail.

RICHARD

For what?

NORTON

For grand larceny, Doctor. After I left the military I had a miserable time finding work.

RICHARD

Did you have a cellmate?

NORTON

Everyone gets a cellmate.

RICHARD

Bunk beds?

NORTON

You'll find out soon enough.

(HANDING RICHARD A METALIC CHIP)

They planted this bug under your car.

END OF SCENE

SCENE SIX

(LATER THAT DAY, IN RICHARD'S
STUDY AS HE IMAGINES THAT HE IS
GIVING A UNIVERSITY LECTURE.
THERE MIGHT EVEN BE POWER
POINT SLIDES)

RICHARD

It was long held that the ancient Greeks would never dare to use biological weapons, but nearly every culture in history had no qualms about resorting to smallpox, bubonic plague, and other unscrupulous methods of death. Arrows and cannon balls were never enough for big wars. So the Spartans invented a poison gas and a flame-thrower to undermine army strongholds. Before napalm, there was quicklime, sulfur and naphtha in lethal combination to enflame the enemy. Frequently, these weapons would attack the wrong people prompting militarist to debate the efficacy of such measures. Clearly, the evolution of biological weapons marches forward.

HARLEN

(AT THE BOOKSHELVES BROWSING SEVERAL TITLES)

Pleasure reading or is this the fruits of your research?

RICHARD

A little of both.

HARLEN

When I was a kid, the great fear was a nuclear attack. We had to run drills and “duck and cover” along the school halls. But times have changed and now we worry about what’s in the salad bar at The Sizzler. In a year or two I know a major U.S. City will be hit by a biological weapon and thousands of lives will be destroyed.

RICHARD

Maybe not. Maybe the devastating attack will be in cyberspace and cripple the nation’s grid?

HARLEN

Disturbing signs that these cells are circling around major research labs at universities. I spoke with your daughter, Doctor.

(REMOVING A CIGARETTE FROM A PACK)

RICHARD

Please don’t light up.

HARLEN

I just hold it. I have no matches. Habit. My wife thought I could quit if I just keep an unlit cigarette between my fingers. I’m also on the nicotine patch, yet for some reason it makes me somnolent. And then I can’t do brilliant work. You were drinking heavily before you were brought in for questioning. You were on foot.

RICHARD

It was late into the evening and my home’s just a ten minute walk from the lab.

HARLEN

Is that habit for you?

RICHARD

Walking home late from work?

HARLEN

No, drinking heavily?

RICHARD

I don’t drink that much.

HARLEN

You must know Don Craig Wiley, the microbiologist.

RICHARD

Of course. From Harvard. 2001.

HARLEN

While visting his father in Memphis, he went over the side of a bridge known for suicides. Cops trawled the Mississippi, but it took a month to find his body floating along the river. This was at the height of the anthrax panic. Wiley was happily married with young kids. Twins, just under three years old. Four days before Wiley's death, Benito Que was found dead in his usual parking spot close to work.

RICHARD

Actually Dr. Que was unconscious when the police found him.

HARLEN

I stand corrected, yes. How did you know that?

RICHARD

Benito Que died in the Florida hospital. But he was a researcher, not a true microbiologist. He never worked with anthrax or any such infectious disease.

HARLEN

At least not for public knowledge, Doctor.

(PAUSE)

The following week, Vladimir Pasechik - a brilliant Russian biochemist who had defected - collapsed in London. Then the DNA expert - Robert Schwartz's death in Leesburg, Virginia.

RICHARD

Yes, yes. Stabbed to death by a two foot long sword.

HARLEN

On the same day of Schwartz's death, yet another scientist - Set Van Nguyen - was found dead in an air-locked storage chamber at Australia's animal disease facility in Geelong. And the list of names . . .

RICHARD

. . . go on and on.

HARLEN

I'm not a conspiracy buff, but Dr. Bronstein . . . one could spin a wonderful theory about the motives behind this pattern of death since September 11th. All victims from your field of science.

(PAUSE)

I am very worried for your life. Were you threatened recently by someone?

RICHARD

Only the FBI.

