

A THING OF BEAUTY

By Charles Kray

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A THING OF BEAUTY**By Charles Kray****CAST OF CHARACTERS***(4 female, 2 male)*

PRIORESS (f).....	Sister Ignatius. 60s. Compassionate, controlled, wise and understanding. <i>(180 lines)</i>
FRAU WEISS (f).....	60s. Aggressive, strong, and passionate. <i>(47 lines)</i>
SISTER TEREZIA FRANCISCA (f)	40s. Composed, serene, fervent, intelligent, and unswerving in her faith. <i>(231 lines)</i>
SISTER EMILIANA (f).....	30s. Stern, vindictive. <i>(114 lines)</i>
COLONEL ERIC BRAUN (m)	50s. Nazi intelligence. Quite brilliant in intellect. Quixotic in his manner. He is the ultimate interrogator. <i>(178 lines)</i>
RABBI MAIMON (m).....	50 to 60. Stern, forbidding, but not without warmth and compassion. <i>(27 lines)</i>

SETTING

10:00 AM. The receiving room of a Carmelite convent in Amsterdam, Holland, 1940. There are two entrances. Upstage left to the Convent proper. Upstage right leads to the outside of the Convent. The furnishings are austere. At up left, is a small screen with a kneeling bench on either side. A common type, open confessional. At lower left stage is a desk with a telephone on it, and behind the desk, a simple chair, and a filing cabinet. At right stage is a plain couch with a coffee table in front of it. Against the upstage wall are two chairs of some substance, place equally apart for a sense of balance. In the center of the room is a rug of oriental design. A stained glass window, religious in nature, can be placed behind the desk on the left wall or on the upstage wall. Its purpose is to enhance a tone of reverence, but it must not be so colorful as to detract from the austerity of the room.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The requirements of this set are very flexible. It can easily be redesigned, the position of the furniture changed, or some pieces eliminated depending upon the limitations of the stage and budget.

ACT ONE, SCENE 1**AT RISE:**

Lights come up on *SISTER IGNATIUS*, dressed in a plain Carmelite habit, seated at the desk. *SHE* is the *PRIORESS*; the Mother Superior of the convent. *SHE* is a woman very much in control of herself and her charges. *SHE* appears to be somewhat nervous as *SHE* works at the desk. *SHE* constantly glances at her wristwatch and then at the right door. *SHE* signs papers and goes through the motion of looking up once or twice. There is a knock at the door. *SHE* rises hurriedly, stops at the door for a perfunctory straightening of her wimple, brushes her habit, then opens the door.

PRIORESS: Come in, Frau Weiss.

FRAU WEISS enters. There is a fierce strength about her. There is an uncomfortable awkwardness between the two women.

FRAU WEISS: Thank you. (*SHE* walks to the center of the room. *PRIORESS* closes the door and walks beside her.)

PRIORESS: Won't you sit down? (*FRAU WEISS* ignores the invitation and remains standing. The awkwardness prevails.) I am Sister Ignatius, Prioress of the convent.

FRAU WEISS: Yes.

PRIORESS: Sister Francisca will be here shortly.

FRAU WEISS: I know no Sister Francisca. I came to see Sarah Weiss. My daughter.

PRIORESS: Yes. (*There is another embarrassed pause.*) Please sit. Make yourself comfortable. (*FRAU WEISS* reluctantly sits at the couch.) It is a long trip from Breslau. You must be exhausted.

FRAU WEISS: Not so long. I am fine.

PRIORESS: Can I get you something? Tea, perhaps?

FRAU WEISS: I need nothing.

PRIORESS: Very well. (*They sit awkwardly for another moment. They have nothing to talk about.*) Forgive the appearance of our convent. There are only twenty-two of us here and nineteen nuns have gone on a retreat to Cologne.

FRAU WEISS: What is a retreat?

PRIORESS: It is a time for prayer, contemplation and study.

FRAU WEISS: Is Sarah on this retreat?

PRIORESS: No. I kept Sister Francisca here because I knew you were coming to see her.

FRAU WEISS: Yes.

Another awkward pause.

PRIORESS: Are you warm, Frau Weiss?

FRAU WEISS: No.

PRIORESS: Can I not get you something? Tea or water?

FRAU WEISS: No. Thank You.

PRIORESS: Are you comfortable?

FRAU WEISS: Yes. *(Pause.)* I would be more comfortable in a synagogue.

PRIORESS: Yes. I understand.

FRAU WEISS: Where do you pray?

PRIORESS: I beg your pardon?

FRAU WEISS: Where do you pray? You do not pray in this room.

PRIORESS: This is not our place of worship. We have a chapel in another room.

FRAU WEISS: Does Sarah pray in this chapel?

PRIORESS: All our nuns pray in the chapel.

FRAU WEISS: Does Sarah pray in this chapel?

PRIORESS: Sister Francisca prays in the chapel.

There is now a stony silence between them. SISTER FRANCISCA enters quietly from the up left door. There is beauty and innocence about her which makes her appear youthful. SHE is composed, controlled. SHE appears to be untouched by the turbulence and torment which has been so much a part of her life. FRAU WEISS stares at her for an uncomfortable moment.

FRANCISCA: Hello, Mama.

FRAU WEISS: Hello, Sarah.

