

FEARLESS SECRETS: *Outer Self / Inner Voice*

A Play in Two Acts

By Richard Ehrlich

© 2025 Richard Ehrlich

CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE OUTER SELVES

AVA — Event organizer, mid-30s

NOLAN — Consultant, late 30s

TESS — Uses humor as armor, late 20s

PRIYA — Author and researcher, early 40s

ELI — Quiet observer, mid-30s

MARK — Former therapist, early 50s

JUNE — Caregiver, late 40s

LUCY — Marketing executive, early 30s

BEN — Arrives with Lucy, mid-30s

THE INNER VOICES

AVA'S INNER VOICE

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

TESS'S INNER VOICE

PRIYA'S INNER VOICE

ELI'S INNER VOICE

MARK'S INNER VOICE

JUNE'S INNER VOICE

LUCY'S INNER VOICE

BEN'S INNER VOICE

NOTE: Each character is played by two separate actors. Sixteen actors total.

SETTING

A modest multipurpose room in a community organization. Present day. One continuous evening.

ACT ONE

SECTION 1: ARRIVAL

(Approximately 0–12 minutes)

AT RISE: The multipurpose room is empty. Low, neutral background music plays—something corporate and inoffensive. The banner is slightly askew. The table is arranged but has a "last event" quality to it.

AVA'S INNER VOICE sits alone in the shadow space, watching the door.

After a moment, AVA enters from the back with a box of brochures. She's dressed carefully—professional but approachable. She sets the box down and begins arranging the table.

AVA'S INNER VOICE stands, moves slightly closer to the edge of the shadow space.

AVA

Okay.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

(from shadow space)

If you say "okay" again the room will know you're not.

AVA exhales. She arranges the name tags in a neat row. Then rearranges them. Checks her phone—nothing. Places it face-down on the table.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

(moving closer)

She's not coming.

AVA smooths the banner. Adjusts a chair. Small, repetitive actions.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

(now at the threshold between shadow and social space)

And when no one shows, you'll know you failed.

The door opens. AVA transforms instantly—brightens, smile activates, energy rises.

AVA

Hi! Come in—please, come in.

NOLAN enters. He holds his phone like a security blanket. Professional attire, careful posture. He scans the room quickly—exits, capacity, threat level.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE enters behind him, stops just inside the threshold, assessing the space.

NOLAN

Hi—yes—hi. Thank you.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

(quiet, observing)

Stop saying hi like it's an apology.

AVA

I'm Ava. Thanks so much for coming.

NOLAN

Of course. Happy to—be here.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

(moving slightly closer to NOLAN)

You sound like you're testifying.

AVA's phone buzzes on the table. She glances at it—her face stays neutral, but AVA'S INNER VOICE reacts.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

Still nothing from Claire.

AVA

There are name tags if you want one. Or not.

NOLAN

No, yes—name tag is great. Love a name tag.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

(hovering near his shoulder)

Why did you say love.

NOLAN writes his name on a tag. It takes him too long. He notices he's taking too long. This makes it take longer.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

It's four letters. You're not chiseling stone.

He places the tag on his shirt. It's crooked. He adjusts it. Makes it worse. Stops trying.

Both INNER VOICES are now visible in or near the social space—AVA'S standing behind her by the table, NOLAN'S circling him slowly at a distance of about six feet.

AVA

Can I offer you something to drink? Wine, sparkling water, regular water?

NOLAN

Water is great. Thank you.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

Safe choice. Uninteresting. Alive.

AVA pours water from a bottle into a glass. Hands it to him. Their eyes meet for a beat too long. Both look away.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

Good. Excellent avoidance.

NOLAN'S phone buzzes. He looks at it. His jaw tightens—just slightly.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

(urgently)

Julia.

He reads the text. Puts the phone in his pocket, face carefully neutral.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

"We need to talk. Tonight."

NOLAN takes a sip of water. The room is quiet. Awkward.

AVA

Everything okay?

NOLAN

(too quickly)

Fine. Yes. All good.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

Liar.

The door opens.

TESS bursts in mid-sentence, already talking before she's fully inside.

TESS'S INNER VOICE rushes in after her, frantic, spinning, trying to keep up with her energy.

TESS

—so I thought, that's it, I'll evaporate in public, which honestly would've saved me—

(sees them, stops abruptly)

Oh—hi! Sorry. I talk when I'm nervous, which is always, which is—great for everyone.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

(circling TESS frantically)

You're a podcast. Stop.