HARLEN

I want to save your life, you little asshole. There are patterns of scientist victims.

RICHARD

Coincidences often have nothing behind them.

HARLEN

It would be understandable why you would bend to a terrorist's request. Worried about your family's safety. And it would explain your erratic behavior as you try to cover your tracks. Even at the expense of ruining your career. And perhaps this back story would surface during your court trial

(PAUSE)

So I ask myself if you were pushed to do some strange things with the lost vials. I ask myself if in a few weeks our wise-ass boys will plant bio-terror pathogens in an Afghanistan bunker because the CIA is coming up short. You know, pathogens which have an unique foreign signature. I ask myself if that action is any different than when a cop plants cocaine on a luckless street kid. I ask myself and I wonder. I ask myself if it is worse for you if it's our sneaky boys, and not the Taliban, not ISIS, not Iran, who are squeezing your balls. I ask myself what I would do if I were in you..

RICHARD

What would you do, Mr. Harlen?

HARLEN

I would talk.

RICHARD

Talk to whom?

HARLEN

To someone who looked just like me. Someone tall, someone strong, someone who's handsome and ethical and open and warm and quiet and sweet and patient.

RICHARD

Someone modest like you?

HARLEN

Yes, Christ-Almighty, some schmuck just like me.

RICHARD

Okay.

HARLEN

Okay.

(PAUSE)

I think the domestic anthrax terror wasn't from a disgruntled American scientist and wasn't from a foreign group either. I think we were playing with ourselves, Dr. Bronstein. Just testing ourselves before the next big killing. It's going to come soon. I say this in an unofficial voice, you understand. But I say this to build a genuine bridge to you. Because I think you believe the same thing too.

RICHARD

And what if I were a crazy man? Very crazy, irrational, nihilistic, stupid.

HARLEN

Crazy.

RICHARD

Crazy, And I have nothing to fear.

END OF SCENE

SCENE SEVEN
(THAT NIGHT)

RICHARD

I thought it over.

NORTON

You thought what over?

RICHARD

Your speech.

NORTON

Oh yeah . . .

RICHARD

It was an exceptionally good speech, Norton. I want to be a man of action. No question about it.

NORTON

Yeah.

RICHARD

A man of action has no doubts, Norton. You fought hard overseas.

NORTON

I hear you, Doctor.

RICHARD

A man of action excites other men. Jean-Paul Sartre made this distinction. Our world doesn't need any more cowardly thinkers. We need brave men with muscle. I'm talking about you, Norton. I'm talking about what we can accomplish together, with your alacrity and my intelligence. And afterwards we'll feel terrific. We'll feel like jubilant school boys.

(PAUSE)

Are you in or are you out?

NORTON

I'm in.

RICHARD

Name a target.

NORTON

A target for what?

RICHARD

For a counter-strike. Weaponized Biohazard options.

NORTON

I can help you escape, Dr. Bronstein. That's the least that I can do. But I'm not going on the offense. I have kids and I share custody.

RICHARD

But you are a man of action.

NORTON

I fix cars.

RICHARD

You are a man of action. Say it, Norton.

NORTON

Say what?

RICHARD

Are you afraid?

NORTON

No.

RICHARD

I don't see any fear on your face.

NORTON

What the hell do you want me to do?

RICHARD

Pick a few targets and make the evening news. Mass illness need not mean death. I'm not asking you to kill anyone. Just make a loud noise and leave a note.

NORTON

A note?

RICHARD

That's right.

NORTON

And what should the note say?

RICHARD

Say the truth. Say that your country failed you. Say the nation is mortally ill.

NORTON

I'll get caught.

RICHARD

You won't get caught.

NORTON

Hey, you're just jerking me around, Doctor.

RICHARD

Surprise them, Norton.

NORTON

What, make a biological bomb? I don't like loud noises.

RICHARD

I can give you a vial of a containable hazardous pathogen.

NORTON

No, thank you, sir.

RICHARD

Think it over tonight. This could change society. Maybe you'll be inspired. I've always admired you.

NORTON

Why?

RICHARD

Because you are totally unattached to the world.

