

simply so much night

by Nigel Berkeley

“I wish I was an old man
And love was through with me
I wish I was a baby
On my mama's knee”

—James Taylor

this play is for Jo Holcomb

CHARACTERS:

MARIS: Phillia's Sister

MAR: her younger self

PHILLIA: Maris' Sister

PHIL: her younger self

MAGNUS: a very rich man

MAG: his younger self

ANDERS: a fisherman

ANDY: his younger self

OKSANA: a lost soul and Maris and Phillia's childhood friend

all the elders are in their 50's to 60's

all the youngers are in their 20's

SETTING:

a shtetl on an island off the coast of maine

the sisters' house

I think we're always inside of their house.

we've been invited to eat with them.

I: THE VILLAGE

MARIS and PHILLIA arrive

MARIS
once upon a time

PHILLIA
there was a shtetl

MARIS
on a remote island

PHILLIA
off the coast of maine.

MARIS
due to a clerical error, this island appeared on none of the maps printed at the time.

PHILLIA
and would not appear on one for another 50 years.

MARIS
due to its northern location,
the island was often shrouded in fog.
and so, when ships would arrive,
and expect to find the Maine coastline,

PHILLIA
they found an island,
a village rising up from the mists in front of them.
they would rush to their maps,
and, finding no island in the coordinates in which they found themselves,
were convinced it was an island of nautical lore,
an ancient city that trapped sailors in its warm glow

MARIS
the villagers thought this was a load of mishegas.
they knew that they existed
and so they went about with their daily lives,
without having to worry about being bothered by the outside world.

PHILLIA
which was, of course,
exactly how they liked it.

MARIS

the island's founders,
tired of being chased out of every place they called home,
settled in the one place they knew would be accepted:
nowhere.

PHILLIA

there, closed off from the rest of the world,
they created a vibrant life for themselves,
without needing much from the mainland.

MARIS

the village today was a small collection of colorful homes.
the children all thought it looked like one of their toy sets:
blue, pink, green, and yellow homes all in a little bundle.

PHILLIA

rarely did anyone bother to leave.

MARIS

those who grew up on the island,

PHILLIA

died on the island.

MARIS

its inhabitants were working people:

PHILLIA

(simple shtetl folk)

MARIS

farmers

PHILLIA

fishers

MARIS

three schoolteachers

PHILLIA

a librarian

MARIS

a rabbi

PHILLIA

and one very lonely postman,

who sat in his office all day long,
without anything to do.

MARIS

(because no one really sent letters to each other on the island)
(and no one received any from the outside world)

PHILLIA

oh!
and of course,

MARIS

then there were those two sisters.

PHILLIA

yes, those two sisters.

MARIS

the ones who lived in the middle of the village,

PHILLIA

the ones who helped everyone but kept to themselves.

MARIS (*presenting herself*)

Maris

PHILLIA (*presenting herself*)

and

Phyllia!

II: THE SISTERS

*they sit down at the table
they always sit in the same spot*

MARIS
we have lived in this house our entire lives.

PHILLIA
we were born here

MARIS
and we will die here.

beat

PHILLIA
(she's older)

MARIS
by a year!

PHILLIA
exactly

MARIS
yes.
by a year.
Exactly.

PHILLIA
to the day

MARIS
to the hour

PHILLIA
to the minute

MARIS
we were raised by our mother

PHILLIA
she taught us everything we know

MARIS
we were never really told who our father was

PHILLIA

(I think it was a spirit from the mists)

MARIS

(I think it was just some sailor)

PHILLIA

but we never really felt the need to ask.

MARIS

we were quite content with our mother.
she showed us all that we needed to get by:

PHILLIA

she taught us how to read

MARIS

how to cook

PHILLIA

how to sew and mend our own clothes

MARIS

how to swim

PHILLIA

how to grow vegetables

MARIS

how to read the time using only the sun

PHILLIA

how to not need from anyone else
and how to give to others.

MARIS

our mother was the village caretaker.
whatever mitzvah needed to be done, she did.
whoever needed feeding, she fed.
whatever window, dress, or chair needed mending, she fixed.

PHILLIA

she taught us how to take care of people,
how to know who needs the most help in this exact moment.

MARIS

we learned from her example,

and after she left this world
we took over her role.

PHILLIA
our mother's motto was simple:

MARIS
"First, be a Mensch."

PHILLIA
we live to serve others.

MARIS
people tell us they don't know how we do it
but it's all we've ever known

PHILLIA
we were taught not to think much about ourselves.
it can only get in the way of helping others.

MARIS
she taught us that
Pleasure
and Decadence
are...
bupkis!
illusions!

PHILLIA
things people want, but don't *need*.
once, when we were very young,
a friend of ours gave us some chocolate.

MARIS
when we came home, our mother was so mad.
she scolded us for giving into temptation.

PHILLIA
we had been indulgent.
after that, she reminded us every day:

MARIS
"the only things that we take with us are those which we have given away!"
and so,
we live simply.
we survive off what we can grow
and what is donated to us.

PHILLIA

we usually eat bread and beer stew.

MARIS

a meal that will give us enough nourishment to keep us fed.