AVA

(laughing, genuine)

Hi! Welcome!

TESS

Tess! Name tags—yes—consent to be perceived.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

(stops spinning, faces audience in defeat)

You said consent. You're done.

TESS writes her name in large letters, slaps the tag on her shirt with theatrical finality.

TESS

Okay. Cute room. Love the vibe. Is that wine? Are we allowed?

AVA

Allowed. Encouraged.

TESS

Incredible.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

Don't chug. This is society.

Now THREE INNER VOICES are visible in the space—a constellation forming. They don't look at each other directly, but there's an awareness. They're the same species.

The door opens again, quieter this time.

ELI enters. Apologetic posture. He holds a small white envelope carefully.

ELI'S INNER VOICE enters separately, hangs far back near the door—more distance than any of the others maintain.

AVA

Hi! Come in.

ELI

Hi. Sorry.

ELI'S INNER VOICE

(from the doorway, barely audible)

You weren't sorry. Now you are.

AVA

No need to be sorry. I'm Ava.

ELI

Eli. This is—nice.

ELI'S INNER VOICE

Nice is a cry for help.

ELI writes his name carefully on a tag, letters small and precise. He places the white envelope on the donation table—the handwriting on it reads "\$200."

TESS notices ELI, senses his discomfort, tries to help.

TESS

Hi! I'm Tess. I fill silence. It's a warning.

ELI

(small, genuine smile)

Good to know.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

(to TESS)

You scared him.

ELI'S INNER VOICE

(to ELI)

She's kind. Don't trust it.

The room now has four people. Four INNER VOICES creating a second layer of reality. The stage picture shows both worlds simultaneously.

NOLAN'S phone buzzes again. He silences it without looking. His hand is shaking slightly.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

She texted again. You know what it says.

The door opens.

JUNE enters. Calm, grounded, actually present in her body in a way the others aren't quite yet.

JUNE'S INNER VOICE enters with her—not following, but moving in sync. They have a different relationship than the other pairs.

AVA

Hi! Welcome.

JUNE

Hi. June.

JUNE'S INNER VOICE

(standing exactly five feet behind JUNE—measured, controlled distance)

Say one true thing.

JUNE writes her name on a tag, places it on her shirt easily, no second-guessing.

JUNE

Thanks for doing this.

AVA

Thanks for coming.

JUNE looks around the room—actually seeing the other people, not just scanning for threats.

JUNE

Hi, everyone.

ALL OUTER SELVES

(various tones)

Hi.

JUNE'S INNER VOICE

They're all bracing.

AVA gestures toward the bar cart.

AVA

Help yourselves to drinks.

They do, loosely. A few people move toward the cart. The INNER VOICES shift positions as their OUTER SELVES move—maintaining distances, adjusting angles.

TESS

So—no speeches. Love that. What do we... do?

TESS'S INNER VOICE

You said "do." Abort.

JUNE

Sometimes standing is the activity.

TESS

That's horrifying.

Real laughter. It lands. The room loosens slightly—just a fraction.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

Thank you, laughter.

JUNE steps in gently, seeing an opportunity to create connection.

JUNE

How do you all know about this place?

NOLAN

Uh—online.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

Sponsored post. Don't say sponsored.

TESS

My therapist said I should do one socially brave thing a week.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

(to audience)

You overshared. Again.

ELI

I work nearby.

ELI'S INNER VOICE

Lie. But acceptable.

JUNE

I like how different the answers are.

A beat. The room settles slightly. The initial arrivals are complete. This is the group—or so it seems.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

Okay. We're here.

The door opens one more time.

MARK enters. No hesitation. No scanning. He walks directly into the center of the social space.

MARK'S INNER VOICE enters last, stays far upstage in deep shadow—barely visible. Different energy from all the others. Quieter. More dangerous.

All the other INNER VOICES turn slightly, sensing this new presence. Something about MARK'S INNER VOICE is different.

MARK

So this is it.

Silence. The air shifts. The casual energy drains from the room.

AVA

Hi—welcome. I'm Ava.

MARK

Mark.

AVA

Thanks for coming.

MARK

Sure.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

(from the shadows, to audience)

Don't soften.

MARK does not take a name tag. He does not pour a drink. He stands center, fully present.

MARK

Who's this for?

AVA

It's a community organization—

MARK

I know.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

Then why does this feel like a test.