(RICHARD OPENS A MINI-FRIDGE AND TAKES OUT THREE VIALS. HE IS ABOUT TO HAND THEM TO NORTON)

END OF SCENE

SCENE EIGHT
(THE NEXT DAY)

AMANDA

You don't look well.

TERRI

I think I'm anemic.

AMANDA

Doesn't that run in our family?

TERRI

Yes. I'm my side. All the women have this issue.

AMANDA

Do you take iron supplements?

TERRI

Each morning and its very constipating.

AMANDA

I thought you and Daddy were doing okay together. At least in the last nine months?

TERRI

So did I

AMANDA

But that's lasting.

TERRI

You father has a split personality.

AMANDA

I know.

TERRI

Far worse than before.

AMANDA

He needs you now.

TERRI

I know. I can't help him anymore, Amanda. He's self-destructing. Such a brilliant mind.

AMANDA

Daddy has no real friends. You have more friends than I can count. You took a lover.

TERRI

Your father invented stoicism.

AMANDA

He's not that sotic.

TERRI

We're not divorcing.

AMANDA

Then what are you doing?

TERRI

A legal separation.

AMANDA

Is there any real difference?

TERRI

A world of difference. You know he'll end up in prison.

AMANDA

I wish you weren't my mother. I could really get a word to you.

TERRI

So do I, Amanda. I never liked being your parent.

AMANDA

I wish Daddy could avoid prosecution.

TERRI

That's really up to him.

AMANDA

Is it?

TERRI

It is. He's spoiling for a big fight and the FBI knows he is withholding.

AMANDA

Daddy's not a terrorist.

TERRI

No.

AMANDA

Well, maybe that's the wrong word.

TERRI

He's using subterfuge in his professional dealings.

AMANDA

How do you know for certain?

TERRI

I don't know.

AMANDA

Does Daddy have a death wish?

TERRI

He has rivals in his field, Amanda. That's as bad as a death wish.

AMANDA

What's going to happen to him?

TERRI

I don't know.

(PAUSE)

Prison by the end of the year.

AMANDA

How long?

TERRI

I don't know.

AMANDA

Maybe if he went on one of the TV news shows and shows contrition?

TERRI

You know him. He won't.

AMANDA

I would ask him to go on TV.

TERRI

He wouldn't listen to you.

AMANDA

Would you go on TV for him?

TERRI

I'm not turning our private lives into a circus.

AMANDA

But Mom . . .

TERRI

No, Amanda.

AMANDA

I would. I'd do whatever it would take to change things.

TERRI

We'll never learn all the details behind Daddy's actions. No matter what comes out in the wash.

AMANDA

What if he were innocent?

TERRI

He's still your father and therefore he's quite guilty.

AMANDA

What if he thought he were guilty, but really was delusional?

(ENTERING FROM THE FRONT DOOR, RICHARD ASSESSES
THE CONVERSATION)

RICHARD

Good evening, dear ladies of my heart.

(AWKWARD SILENCE)

I know exactly what you've been saying. I am the canary in the coal mine. I am about to die. I'm mentioned in the New York Times Op/Ed pages. A woman columnist dares to say that I am the West's failed answer to Andrei Sakharov. "I shall continue to live in the hope that goodness will finally triumph."

TERRI

That won't save you, Richard.

RICHARD

It's my fault, Amanda.

AMANDA

Is it?

RICHARD

I made a colossal mistake.

TERRI

But that's not the entire story, Amanda.

RICHARD

Your mother's correct.

TERRI

Someone's pulling your father's strings.

AMANDA

I don't understand.

TERRI

Tell her, Richard.

RICHARD

Someone's yanking my strings.

Who is?

AMANDA

I don't know.

TERRI

Daddy?

AMANDA

TERRI

Tell her, Richard. You won't tell me, but you should tell your own daughter.

RICHARD

I can't.

TERRI

I'll leave the room and then you'll be free to say it.

AMANDA

Then I don't want to know.

TERRI

It's a rogue General from the Pentagon who served in Iraq.

RICHARD

Very clever, Terri. Brilliant guess.