There is another awkward pause. FRANCISCA goes to her mother and embraces her. FRAU WEISS, her arms at her sides, does not seem to respond although it is evident that SHE wants to very badly.

FRANCISCA: It is good to see you, Mama.

PRIORESS: *(Pause; rises from her chair.)* Excuse me, please. I will leave you.

FRANCISCA: Thank you, Mother.

FRAU WEISS reacts to her daughter calling another woman other.

PRIORESS: It was a pleasure to meet you, Frau Weiss. *(FRAU WEISS does not respond.)* We thank you for your daughter. *(FRAU WEISS looks up quickly and sternly.)* Goodbye.

FRAU WEISS: Goodbye.

PRIORESS exits. FRANCISCA sits near her mother.

FRANCISCA: Mama, it has been a long time.

FRAU WEISS: Yes.

FRANCISCA: Are you all right, Mama?

FRAU WEISS: Yes.

FRANCISCA: And the others, at home, are they all right?

FRAU WEISS: For now.

FRANCISCA: I miss you all and I love you. *(Pause.)* Mama, you do not seem happy to see me.

FRAU WEISS: No. You call her mother. I am your mother.

FRANCISCA: Mama, she is the representative of our Holy Mother. The mother of us all.

FRAU WEISS: She is not my mother and she is not your mother. I am your mother.

FRANCISCA: Yes, Mama. You are my mother. *(Pause.)* Are you not happy to see me, Mama?

FRAU WEISS: I am happy to see my Sarah. I am not happy to see this Sister Francisca.

FRANCISCA: They are the same now, Mama.

FRAU WEISS: That should not be so. A person can only be one.

FRANCISCA: You are right, Mama. I am now only Sister Francisca.

FRAU WEISS: That should not be so, either!

FRANCISCA: Mama, please!

FRAU WEISS: By all the laws of Moses, by all the teachings of the prophets, that should not be so.

FRANCISCA: Mama, we have spoken of this many times before and always we end up fighting. No more, Mama. Please. I feel so bad when we fight.

FRAU WEISS: Feel bad, then. Feel bad for shame... for the shame you have brought on your family, for the shame you have brought on me, for the shame you have brought on your race.

FRANCISCA: Mama, Mama. What I do, I do for God. There is no shame in that.

FRAU WEISS: For whose God?

FRANCISCA: For my God. Jesus Christ.

FRAU WEISS: Your God is in the Talmud. Your God is in the teachings of Abraham. This Jesus Christ does not exist for us.

FRANCISCA: Mama, please. Do not talk to me as to a child. I am a woman. I have thought. I have studied. I have suffered over this. For many years, my heart and soul were lost in a wilderness. I have found a light which brought me out from that wilderness. I have found my faith.

FRAU WEISS: In a Catholic church?

FRANCISCA: In a Catholic church.

FRAU WEISS: Sarah. You are a child - a curious child. In the ways of life you are still a child. You have found a curiosity, a toy. Like a child, you must soon tire of it.

FRANCISCA: Mama!

FRAU WEISS: Listen to me, Sarah. The heritage of thousands of proud years of orthodoxy flows in the blood in your veins. Years of anguish suffered by our people. You cannot, you must not, forsake this. One day you will realize this and you will be bitter and angry at these teachings which have stolen your birthright. Come back, Sarah, before it is too late.

FRANCISCA: Mama, these are not the middle ages and I am not cursed. This is the twentieth century, Mama. A troubled century, and one in which only faith can guide us and save us. I have found that faith, Mama. It will guide me. And through it, I might be able to help guide others.

FRAU WEISS: To what?

FRANCISCA: What, Mama?

FRAU WEISS: What will you guide them to, Sarah?

FRANCISCA: You just won't understand, will you, Mama?

FRAU WEISS: What's to understand? To what will you guide them?

FRANCISCA: To the same peace in their God that I have found in mine, Mama.

After a moment. FRANCISCA rises and embraces her mother who is too puzzled and confused to return it.

FRANCISCA: I must go now, Mama.

FRAU WEISS: *(Rises and follows her to the center of the room.)*

Sarah! Come back. Please come back to your home, to your people, to your faith. Please come back.

FRANCISCA: Goodbye, Mama.

FRAU WEISS: I will come back tomorrow in the morning. The Rabbi came with me. I will bring him. Perhaps he can make you see.

FRANCISCA: I do not need the Rabbi. *(FRAU WEISS is affected by this statement.)* I am sorry, Mama.

FRAU WEISS: My heart breaks with my sorrow. *(As FRANCISCA leads FRAU WEISS to the right door, PRIORESS enters from the left and watches them. At the door, FRAU WEISS clutches FRANCISCA and holds her in a long desperate embrace. SHE releases FRANCISCA, holds her at arm's length and stares at her for a pause.)* May our God bless you and keep you, Sarah. Goodbye.

FRAU WEISS exits. FRANCISCA turns away from the door and takes a few steps toward center. SHE stares ahead, pensively. PRIORESS walks to her.

PRIORESS: Was it difficult for you, Sister?

FRANCISCA: What? Oh, I'm sorry, Mother. I didn't know you were here.

PRIORESS: Was it difficult for you?

FRANCISCA: It is always difficult for me with her. I love her so much, but she will never be able to accept or understand. I hope she will not come to hate me.