PHILLIA

just what we need and not much more.

MARIS

TO MAKE BREAD AND BEER STEW:

PHILLIA

tear a loaf of bread into small pieces

MARIS

soak in beer for at least 3 hours

PHILLIA

add some salt

MARIS

and stew over medium heat until it is the desire thickness

MAR and PHIL appear

they are MARIS and PHILLIA's younger selves

MAR

once upon a time,

PHIL

on an island off the coast of maine,

MAR

in a tiny shtetl no one had ever heard of,

PHIL

two sisters let themselves live for a night.

MARIS

oh, shut up, you two!

MAR

the sisters were ashamed to admit it,

PHILLIA

yes, please stop bothering us

PHIL

but both of them were secretly tired of being so good.

MARIS

we're trying to / tell a story here

PHILLIA

they're really quite annoying

MAR

they had convinced themselves that love was superficial.

PHIL

nice for others, but unnecessary to their work.

MAR

they fought against pleasure, against anything that might upset their carefully structured life.

seeing that they're not stopping,

MARIS and PHILLIA move to the sides of the house to watch themselves tell the story

MAR

not that they weren't sought after.

PHIL

it was said that the two sisters were the loveliest women on the island.

MAR

everyone wanted something to do with them.

PHIL

one day, I personally watched Maris reject 10 suitors in a row!

MARIS

not 10!

it could not have been 10

PHIL

I saw it myself...

PHILLIA (*begrudgingly*)

(it was 10)

MAR

but the sisters,

determined not to let themselves be burned by the flames of the world,

PHIL

rejected everyone,
always remaining kind

MAR
but firm

PHIL
and then went back to work,
content with their life.

MAR
but one day, a stranger came to town

PHIL
the summer after their mother died.

MAR
the first stranger they could remember since they were born.

III: THE STRANGER

a knock at the door

a clap of thunder and the sound of rain

we are now fully in the past

MARIS and PHILLLA keep watching, ghosts of the future

MAR
hello?

MAG
yes?
hello? /
is um?

PHIL
hello? /
who's there?

MAG
hello?
I
um
I need a place to stay.
I was told to come to the yellow house in the middle of town.

MAR opens the door

MAG is soaked

MARIS stands up, shocked to see him, and sits down again, unable to speak

MAR
come in, come in,
you're soaked,

PHIL
yes, please
please come in

MAG
thank you so much
I really didn't mean to get here this late.
I'm sorry to bother you at this time of night
I had some trouble convincing anyone to take me here
apparently, you're not...

MAR
on the map?

MAG

yes, very strange
I had to pay quite a lot of money to...
sailors seem to be a very superstitious bunch

MAG shivers

MARIS

oy!
get him a blanket or something!

PHILLIA

poor dear, he looks so cold

PHIL gets him a blanket

PHIL

can we get you anything?
coffee?
something / warm?

MAG

no, please
I don't want to trouble you

he shivers

MARIS

go!

PHIL glares at her "I'm going"

PHIL

no, it's not any trouble,
we live to serve!

PHIL runs to the next room to get some coffee

MAR

so what brings you here?
not many people are trying to get here.
in fact, no one wants to come here.

MAG

Well
um
it's actually very embarrassing but
um

I was kicked out
by my father
He.
was
Unhappy
about how I've been living my life.
I've become somewhat of a nuisance to him, I suppose

MAR
a nuisance?
how so?

MAG
I
uh
in the past year,
I've... been a bit of a schmuck.
he's had to spend a great deal of money,
paying for certain
damages.

MAR
... damages?
like what

MAG
oh
well
bail.
paying off reporters,
reimbursing a few bars,
bribing certain restaurants to let us keep eating there,
that sort of thing.
my father is a very wealthy man
so
these incidents were no great financial loss
but, as I said,
quite a nuisance
to him.

MAR
I see
and so you decided to schlep all the way out here?
how did you find out about this place?

MAG
it was his idea
he, uh, grew up here

on the island

MAR

oh!

I'm sure we know his family then

MAG

probably not

they died when he was very young

he left when he was about my age

he thought I should come here

to

learn some of the values

I guess

that uh

people practice here

or something.

he thinks being raised in the city has made me shallow

and carefree

and uh

he's probably right.

hah.

so I've spent all the money he gave me to travel here

and I asked around and everyone said that the two sisters who live in the yellow house in the middle

of the village help people and might be able to help

me

and take me in and sort of

maybe

help me learn to be

Uh

Better.

how to be

a

a mensch

PHIL returns with the coffee

thank you

MAR

how long do you think you'll stay?

MAG

oh

um

I'm not sure
until I learn to be better I guess

PHIL
how long will that take?

MAG
I don't know
I've got nothing but time though

MAR
my sister and I will need to discuss first

MAG
of course

*the sisters whisper to each other
then:*

PHIL
we'd be more than happy to have you here!

MAR
welcome to the island!

MAG
oh thank you
thank you so much!
I promise I'll pay you back somehow
I promise I
won't be a
a

MAR
nuisance

MAG (*laughs*)
yes
hopefully I can manage to not be a nuisance

...
Magnus

PHIL
Phyllia

MAR
Maris