MARK

What do you do when this part is over?

AVA

I—

(beat)

—*I sleep.*

AVA'S INNER VOICE

Why did that sound like a confession.

MARK

I don't.

Silence. Something real lands. The social niceties have been punctured.

MARK

When it's quiet, I replay conversations.

The room listens. The other OUTER SELVES have stopped moving. The INNER VOICES all lean forward slightly—they recognize this.

TESS

(surprised at herself)

I replay jokes.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

You just admitted something true.

ELI

I replay silence.

NOLAN

I replay exits.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

You're saying too much.

But he doesn't stop. A fragile connection is forming. Something has begun that can't be unfurled.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

This is happening.

The six OUTER SELVES stand in various positions in the social space. The six INNER VOICES create a second constellation around and behind them—watching, monitoring, judging.

The stage picture shows both realities at once: the social performance and the psychological truth.

Lights shift slightly—cooler, more intimate. The casual event has become something else.

END SECTION 1

SECTION 2: MISALIGNMENT

(Approximately 12–28 minutes)

Time has passed—not much, but enough. Maybe ten minutes. Drinks are in hands now. The group has subtly shifted positions. They're no longer arrivals waiting for direction—they're occupants of a space.

The INNER VOICES have moved closer to their OUTER SELVES. Proximity equals rising anxiety.

MARK

So.

No one rushes to fill the silence.

MARK

When it's quiet, I replay conversations.

Everything I didn't say. Everything I said wrong.

Over and over. Like I'm trying to fix it retroactively.

MARK'S INNER VOICE moves forward for the first time—still distant, but visible now in the light.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

(directly to MARK, not to audience)

Tell them why.

MARK doesn't. Not yet.

PRIYA

Mm.

This is the first time we've heard PRIYA speak. We realize she's been here the whole time—observing from the periphery.

PRIYA and PRIYA'S INNER VOICE are revealed standing together near the back of the social space in perfect alignment. She's been watching since before MARK entered.

MARK

That's why I came.

AVA

To the fundraiser?

MARK

To a room.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

To see if anyone else does this.

TESS shifts position, instinctively trying to help, to lighten.

TESS

Oh—yeah. Totally. I do that too.

I replay jokes. Like—did they land?

Did they land wrong?
Did they land on someone's childhood?

TESS'S INNER VOICE

You went too far. Reel it back.

A few smiles. A release of tension. Relief.

NOLAN

I replay exits.

MARK

Exits.

NOLAN

Yeah. How I leave conversations.

Did I leave too early.

Did I stay too long.

Did I leave right when it got real.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

(urgent, hovering close)

You're saying too much. Stop.

But NOLAN doesn't stop. Something about MARK'S directness gives him permission.

MARK

Yeah.

Just that. One word. No fixing, no therapy-speak, no solving. This lands harder than any elaborate response.

ELI

I replay... silence.

That lands heavier than expected. The others look at him.

ELI'S INNER VOICE

(from far away, alarmed)

Too big. Too big.

MARK

After?

ELI

After things end.

MARK

Relationships?

ELI flinches. ELI'S INNER VOICE retreats even further—almost to the threshold of the door.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

Careful.

ELI

Sometimes.

A small, uncomfortable honesty hangs in the air. No one knows quite where to look.

PRIYA has been still this whole time—observing, cataloging. Now she speaks.

PRIYA

I replay tone.

MARK

Tone.

PRIYA

How something sounded
versus how I meant it.

PRIYA'S INNER VOICE

(standing exactly behind her, in perfect sync)

You're taking notes. Stop taking notes.

PRIYA shifts slightly—caught. MARK sees it.

MARK

Right.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

She's analyzing. Not participating.

PRIYA'S INNER VOICE

He's actually listening.

JUNE has been quiet, grounding the room through presence alone. She steps in—not to lead, but to steady.

JUNE

I replay moments where I thought I was being kind
and later realize I was just being careful.

MARK looks at her. Something passes between them—recognition.

MARK

Exactly.

*The room breathes together for a moment. This is no longer small talk. This is no longer
"an event."*

AVA'S INNER VOICE

This is not on the clipboard.

TESS feels the shift and reaches for it—wanting to hold onto it, wanting to name it.

TESS

Okay but—can we keep this?

Like—can we stay here?

AVA

Stay how?

TESS

Like this.

Honest.

Not pretending.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

(hovering directly at her shoulder)

You're pushing. Stop pushing.