PRIORESS: You knew when you became a Catholic and took your vows as a Carmelite, people would not understand, that they might hate your for it.

FRANCISCA: I know, and I weep for this. I pray for them and for myself.

PRIORESS: Many condemn you. A baptized Jew, as a traitor, an apostate, turning your back on your own people.

FRANCISCA: I cannot help what people say or think. In turning to Christ, I have become complete. Christ Jesus did not create a new way for me - he cleansed and revived the old. He and His Jewish disciples are my Jewish brothers among whom I feel perfectly at home. I am at one with them. Why can people not understand that?

PRIORESS: What you must have gone through in your conversion, no one but you can understand. It is something between you and Christ. It must be very much.

FRANCISCA: It is. I have experienced a high and holy moment. God has come and placed His hand upon me.

PRIORESS: Such faith makes you a Christian. You will need the strength of that faith in the times to come.

FRANCISCA: Oh, Mother! Will I be strong enough?

PRIORESS: If you dare to believe, you are blessed and you will be strong enough.

SISTER EMILIANA bursts into the room from the outside door.

PRIORESS is annoyed. SHE does not like EMILIANA much.

EMILIANA: Mother, may I speak to you?

PRIORESS: Later, Emiliana. I am busy.

EMILIANA: Now, Mother. Please.

PRIORESS: Well, what is it?

EMILIANA: Alone, Mother. I beg your pardon, Sister Francisca. I must speak to you alone, Mother. Now.

PRIORESS: Very well. You will excuse us, Sister.

FRANCISCA: Of course, Mother. *(Exits up left.)*

PRIORESS: What is it, Emiliana? What is this urgency and secrecy?

EMILIANA: Mother, I had to speak to you alone.

PRIORESS: Yes, you said that. I don't like secret meetings. Well, what is it?

EMILIANA: He is coming. He is coming here.

PRIORESS: Who is coming?

EMILIANA: To find out.

PRIORESS: To find out what? Who?

EMILIANA: He is on his way at this moment.

PRIORESS: For God's sake, calm down, Emiliana. Make some sense. Who is coming and for what?

EMILIANA: The S.S. Colonel from Berlin. Braun. He is coming here. He is a cruel man.

PRIORESS: They are all cruel men. Who told you this?

EMILIANA: At the market. They stopped me and took me to the mayor's office. They told me to tell you.

PRIORESS: Why couldn't they have just called me?

EMILIANA: I don't know.

PRIORESS: Well, we have nothing to hide, do we, Sister?

EMILIANA: *(Hesitates a pause.)* There is more, Mother.

PRIORESS: Well?

EMILIANA: He is coming to find Sarah Weiss.

PRIORESS: Well, what of that?

EMILIANA: They will interrogate us all.

PRIORESS: And what of that?

EMILIANA: They will find her.

PRIORESS: They will find who?

EMILIANA: Sarah.

PRIORESS: There is no Sarah Weiss here.

EMILIANA: But, Mother!

PRIORESS: What? But, Mother? Did you not hear me? Do I not speak clearly? There is no Sarah Weiss here?

EMILIANA: Yes, Mother.

PRIORESS: What have you told them?

EMILIANA: Nothing, Mother, but...

PRIORESS: But, what?

EMILIANA: Oh, Mother! Sister Catherine. The nineteen nuns that went to Cologne for the retreat - they have been taken prisoner.

PRIORESS: What are you talking about?

EMILIANA: They are to be taken to a concentration camp. I was told to tell you that they will be held until Sarah Weiss is found.

PRIORESS: Where did you hear this?

EMILIANA: At the mayor's office.

PRIORESS: How long were you there?

EMILIANA: Just long enough for them to tell me this.

PRIORESS: Why were you there?

EMILIANA: I had no choice. They took me off the street. I was forced to listen.

PRIORESS: What did you tell them?

EMILIANA: Nothing, Mother.

PRIORESS: You talk too much, Emiliana. What did you tell them?

EMILIANA: Nothing, Mother. I swear.

PRIORESS: It is unseemly for a nun to swear. Nor should it be necessary.

EMILIANA: I told them nothing.

PRIORESS: Very well. You are not to talk to them again. To anyone, understand?

EMILIANA: Yes.

PRIORESS: Send Francisca to me.

EMILIANA: Yes, Mother.

PRIORESS: On your holy vows. Remember, there is no Sarah Weiss here.

They stare at each other for a pause. EMILIANA does not answer, then SHE exits. PRIORESS crosses to phone.

PRIORESS: Yes, operator. The Carmelite convent in Cologne. The number is 47831. Yes, I will wait. *(After a moment.)* Yes. This is Sister Ignatius in Amsterdam. Let me speak to Mother Cyril. Quickly. Hello. Hello? Sister Cyril? Sister Ignatius. Listen carefully and don't interrupt. I must speak quickly. Nineteen nuns from our convent have been interned in Cologne. I have been told that they were taken off the train and sent to a concentration camp. No. I don't know why. Don't ask. Don't interrupt. *(FRANCISCA enters and stands above the desk listening.)* Find them. Find where they are. Find out what is happening to them. And Sister, they are looking for Sarah Weiss in all Carmelite convents. Yes, I know she is here. But you will be questioned. Call the other convents in Germany. I cannot. Tell them all that they do not know anything of Sarah Weiss. It will be no lie. They only know of Sister Francisca!