TERRI

However it plays, the disaster falls only on you.

RICHARD

I realize.

TERRI

The General has phoned us at home. Just come clean to one honest reporter.

RICHARD

I can't. I would have to be very specific and very thorough.

TERRI

Then come clean to me, Richard.

RICHARD

And then you'll go public with it.

TERRI

Something has to get out to the world about the secrecy.

RICHARD

And if there are repercussions?

TERRI

Like what?

RICHARD

Harm to my immediate family?

TERRI

Who asked you to bring back vials from Kenya?

RICHARD

An American General stationed in Iraq.

TERRI

In secret?

RICHARD

Yes.

TERRI

And then what?

RICHARD

I'm not certain, Terri. The NSC baited secret operatives working under the General.

TERRI

Why?

RICHARD

U.S. Intelligence predicted a powerful Israeli military action, just short of nuclear war, against Iran,

TERRI

And then what?

RICHARD

Everything leaks in due time. Iranians came to visit me about a year ago.

TERRI

This sounds fictitious, Richard.

RICHARD

It isn't, Terri. Everything is documented.

TERRI

And you cooperated?

RICHARD

No, not at first. I had contacted someone at the NSC. I was told to play along. But instead, I began to destroy the vials. I know my moral responsibilities. And then a certain General contacted me. It's not far out of the plotline for DR. STRANGELOVE.

(PAUSE)

I'm telling you the truth, Terri

TERRI

But you didn't destroy all the vials.

RICHARD

No. I have 10 secreted away. 20 were destroyed.

TERRI

You had alternatives, Richard.

RICHARD

I'm telling you that they had me tormented me and twisted me in every direction. Just as they did to James Wilson and his CIA wife. Plans colliding against one another. Back in 2002 the White House had many schemes about planting biological weapons. Should the White House falsify testimony from prominent Iraqi scientists? Should they pin the Intelligence failure on Britain? Should the U.S. invade Iran next? Or annihilate ISIS? Should the U.S. implicate the UN in the factious evacuation of all "level one" weaponry from terrorist states?

TERRI

And your hidden arsenals in your university lab?

RICHARD

I became very angry about how I was being treated. And things grew worse between O'Reilly and my staff. So I stopped cooperating with the Pentagon. This came right on the heels of the GAO investigation ordered by Congress. GAO went to a web site that sells Pentagon surplus and bought equipment that makes biological weapons. GAO purchased centrifuges, evaporators, incubators and protective gear. The Defense Department didn't give a shit as to who was buying this stuff. Deadly stuff at bargain basement prices. One third the cost billed directly to American taxpayers. Some independent brokers were then re-selling the surplus to shady gangs in Egypt, the Philippines and Malaysia.

TERRI

So why do you come away looking like a world class fool?

RICHARD

I was afraid that the Pentagon was trying to plant my cache in the Middle East.

AMANDA

Are people forcing you to do things against your will? Daddy?

RICHARD

(TO TERRI)

You think I'm insane.

TERRI

I do.

RICHARD

I'll put my plans into operation.

TERRI

What the hell does that mean?

RICHARD

Faust wanted ultimate knowledge. Prometheus wanted the fire of the Gods. They are wonderfully interchangeable. 30 vials.

TERRI

And where is your soul, Richard?

END OF SCENE

SCENE NINE
(SEVERAL DAYS LATER. HARLEN'S
AT BRONSTEIN'S FRONT DOOR)

RICHARD

I didn't hear you knock.

HARLEN

You were listening to Puccini. We all love popular opera, Doctor.

RICHARD

I thought you left town Monday?

HARLEN

It wasn't time for me to go. You scare me, Doctor.

RICHARD

I'm sorry if you feel that way. Please realize that I am contrite.

HARLEN

Are you?

RICHARD

I merit punishment.

HARLEN

I think you deserve jail time.

RICHARD

My lab work will never be the same.

HARLEN

The FBI is very fallible, Doctor. We have manpower and speed, but we trip over ourselves half the time like the Keystone Cops.

RICHARD

I know you have me cornered. But I'm a lucky guy.