PRIYA

You mean without the scripts.

TESS

Yes! The scripts.

MARK

Careful.

TESS

What?

MARK

If you name it, people either perform it...
or run from it.

*That lands harder than he intends. All the INNER VOICES react simultaneously—
moving, circling, shifting positions. The room's energy has changed.*

TESS

Oh.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

He just shut you down.

JUNE

I don't think she meant to turn it into a thing.

MARK

I know.

I just—

(beat)

—I've seen rooms break that way.

*ELI takes a half-step back toward the door. His body language shifts to "preparing to
leave."*

ELI'S INNER VOICE

Here it goes.

AVA

Hey—

(to TESS)

—thank you for wanting it to be real.

TESS

Yeah.

(soft)

Okay.

But the room has tightened. The ease is gone. People have retreated into their bodies.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

We lost it.

*NOLAN'S phone buzzes. He looks at the screen. Reads the message. His face drains
slightly.*

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

"I'm serious. We need to talk."

NOLAN puts the phone away. His hand shakes slightly as he does.

Laughter from the hallway—loud, approaching. Multiple voices. New energy coming.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

Oh no. Not a wave.

The door opens. LUCY and BEN enter together, mid-laugh, mid-story.

LUCY'S INNER VOICE and BEN'S INNER VOICE enter with them—different energy than the others. Lighter. More performative. These are people whose inner voices are well-managed, well-hidden.

LUCY

—no, I swear, it's the same song—

BEN

Hi! Sorry—are we late?

AVA

No, you're perfect. I'm Ava.

LUCY

Lucy.

BEN

Ben.

They clock the room—the energy, the faces. Something's happened here.

BEN'S INNER VOICE

This is... not casual.

LUCY'S INNER VOICE

Okay. Be breezy.

AVA

Help yourselves to drinks over there.

LUCY

Cute space.

AVA

Thanks.

Now EIGHT INNER VOICES are visible on stage. The shadow space is crowded. It's harder to track who belongs to whom.

BEN looks around, trying to orient himself in the social dynamics.

BEN

So how does everyone know Ava?

A pause. A long one. It reveals something.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

We don't.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

Say something normal.

JUNE

We just met her.

BEN

Oh! Nice.

But the fracture is there now. Two groups in one room: those who've been here for the shift, and those who just arrived to the aftermath.

LUCY

(trying, bright)

So—

(to NOLAN)

—what do you do?

NOLAN

Consulting.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

Fog. You chose fog.

LUCY

I'm in marketing. Or brand strategy.

Or—whatever we're calling it now.

BEN

She tells people what they want
before they know they want it.

LUCY

That's generous.

LUCY'S INNER VOICE

And uncomfortably accurate.

TESS

That sounds... exhausting.

LUCY

It is!

(beat)

But in a fun way.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

She hates it.

Near the donation table, a quieter conversation is happening between AVA and PRIYA.

AVA

I didn't expect tonight to feel like this.

PRIYA

Neither did I.

AVA

I thought people would come, nod politely,
drink wine, and leave.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

Then you'd go home and be done.

PRIYA

You sound disappointed.

AVA

No. Just... surprised.

PRIYA

By what?

AVA

By how quickly the room changed.

PRIYA'S INNER VOICE

She noticed it too.

ELI

(quietly, to no one in particular)

I like rooms before they change.

The others look at him—he's spoken from the edge of the space.

ELI

When you still know what's expected.

ELI'S INNER VOICE

Say less. You said enough.

TESS feels the tension building again. She tries one more time—more careful now, but still reaching.

TESS

Okay—

(bright but tentative)

—can I try something?

TESS'S INNER VOICE

Abort. Abort.

AVA

Try what?

TESS

Nothing big. Just—

(to the whole group)

—what if we all just say one thing we're avoiding?

The air tightens immediately.

ALL EIGHT INNER VOICES move forward simultaneously—some quickly, some slowly, but all moving toward their OUTER SELVES. It creates a visual wall of anxiety.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

Absolutely not.

ELI'S INNER VOICE

I knew this was coming.

PRIYA'S INNER VOICE

She wants structure.

MARK

That's the thing.

TESS

What?

MARK

You just turned it into an exercise.

TESS

No, I—

(she stops herself)

—I just wanted to keep it from disappearing.

MARK

I get that.

But once it's an exercise,
people either perform it...
or they leave.