FRANCISCA: *(Comes to the front of the desk.)* What is it, Mother? What has happened?

PRIORESS: They are looking for you. They have taken our nineteen nuns from the train to a concentration camp.

FRANCISCA: Oh my God! What will happen to them? What will they do to them?

PRIORESS: I don't know. I pray we won't have to find out.

FRANCISCA: If they are looking for me, then let them find me. If they are holding our nuns because of me, let them find me. I do not fear them.

PRIORESS: You must fear them. We all must fear them. They are not looking for Sister Francisca. They are looking for Sarah Weiss.

FRANCISCA: Then they must find her.

PRIORESS: Now listen to me Francisca. We must wait and pray. They are on their way here at this moment. I want you to leave. Go to the market. Go to the church in town and pray. Go to the poor and give out some food. I do not want you here when they arrive. They must not find you here.

FRANCISCA: But, Mother, the nuns.

PRIORESS: I'm sure they are safe for now. They wouldn't dare harm them. But I don't want you here.

There is a knock at the door.

PRIORESS: Hurry now. Go. Stay away as long as you can - until Curfew. Hurry.

FRANCISCA exits left. SHE brushes by EMILIANA who has just entered.

EMILIANA: What is it, Mother? Is he here?

PRIORESS: Yes. Open the door. And say nothing.

EMILIANA opens the door and steps discreetly upstage out of the way of the S.S. COLONEL who enters. SHE curtsies to him. COLONEL is an impressive and intimidating man. HE is resplendent and meticulous in his black uniform and polished boots. His hair, thick and brown, is peppered with gray. His presence seems menacing primarily because of the uniform. There is a softness occasionally in his manner, which belies this menace. HE exudes confidence and arrogance, but HE is laid back, seemingly easy going. There is a sense of a cobra about him; HE can strike quickly, unexpectedly. PRIORESS stands and comes center to receive him. SHE looks at him quizzically.

PRIORESS: Come in, sir. Colonel.

COLONEL: Thank you, Reverend Mother. (*Looks at EMILIANA.*)

Would you excuse us, Sister?

EMILIANA: Of course, sir. (*Exits.*)

PRIORESS: Please sit down.

They sit.

COLONEL: Thank you.

PRIORESS: (*Still staring closely at him.*) Is it you, Eric? Eric Braun?

COLONEL: (*Smiles at her.*) Yes, Sister.

PRIORESS: Oh my God. So many years.

COLONEL: It has been a long time, Sister.

PRIORESS: Yes. Yes. Time passes much too quickly.

COLONEL: You haven't changed much. Is this some miracle lotion that nuns have to be able to look perpetually young. You've hardly changed at all.

PRIORESS: You have. I've read about you. You've become quite famous. Or is it infamous?

HE looks at her strangely for a pause. HE's not sure whether her remark is intended to be harmless small talk or meaningful. HE ignores the remark, but his manner becomes a bit harder, more formal.

COLONEL: Your pardon, Sister?

PRIORESS: You are an important man, Eric. Why would they send you to such an insignificant place?

COLONEL: I am an important man on an important mission.

PRIORESS: A few harmless nuns, an important mission?

COLONEL: A few. Or one. Or thousands. A threat must be dealt with.

PRIORESS: Nuns? Threatening? That's ridiculous.

COLONEL: Perhaps. That's what I intend to find out.

PRIORESS: I received news of my sisters.

COLONEL: I expected you would.

PRIORESS: It is true, then?

COLONEL: I'm afraid so.

PRIORESS: But why?

COLONEL: We both know why, sister.

PRIORESS: No, I don't. I don't understand why nineteen innocent nuns are taken off a train like criminals and sent to a concentration camp. We are Germans. We have done nothing to be treated this way.

COLONEL: Sister, you have been warned, as has every Carmelite convent in Holland and Germany, that we mean to have Sarah Weiss. If you are Germans, then give her up to us.

PRIORESS: There is no Sarah Weiss here.

COLONEL: Perhaps not. But we know that she is hiding in a Carmelite convent. Your nuns are being held as hostages. If we do not apprehend Sarah Weiss, the nuns will suffer the consequences. Nineteen for one. That's not a bad trade.

PRIORESS: Why is she so important.

COLONEL: She is a Jew.

PRIORESS: Is this a crime, to be a Jew?

COLONEL: It very well might be. And she is the worst kind of Jew. One who has become a Christian. This kind of Jew has more influence and is more dangerous to us than your ordinary Jew. This Christian Jew is insidious. She can destroy the fabric of our society, our beliefs, with the preposterous assumption that she can become one of us. And when that Christian Jew is an intellectual like your Sarah Weiss, then the destruction and havoc she can wreak on our faith, on our principles, on our people, is without limit. I will destroy her before she destroys us.

PRIORESS: You've become a cruel and vengeful man, Eric.

COLONEL: On the contrary, Sister. I'm merely a practical soldier doing his job.

PRIORESS: I remember in my eighth grade class a puzzled boy with curious blue eyes who used to dream of building bridges and buildings. who used to serve early Mass on Sunday mornings. What great promise he showed.