HARLEN

When we are very close to our prey, some bald overweight official yanks our strings and suddenly we have a colossal miscarriage of justice.

(PAUSE)

You lost your wife. How lucky is that?

RICHARD

Not lucky enough. I am also married to this university, Mr. Harlen. This campus is, after all, a teaching institution. My students will go far.

HARLEN

You're right. They will go far.

RICHARD

Thank God.

HARLEN

You're planning something in a few days. It's time you tell me what is your plan. I know you need to prove something on a grand scale, now that you found a taste for attention. You're an angry man, Dr. Bronstein.

RICHARD

And that's why you're lingering?

HARLEN

You're not a modest man, Dr. Bronstein.

RICHARD

Science doesn't ask for my modesty. Science only asks for an absolute.

END OF SCENE

SCENE TEN
(SEVERAL DAYS LATER)

HARLEN

Mrs. Bronstein, I know how you feel.

TERRI

Do you?

HARLEN

I'm a very compassionate man. Your friends and neighbors don't understand.

TERRI

Actually, they do.

HARLEN

But you can never really know for certain. And when they talk about you behind your back, can there be anything worse in life?

TERRI

Is this the last interview with me?

HARLEN

Yes. I feel a powerful love for you and that's so stupid. I thought you knew and I thought you would let me see you outside of this house. I thought you would meet me in my hotel.

TERRI

Are you going to tape this conversation?

HARLEN

I never taped our conversations.

TERRI

My husband told me that you're married.

HARLEN

Yes, for 23 magical years. But we sleep in separate beds.

TERRI

O'Reilly is the man behind my husband's folly, Mr. Harlen. These two have seen rivals for almost three decades.

HARLEN

That much I do know.

TERRI

Does your wife approve of the work you do?

HARLEN

I think she does. Why do you ask?

TERRI

Because I don't think many married men take the matter to heart.

HARLEN

I worship my wife dearly, Mrs. Bronstein. Her Platonic love has made me a finer investigator.

TERRI

My husband wouldn't say the same about me.

HARLEN

Your husband's not an investigator.

TERRI

Oh, but he is.

(PAUSE)

Do you have a photo of your wife?

HARLEN

I do. In my wallet.

TERRI

May I see it?

HARLEN

No.

(SMILING)

Of course.

(REMOVES PHOTO AND HANDS IT TO HER)

It was taken in a Red Lobster restaurant. She loves Alaskan crab legs. She always wears a long pearl necklace.

TERRI

So do I.

HARLEN

I know. Crab legs take forever to eat.

TERRI

My husband's a superior scientist, but he's naive.

HARLEN

I'm running out of time with your husband.

(PAUSE)

Sad to say, but this is my last visit. You can tell your husband that.

TERRI

Why not tell him yourself?

HARLEN

I've been taken off the case.

TERRI

You're kidding?

HARLEN

I suppose your husband won the bigger cosmic battle.

TERRI

You've managed to ruin his career.

HARLEN

I doubt that.

TERRI

Did an Army General call? Who served in Iraq?

HARLEN

That's right.

TERRI

Richard doesn't want to stay at this lab anymore. You must already know this.

HARLEN

He'll find another research university or he'll go to prison.

TERRI

After this fiasco?

HARLEN

At the very least, a commercial lab will take him. One with major government military contracts.

TERRI

Will the FBI drop the case?

HARLEN

Mrs. Bronstein . . .

TERRI

Please tell me.

HARLEN

I can't say one way or the other.

TERRI

Then it was *your* loss.

HARLEN

I guess it was *our* loss.

(PAUSE)

Your husband shouldn't gloat about any possible turn of events, Mrs. Bronstein.

TERRI

He won't be gloating.

HARLEN

I'm always wrong.

(PAUSE)

Are you leaving him?

TERRI

I don't think that's any of your business, Mr. Harlen.

HARLEN

You're right.

TERRI

Why are you smiling?

HARLEN

Beauty is a commodity.

TERRI

Security is a commodity.

HARLEN

Yes, Mrs. Bronstein, indeed it is. One day Dr. Bronstein might lose his temper in a big way. And that would be a national tragedy.