This lands harder than he intends. MARK'S INNER VOICE moves closer to him than we've seen before—nearly touching.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

You're doing it again.

TESS

Oh.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

You embarrassed yourself.

JUNE

Tess wasn't trying to control it.

MARK

I know.

I'm just saying—

rooms don't like being told what they are.

TESS nods, but she's wounded. She takes a physical step back—retreating toward the wall.

TESS

Right.

Of course.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

She's retreating.

ELI shifts his weight. Tests the door with his eyes. The room is too exposed. He needs out.

ELI

I'm going to—

(beat)

—get some air.

AVA

Oh—

(too fast, trying to keep him)

—the balcony's closed but—

ELI

No, I just—

I'll be right back.

ELI'S INNER VOICE

Lie.

ELI exits. His INNER VOICE follows him out.

The door closes. Something essential leaves with them.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

There it is.

AVA

I hope he's okay.

MARK

He will be.

AVA

How do you know?

MARK

Because he left before anyone could misunderstand him completely.

That stings. AVA absorbs it.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

Ouch.

LUCY, sensing the tension and wanting to help (or escape it), steps in.

LUCY

Okay, I'm going to say something possibly wrong.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

Here it comes.

LUCY

This is... intense.

In a good way!

But I feel like I walked into the middle of something.

NOLAN

You kind of did.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

That sounded territorial.

LUCY

Right. Which is fine.

I just—

I like to know the rules.

BEN

Same.

LUCY

And I can't tell what the rule is here.

MARK

There isn't one.

LUCY

That's... not comforting.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

Fair.

JUNE

Maybe the rule is listening.

LUCY

Listening to what?

Silence. No one has an answer.

TESS

(jumping in, trying to recover)

I think—

I think it's about being brave.

MARK stiffens. His whole body language changes.

MARK

It's not bravery.

TESS

Oh.

MARK

Bravery implies choice.

Some people are just... exposed.

That lands wrong. Too sharp. Too personal.

MARK'S INNER VOICE circles him now—agitated, upset.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

You just hurt her. Like you hurt Sarah.

MARK actually flinches—reacting visibly to his own inner voice. The others see it but don't understand what just happened.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

He just erased you.

TESS

Okay.

(too bright, covering)

That makes sense.

She retreats further, physically moving toward the wall now.

TESS

I choose noise.
That's my thing.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

We just lost her too.

BEN clears his throat—a social reset gesture.

BEN

Well.
This has been... different.

LUCY

Yes.

LUCY'S INNER VOICE

I don't know where to stand anymore.

AVA steps forward—not as host now, as person.

AVA

I need to say something.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

Don't manage it. Just say it.

AVA

I invited people tonight because I believe in the work.

(beat)

But also because I didn't want to be alone.

Silence. This is the first true reset of the evening. Real vulnerability, not performed.

The INNER VOICES all stop moving. They're listening too.

The door opens.

ELI re-enters. His INNER VOICE enters behind him—still distant, but he came back.

ELI

Sorry.

I just—

(beat)

—I didn't want to disappear.

This lands deeply. Everyone feels it.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

He came back.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

He came back.

AVA

I'm glad you're here.

ELI

Me too.

The room recalibrates—wounded, yes, but alive. Still here.

The INNER VOICES resettle into new positions—still present, still watching, but the acute crisis has passed.

Lights shift slightly—a subtle change. We're moving into something new.

END SECTION 2

SECTION 3: THE ALARM

(Approximately 28–43 minutes)

Time has passed. The group has found a tentative equilibrium. Some people sit now. Some stand. The formality has dissolved. Drinks have been refilled.

The INNER VOICES have moved back slightly from their OUTER SELVES—still visible, but less urgent. The anxiety thermometer has lowered a few degrees.

NOLAN'S phone has buzzed three more times. Each time, his INNER VOICE moves closer, then retreats when he silences it without looking.

LUCY

(to NOLAN, making conversation)
So consulting can mean a lot of things.

NOLAN

It can.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

Fog. Still fog.

His phone buzzes again. This time NOLAN looks. His face drains of color.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

"If you don't call me back, I'm calling a lawyer."

SUDDENLY: FIRE ALARM. Piercing, mechanical, loud. Lights flash—red strobes.

Everyone jumps, covers their ears, looks around wildly.

TESS

Oh my god—

AVA

It's okay! It's just—

She rushes to the wall panel, tries to silence the alarm. Can't. Doesn't have the code or it's malfunctioning.