COLONEL: And I, Sister, remember a God who taught that man had infinite capacity for love, for compassion, for hope. What great promise He showed, and what futility. We've both been disappointed, Sister.

PRIORESS: Are you so disillusioned that you've turned murderer, Eric?

COLONEL: *(For a moment, HE loses control.)* Godammit, Sister! You are not talking to a starry-eyed eighth grade boy now. You're talking to a man, an officer of the Third Reich. You have no special privileges because of your habit. I am the interrogator here. Speak civilly to me or you'll join the rest of the penguins at the camp.

PRIORESS: And may God damn you, Colonel. I'm too old to be intimidated or frightened. And if you haven't progressed beyond the eighth grade, except for turning into a vicious bully, you'll be treated as such. I want my nuns.

COLONEL: And I want Sarah Weiss. Is she a member of your convent?

PRIORESS: *(SHE composes herself. SHE may stand up to him but SHE still fears him and his power.)* To admit a Jewess into our order would not only be contrary to the Carmelite temperament, but a violation of the law. I told you we are Germans.

COLONEL: Sister, it is not necessary to acquaint me with German law, nor try and confuse me with vague terms like Carmelite temperament. Merely answer my question.

PRIORESS: Sarah Weiss is not a member of our convent.

COLONEL: You are sure?

PRIORESS: Yes.

COLONEL: Very well. But I promise you, I will find her.

PRIORESS: But why her? There are other Jews walking around freely. Why her?

COLONEL: I told you she is dangerous.

PRIORESS: Dangerous? She is the most sensitive philosopher of our time and you call her dangerous.

COLONEL: She is dangerous to us, to the government. It is this philosophy and its influence which make her dangerous.

PRIORESS: She represents everything that is good and beautiful, Eric. Don't you see? She preaches Christ's words. A world of harmony and peace. The path to a oneness of man. White or black. Jew or Christian. Is this dangerous?

COLONEL: It is to us. There is no oneness in man in this world. There is only oneness in strength. There is oneness in power. And those who believe in her make us weak. She must be destroyed.

PRIORESS: Then you would destroy everything good?

COLONEL: If need be. When there is no more good, the bad will become good.

PRIORESS: What a terrible, terrible day that would be.

COLONEL: No more so than if the good destroyed all the bad. Then the good would become bad.

PRIORESS: You sound like something out of a Nazi primer.

COLONEL: Why not? I'm helping to write that primer. And when it is finished, it will devastate the philosophy of Sarah Weiss just as surely as I will devastate Sarah Weiss herself.

PRIORESS: Eric, I knew you too well once to believe this is state policy you are speaking. Those are the words of a personal vendetta. You're not looking for a philosopher or a Jew. You're looking for someone who represents something that you once loved, that you destroyed, and now you must wipe out every other beautiful thing so that there will be no reminder to torture you. Oh, what an unhappy man you must be.

COLONEL: There is no beauty left. It is false. Sarah Weiss is false. I don't want your sympathy. I want Sarah Weiss. Where is she? (*COLONEL rises, crosses to the phone, dials and waits. HE and PRIORESS stare at each other. HE with an arrogant superiority, SHE with fear.*) Major, call Camp 83. Tell the Commandant we have not been able to find Sarah Weiss. Tell him that if he has not heard from me by seven o'clock tomorrow night, the execution of the nuns is to begin. (*Covers the mouthpiece.*) I'm giving you some time to think about this. (*Into phone.*) Yes, one every hour on the hour until the Weiss woman is found. Beginning with the youngest first. Relay that message by wire to every Carmelite convent in Germany and Holland. Yes. That's right. Tomorrow evening, at 7:00 P.M. (*Hangs up.*) Now, Sister, where is Sarah Weiss?

PRIORESS: Oh my God.

COLONEL: Is Sarah Weiss in this convent? (*SHE is too overcome to answer.*) Very well. Give me your roster. (*SHE gets up mechanically and goes to the file cabinet.*) Do you know what the executions are like at Camp 83?

PRIORESS: Stop it.

COLONEL: Aren't you ashamed? You Carmelites, hiding a Jew? The whole country is appalled at this preposterous act. A Jew becoming a Carmelite nun. Have you no shame?

PRIORESS: You dare ask me that?

COLONEL: I dare anything. I want Sarah Weiss.

PRIORESS: Oh my poor babies.

COLONEL: Is Sarah Weiss a member of your convent?

PRIORESS: If she were, do you think I could pass judgment on her? I refuse to wield the power of life or death over anyone.

COLONEL: You wield that power over the nuns at Cologne.

PRIORESS: Oh my babies!

COLONEL: You don't have much time, Sister.

PRIORESS: Stop it!

COLONEL: Is Sarah Weiss a member of your convent?

PRIORESS: No! No!

COLONEL: Are you certain?

PRIORESS: Yes. Please leave me alone.

COLONEL: (*Looks over the roster.*) Very well. You have a new nun here. Her name has not yet been registered at the voting polls. A sister Terezia Francisca. I wish to see her.

PRIORESS: (*Has not been listening and is still in a somewhat dazed state.*) What?

COLONEL: I wish to see Sister Francisca.

PRIORESS: No.

COLONEL: What? Did you say no, Sister?

PRIORESS: No. I meant, no, my poor children.

COLONEL: I see. How long has Sister Francisca been here?