(PAUSE)

My men just arrested Norton Frome. The car mechanic.

TERRI

Today?

HARLEN

He rigged something under the car of one of our agents – in the exhaust pipe. The agent escaped unharmed.

(PAUSE)

I worry for your safety. Your husband inspired this poor sap. At any rate, Norton Frome is talking to us. We'll get to the bottom of this.

TERRI

Should I be worried for my daughter?

HARLEN

I like the honesty we share, Mrs. Bronstein.

TERRI

So do I, Mr. Harlen.

HARLEN

Well then . . .

(PAUSE)

Your husband won't hurt your daughter. And, even if I am wrong, there are other agents that will step in immediately - in an emergency.

TERRI

Thank you, Mr. Harlen.

HARLEN

You're very welcome, Mrs. Bronstein.

END OF SCENE

SCENE ELEVEN
(LATER THAT DAY)

AMANDA

Mom left a long rambling voice mail on my cell. This is the most sick she's ever been. Like a clinical depression, Dad.

RICHARD

I know she left town.

AMANDA

It's dire, you've got to do something.

RICHARD

I've tremendous pain inside me, darling. I had bouts of depression in my life, but the last two weeks have been worse than death. There's a monster inside me. How do I know this? When I feel a certain rage, I might as well believe in the Devil. I might as well surrender. I tried talking this over with your mother, but the very idea scares the shit out of her. She cannot handle grief. She denies pain and pretends that life has only rewards.

When I see you back home again, when I study the lines of your face, my emotional swelling is unstoppable. You are my only child. You are my flesh. It's the beauty of your eyes and the intelligence of your . . .

(PAUSE)

But I can't help the situation. And I won't.

AMANDA

You're subversive.

RICHARD

I know.

AMANDA

You are out to hurt people.

RICHARD

I wouldn't kill a soul.

AMANDA

But how do you explain Norton Frome?

RICHARD

I can't.

AMANDA

Did you push him?

RICHARD

No.

AMANDA

Don't lie to me, Daddy.

RICHARD

I'm not lying, Amanda. Despite what your mother's telling. Terri spoke too much with the FBI.

AMANDA

Mom had to. It was from fear.

RICHARD

She has a lover.

AMANDA

I know.

How long have you known?
RICHARD

Longer than you.
AMANDA

But you don't judge her?
RICHARD

I do judge her.
AMANDA

But you judge me harder.
RICHARD

I do. There's more of you inside me.
AMANDA

Only if you think that.
RICHARD

Mom's not insane.
AMANDA

I never said she was.
RICHARD

Her insight makes her insane. I think you could have gone mad inside your lab.
AMANDA

Yes. I have gone mad.
RICHARD

You despise yourself.
AMANDA

Yes.
RICHARD

And you despise the government.
AMANDA

I can't help that.
RICHARD

AMANDA

You think you're smarter than Jonas Salk. You've said that to me so many times.

RICHARD

It was our joke.

(PAUSE)

I'm not a spy. I'm not an enemy. But the media is painting me like a monster. I had an opportunity to work with the Pentagon. I saved my correspondence with them. I want this country to be safe and healthy for you and your children. Our universities have whored themselves to the military. Our labs aren't racing toward cures. We're building weapons. That has to change right away.

AMANDA

By resorting to terrorism?

RICHARD

Is that your mother talking?

AMANDA

What the fuck are you talking about?

RICHARD

There is an old bubonic plague with a very new antidote. It is my invention and I will make war obsolete.

AMANDA

Stop it.

RICHARD

I can't.

AMANDA

Who did you target?

RICHARD

A few American hawks.

AMANDA

Who???

RICHARD

The Joint Chiefs of Staff. Top brass. A General from Baghdad.

AMANDA

I'll warn the FBI.

RICHARD

It's too late. They've become infected as of late last week. They will be as sick as an Ebola patient. But there's an antidote.

(PRODUCES A VIAL FROM HIS POCKET)

It's in this vial. Keep it in the fridge. Call Mr. Harlen and give him the joyous news. I've always been his guy.

END OF PLAY