NOLAN

Should we evacuate?

AVA

There's no fire. The system's been glitching all week—

The alarm stops abruptly. Emergency lighting kicks in—cooler, dimmer, eerie. The warm overhead lights are gone.

A mechanical CLICK—loud, final, ominous.

MARK

What just happened?

AVA

The building locks automatically during alarms.

Fire protocol.

PRIYA

We're locked in?

AVA

For forty-five minutes. Until it resets.

Silence. This is real. They process it.

ALL EIGHT INNER VOICES suddenly move rapidly to center stage—clustering together in a swarm. They speak over each other, voices overlapping, building to cacophony:

ELI'S INNER VOICE

No. No. No.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

You're going to spiral you're going to—

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

Julia is calling a lawyer and you're TRAPPED—

PRIYA'S INNER VOICE

Calculate the exits calculate the—

LUCY'S INNER VOICE

This is not safe this is not—

BEN'S INNER VOICE

Smile through it smile—

JUNE'S INNER VOICE

Someone's going to panic someone's—

AVA'S INNER VOICE

They're going to blame you they're going to—

MARK'S INNER VOICE

Sarah was trapped. Sarah couldn't get out. Sarah—

The cacophony builds—voices overlapping, spinning, creating a wall of anxiety at center stage.

The OUTER SELVES stand frozen at the edges of the space, looking at the cluster of their collective INNER VOICES.

Then:

AVA

(loudly, cutting through)

We're safe. We just can't leave.

The INNER VOICES quiet slightly—still there, still speaking, but the volume lowers.

TESS

(forced laugh, wrong pitch)

This is fine. This is totally fine.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

(stepping out from the cluster)

It's not fine.

Another voice—TESS has two now:

TESS'S INNER VOICE *(second voice)*

Perform fine.

TESS looks around, hearing both contradictory commands. Two voices, two directions.

PRIYA

Are you okay?

NOLAN

Fine.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

(fragmenting—multiple rapid-fire thoughts)

No. / Yes. Lie. / She's done. / She's bluffing. / This is it. / Say nothing.

His INNER VOICE is splitting—multiple contradictory directives at once.

MARK

We should sit.

AVA

I'm sorry—this is—

MARK

Not your fault.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

(from the cluster)

Except you saw this coming. You knew the system was broken.

Everyone slowly finds places to sit—chairs, floor, wherever. No one leaves. Can't leave.

The INNER VOICES slowly disperse from the cluster, but they stay much closer to their OUTER SELVES now. Some hover at shoulders. Some touch lightly.

ELI

(very quiet)

How long did you say?

AVA

Forty-five minutes.

ELI

Okay.

But ELI'S INNER VOICE is GONE. It has completely vanished from the stage—exited into the wings or shadow space, invisible.

ELI looks around—disoriented, unmoored. Where did it go?

JUNE

Has anyone here been trapped before?

Beat. The question sits.

MARK

Define trapped.

This lands differently than expected. It's real, not deflecting.

TESS

In a room? Or like... in a life?

PRIYA

Those aren't the same thing.

TESS

Aren't they though?

No one answers. The question is too big.

MARK

I was stuck in an elevator once.

Two hours. Alone.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

You thought about Sarah the entire time.

MARK flinches visibly.

NOLAN

Who's Sarah?

MARK

No one.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

(louder)

The patient you couldn't save.

Beat. He's said too much. Everyone feels it.

PRIYA

We don't have to share.

MARK

I know.

TESS

But we're trapped, so...

NOLAN

So what?

TESS

So maybe we should.

MARK

Careful.

TESS

Why?

MARK

Because once you name it,
people either perform it—

TESS

—or run from it. Yeah. You said that.

TESS stands abruptly.

TESS

But we can't run.
So what do we do instead?

No one answers.

TESS'S INNER VOICE moves directly in front of her—blocking her path.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

Don't. You'll regret this.

But TESS speaks anyway:

TESS

My therapist says I use humor to avoid intimacy.
That I turn everything into performance
so I never have to be real.

Beat.

TESS

She's right.

TESS walks forward—directly through the space where her INNER VOICE stands. She passes through it like walking through fog.

This is the first time an OUTER SELF has moved through their INNER VOICE.

She sits back down on the other side.

The room holds this. Fragile. Real.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

This is the moment it breaks or builds.

AVA makes a choice.

AVA

We wait.

TESS

For what?