PRIORESS: I'm not sure. Less than a year.

COLONEL: I wish to see her.

PRIORESS: She is not here.

COLONEL: Oh? Is she one of the nineteen?

PRIORESS: No.

COLONEL: Where, then?

PRIORESS: She is in the village visiting the poor. She will not be back until late.

COLONEL: (*Rises.*) Very well, then. I will return tomorrow. I will see her then. (*Walks to the door.*) Remember, Sister. Seven o'clock tomorrow will be your hour of truth or consequence. I hope for your sake, I will have found her by then. (*SHE stands, still dazed, unable to answer.*) Oh, sister...

PRIORESS: Yes?

COLONEL: I just wanted to make sure I had your answer correct. You did say that Sarah Weiss was not in your convent.

PRIORESS: Yes. That is what I said.

COLONEL: Very well, Sister. Tomorrow, then.

HE exits. EMILIANA rushes in as HE leaves.

EMILIANA: What are we to do, Mother?

PRIORESS: You heard?

EMILIANA: Yes, everything. I was at the door. Is that all right?

PRIORESS: Yes.

EMILIANA: What are we to do?

PRIORESS: We are to pray and place our faith in God.

EMILIANA: But Sister Catherine and the nuns?

PRIORESS: They are in the hands of our Savior.

EMILIANA: No, they are not, Mother.

PRIORESS: What?

EMILIANA: I beg your indulgence, Mother, but they are in the hands of Sarah Weiss.

PRIORESS: I told you there is no Sarah Weiss here.

EMILIANA: I accepted that once. I cannot accept it now when the lives of nineteen Catholic nuns are at stake. She does not belong here. She is not one of us. She is not one of us. Must we sit by and sacrifice nineteen of our sisters for the life of a woman who belongs to a race which despises us? Which hardens its heart against us?

PRIORESS: Those are words which propitiate the evil of our time and allow it to hold sway in a troubled and unknowing world. You are to rid yourself of such thinking.

EMILIANA: Do they not harden their hearts against us?

PRIORESS: The hardness of the heart of the Jews is no longer Christian dogma in our time. Christ has enough hard hearts within His own church that would crucify Him.

EMILIANA: (*Shocked.*) Is this the voice of Catholic authority speaking?

PRIORESS: I speak with a voice of hope, prayer and understanding. And you must learn to speak with that voice instead of one of intolerance. I speak with the voice of your Prioress. You will pray for guidance and leave the decision of Sarah Weiss and our sisters in the hands of God.

EMILIANA: I have never defied you in any way, Mother.

PRIORESS: Nor will you now. Go to your duties.

EMILIANA: I have never defied you, Mother, but in my soul I must place this terrible decision on your conscience...and on mine.

EMILIANA exits. The PRIORESS goes to the confessional bench and begins to pray. The stage lights dim momentarily to denote the passage of time and change of scene. The PRIORESS exits during the dim out.

ACT ONE, SCENE 2

AT RISE:

The next morning. FRANCISCA is cleaning and dusting the room. EMILIANA enters and watches her for a moment. EMILIANA carries a pail and dust rags.

EMILIANA: What are you doing in this room, Francisca?

FRANCISCA: I am cleaning it.

EMILIANA: This room is not one of your duties. It is my duty.

FRANCISCA: I had finished mine. I thought you might like some help.

EMILIANA puts the bucket down and begins cleaning another section of the room at the desk.

EMILIANA: Did I ask you for help?

FRANCISCA: No.

EMILIANA: Did Mother Superior ask you to help?

FRANCISCA: She suggested it.

EMILIANA: I have been cleaning this room for two years. Suddenly I need help?

FRANCISCA: I thought perhaps we could talk.

EMILIANA: About what?

FRANCISCA: About us.

EMILIANA: There is no need to talk about us. I feel the same way about you as I did when you first came here.

FRANCISCA: It is different now.

EMILIANA: Different? How?

FRANCISCA: This terrible situation makes it different.

EMILIANA: For one who has caused the situation, you don't seem very troubled.

FRANCISCA: I am praying for guidance, Emiliana.

EMILIANA: Then pray that your guidance will free our sisters from those brutal men.

FRANCISCA: I pray that with all my heart and soul.

EMILIANA: I am sick to death of your prayers, Francisca... of your prayers and your posturing. You demand the first place in church so all can see you pray. Everyone must see what a saint Francisca is. Everyone must know that Francisca spends more time than any others in prayer and meditation with God. Next you will want them to believe that you talk with God. Is that what you want them to believe? That you are another Saint Joan? You flaunt your prayers and your holiness, Francisca. I am sick of your prayers.

FRANCISCA: How dare you talk to me this way? I come to you in friendliness and sisterhood.

EMILIANA: Don't come to me at all. I don't want you to. This Jewishness of yours, this need to be acknowledged, this need for immediate gratification, it has no place in a Carmelite convent. Nor have you.

FRANCISCA: My place is with my God who inspires a divine strength in me; who has led me to a discovery of my faith; whose redemptive suffering was victorious, even over death; who brought me to the healing Cross and the Church which fulfilled all my dreams and hopes and beliefs. If it is as a Carmelite I have found these things, then this is my place. If all this is unacceptable to you because I am a Jew, then I shall pray for your intolerance.

EMILIANA: Don't talk to me of intolerance. We inherited intolerance from your Judaism. Your Talmud proclaims your Jehovah to be a vengeful God, who, it says, hath indignation every day. He called upon the Israelites to show no quarter to the Canaanites. And they were slaughtered mercilessly. Were they any less violent or intolerant than those in power today? That is the intolerant dirt of your Jewish nation.

FRANCISCA: Those were the acts of a nation in agony.

EMILIANA: And are we not in agony? Will agony justify the terrible things our nation is doing? Will agony wash the dirt from the hands of the German nation, which will be there for all time to come?

FRANCISCA: Emiliana, there is dirt that rubs off hands. This dirt is washed back to earth. The real dirt is the corruption that clings to the mind. The viciousness that intolerance harbors. That's the kind that cannot be washed away. That evil dirt will return to earth only when the evil generations forget the acts of their dead. When people forget to hate, and have forgotten their reason for hating. Forget your hate, Emiliana, and wash the dirt from your hands.

EMILIANA: Don't preach to me. There are nineteen nuns about to die. Your prayers cannot save them. But you Jewishness can.

Pause as they stare at each other. EMILIANA defiantly, FRANCISCA with compassion.

FRANCISCA: Do you want me to give myself up, Emiliana?

EMILIANA: That decision is not mine to make, but if it were, then, yes.

FRANCISCA: And if I don't?

EMILIANA: They will find you anyway. You are a Jew.

FRANCISCA: And if I do?

EMILIANA: They will have found the Jew.

They are silent for a moment.

FRANCISCA: Will you pray for me, Emiliana?

EMILIANA: I pray for all lost souls.

FRANCISCA: Which one of us is more lost, Emiliana?

EMILIANA: Leave me alone, damn you!

FRANCISCA: I will leave you, Emiliana, and I will pray for you.

EMILIANA: Get out!

As FRANCISCA walks toward the door, PRIORESS enters. SHE takes in the tenseness of the scene. FRANCISCA stops in front of her.

PRIORESS: What is wrong, Francisca?

FRANCISCA: Nothing, Mother.

PRIORESS: You have talked?

FRANCISCA: Yes.

PRIORESS: And?

FRANCISCA: Please excuse me, Mother.

FRANCISCA exits. PRIORESS stares at EMILIANA for a pause. EMILIANA looks back at her defiant.

PRIORESS: What happened here, Emiliana?

EMILIANA: Nothing, Mother. We talked.

PRIORESS: And?

EMILIANA: It was a private matter. (*Silence.*)

PRIORESS: You don't like her very much, do you?

EMILIANA: I never did.

PRIORESS: Why?

EMILIANA: I have my reasons.

PRIORESS: Because she is a Jew?

EMILIANA: That is one. She does not belong here.

PRIORESS: Sister Francisca is a Carmelite nun now. It is not for you to decide who does or does not belong here.

EMILIANA: If it means nineteen nuns are to be sacrificed for her?

PRIORESS: That is not your decision, either.

EMILIANA: If it becomes my decision?

PRIORESS: Then we will pray for your guidance.

EMILIANA: I will pray alone for guidance and act accordingly.

PRIORESS: You overstep yourself, Emiliana. These are fearful times. We Carmelites must not add more tragedy to the terrible things being done in these times.

EMILIANA: I understand, Mother.

PRIORESS: You will do as I say.

EMILIANA: I will do as my God says.

PRIORESS: Leave this room.

EMILIANA: Your pardon, Mother.

EMILIANA exits. PRIORESS walks about the room for a moment in her distress. SHE walks over to the confessional and kneels for a short, silent prayer. SHE rises and goes to the right door and opens it.

PRIORESS: You may come in. I'm sorry you had to wait so long.

FRAU WEISS and RABBI MAIMON enter.

PRIORESS: Frau Weiss.

FRAU WEISS: I have brought the Rabbi to see Sarah.

RABBI: Sister, I am Rabbi Maimon.

PRIORESS: Good morning. I am Sister Ignatius. (*Offers her hand and RABBI takes it; leads them to the couch.*) Won't you be seated, please? (*RABBI and FRAU WEISS sit at the couch.*) These are dangerous times for you to be here.

RABBI: These are dangerous times for a Jew to be anywhere.

PRIORESS: We are under surveillance by the Gestapo.

RABBI: We have been under surveillance since time began.

PRIORESS: (*Uncomfortably.*) Yes.

FRAU WEISS: Would you please let Sarah know we are here.

PRIORESS: Yes. Of course. I will bring Sister Francisca. (*Exits.*)

FRAU WEISS: You see, Rabbi? She has given up her name as well as her faith.

RABBI: No. She is a Jew by birth and she will always be a Jew. She cannot deny her birthright and her upbringing.

FRAU WEISS: I hope you can convince her of that. Make her see that what she is doing, has done, is wrong.

FRANCISCA: (*Enters hurriedly from up left.*) Mama! Mama! What are you doing here?

FRAU WEISS: I have brought the Rabbi.

RABBI: Hello, Sarah.

FRANCISCA: Rabbi. Mama. You cannot stay. The S.S. are coming here any time now.

RABBI: We will go, but first we must talk. We have come a long way.

FRANCISCA: Yes. Thank you for your trouble.

RABBI: If it meant to save you, Sarah, I would have gone to the ends of the earth.

FRANCISCA: I need no saving, Rabbi. I have been content and at peace.

RABBI: In a convent? As a Catholic?

FRANCISCA: Yes.

RABBI: That cannot be. You are a Jew. A Jew is a Jew in one's soul. Even, even if you have been misled to think that you are conforming to the requirements or Roman Catholicism.

FRANCISCA: I have not been misled, Rabbi, and you know yourself that the gates of God stand open to all.

RABBI: The Torah alone is your salvation and your way to God. In the keeping of it, is the only salvation in this terrible world we live in.

FRANCISCA: Rabbi, the Jews have no monopoly on eternal bliss. It was intended for all men by the Creator. An exclusive religion cannot be a true one. If it alone says it is capable of saving man, it does not harmonize with the purposes of the Creator.

RABBI: And do you think that a Christian faith is more of a way to God than the thousands of years of the reasoning of Judaism?

FRANCISCA: I pray that it is.

RABBI: You pray to the wrong God.

FRANCISCA: Jesus is my God.

RABBI: Blasphemy from a Jew! Has your new Messiah changed His people so that they now love their neighbors more than they did? NO! Not in their conduct. Not in their hearts. Not in their lives. Yet they show their Christianity as a source of pride.

FRANCISCA: There are Pharisees and hypocrites in all religions. Jesus forgives even them.

RABBI: And these cruel men. These men who pursue you and kill our people by the thousands. They are Christians. Does your Jesus forgive them?

FRANCISCA: I do not question the way of my God.

RABBI: You should. Your Messiah appeared in Jesus, the Christians say. Was the promise of salvation and redemption fulfilled? Is this war, and outrage, and injustice, and bloodshed, this murder and torture, is this the salvation He promised?

FRANCISCA: The scriptures tell us that the triumph of the wicked is short and the joy of the Godless will be but for a moment. The mercy of God will extricate man from this human predicament.

RABBI: You sit there in a Catholic nun's habit and quote Hebrew scripture to me. What is going on inside you, Sarah?

FRANCISCA: I am searching, Rabbi. Always searching.

RABBI: For what?

FRANCISCA: I don't know. Knowledge? I am beset by doubt and ignorance. Is that sinful?

RABBI: To search for knowledge is not sinful. With it, one can become a king. Without it, with doubting, one becomes a pauper. Why can you not find this knowledge in your own faith, in the Torah, in the Talmud. In the writings of the prophets which contain all the knowledge and wisdom which have sustained man since Moses. What need do you have for this Christian faith?

FRANCISCA: I hope you will be able to understand this, Rabbi, Mama. The Christian faith gives me an inner strength in all circumstances. It gives me an inward assurance that, thanks to Christ's suffering and His death, nothing will ever be able to separate me from God's love.

FRAU WEISS: The faith of your fathers gave you that when you were born.

RABBI: Sarah, as a Jew, you are of the seed of Abraham, a child of promise. You will return to Abraham's bosom without a second rebirth as a Christian in what they call the Holy Spirit. Whoever is born an Israelite is a member of the covenant by virtue of that birth. You are the seed of Abraham, the Zera Kodhesh. The Holy Seed.

FRANCISCA: Please, Rabbi. My heart has been restless all my life and it has found its rest here in Jesus Christ. If I can be in the way of the Lord, know it, and follow it, my restlessness will cease. I am determined to search and pursue His will in the way that has been shown to me.

RABBI: (*Angry.*) Then you are determined to be an apostate, a Geshmad. And you will be *goyim*.

FRANCISCA: Don't say that as if it's a despicable word, Rabbi. Our religions are much the same, in their beliefs, in their hopes, in their prayers.

RABBI: No. Our Messiah has yet to come. Yours has already been here. Much good He has done for this world. When they come for you, to crucify you, will He give you the secret of life?

FRANCISCA: If the secret of life is ever given to me, to mankind, it will have to do with love, of family, of land, of creation, of God. And as many loves as there are peoples on this earth. That is the path on which He leads me. Toward the discovery of the secret He wishes me to know.

RABBI: And if he chooses to let you die?

FRANCISCA: Then I will accept and I will die.

RABBI: Then you will die without your faith.

FRANCISCA: I have my faith, Rabbi, and it will sustain me.

RABBI: There is but one faith for you. Remember Isaiah: "In the whole world, there shall be but one faith, that of Israel. In the whole world there shall be but one kingdom, the kingdom of Israelite's as God's saints." Is there no fear in you of the wrath of the prophets? Of your people?

FRANCISCA: Rabbi, I have suffered over this. I have agonized. But I know I have found the way which is right for me. Mama and I have talked about this over and over. This is no time to talk about this again. They will be here any moment. You must leave.

RABBI: (*Unmoved.*) Do you know the Birkat Ha-Minim from the Benedictions by Tannaim?

FRANCISCA: I know it, Rabbi.

RABBI: No. You do not know it or you would not do this. I will tell it to you so you know it. "May the Jewish Christians, the Nosrim, and other Jewish heretics, the Minim, perish suddenly; may they be blotted out of the book of life." The Meshummadhim, the deserters of Judaism are not to be recorded with the righteous. Do you not fear the wrath of the prophets?

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