AVA

For the door to open.
Or for us to decide
what this is.

The room holds. The INNER VOICES all watch. Even from their positions of judgment, they're curious now.

NOLAN'S phone buzzes again. The sound is loud in the quiet.

NOLAN

My wife wants a divorce.

This comes from nowhere. Lands everywhere.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

You just said it out loud.

NOLAN

She texted me ten minutes ago.
While I was standing here
pretending I came to help someone else's crisis.

Beat.

NOLAN

I don't know how to stop rehearsing my life
long enough to live it.

Silence. Complete. Honest.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE sits down on the floor—exhausted. This is the first time we've seen an INNER VOICE sit.

PRIYA'S INNER VOICE

He just jumped.

ELI looks around frantically—his INNER VOICE is still gone. He touches his chest, his head. Where is it?

ELI

(barely audible)
I can't—

JUNE

Can't what?

ELI

Hear myself.

He's dissociating. The absence of his INNER VOICE is more terrifying than its presence.

JUNE

Is that good or bad?

ELI

I don't know.

MARK moves carefully toward ELI.

MARK

Stay with us.

ELI

I'm trying.

MARK

Thank you.

MARK'S INNER VOICE moves away from MARK for the first time—giving him space, permission to try.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

(to audience, quiet)

He's trying to save this one.

NOLAN looks at MARK—really sees him.

NOLAN

You asked who Sarah is.

MARK

You don't have to—

NOLAN

I know.

But you asked.

MARK absorbs this. Permission granted. He takes a breath.

MARK

Sarah was a patient.

Three years ago.

She was struggling, and I thought I understood.

I thought if I just listened carefully enough,

I'd know what she needed.

Beat.

MARK

She killed herself two days after our last session.

The room goes absolutely still. Even the INNER VOICES stop moving.

MARK'S INNER VOICE walks slowly toward MARK—for the first time, they stand face to face.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

Say the rest.

MARK

I lost my license.

Because I missed it.

Because I was so busy seeing patterns

I didn't see her.

Silence. The full weight of this.

MARK

And ever since then,

I see people breaking

and I think if I just name it in time—

His voice cracks.

MARK

But I can't save anyone.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

(quietly)

You never could.

PRIYA has been cataloging all of this—observing, analyzing. Now she speaks.

PRIYA

I'm writing a book about social anxiety.

Everyone looks at her.

PRIYA'S INNER VOICE

Don't.

PRIYA

I came tonight to observe.

To take notes.

She pulls a small notebook from her pocket. Shows it to the room.

PRIYA

I told myself I was researching.

She looks at the notebook.

PRIYA

But I think I'm just terrified
of being known instead of right.

She closes the notebook. Puts it away.

PRIYA

I didn't write anything down tonight.

ELI

Why not?

PRIYA

Because I stopped wanting to understand this
and started wanting to be in it.

ELI'S INNER VOICE suddenly REAPPEARS—walking slowly back onto stage from the wings, emerging from shadow.

ELI

(seeing it, relief flooding his face)
There you are.

He's talking to his own INNER VOICE. Out loud. In front of everyone.

ELI'S INNER VOICE

I didn't go far.

LUCY

(quiet, to BEN)
I don't think we're in the right room.

BEN

What?

LUCY

For us. For this.

BEN

Maybe not.

LUCY

But I don't want to leave.

BEN

Me neither.

AVA crosses to the donation table. Picks up ELI'S envelope. Opens it. Reads the amount written on it.

AVA

Eli—

you gave me two hundred dollars.

ELI

I know.

AVA

The flyer said twenty was suggested.

ELI

I know.

Beat.

ELI

I wanted someone to survive.

AVA's eyes fill with tears. She doesn't hide them.

AVA

I don't think we're going to.

ELI

The organization?

AVA

Yeah.

She puts the envelope down gently.

AVA

But I think I will.

This is the first time she's believed it. The first time she's said it out loud.

A CLICK. Mechanical. Loud. The door lock releases.

No one moves.

JUNE

Did you hear that?

AVA

We can leave now.

Still, no one stands. The choice to stay becomes conscious.

TESS

Does anyone want to?

Silence. The INNER VOICES all watch their OUTER SELVES make this choice.

Lights shift—back toward warmth, slightly. The emergency is over. The choice remains.

END SECTION 3

[END OF ACT ONE]

INTERMISSION NOTE: This play is performed without an intermission. If producing circumstances absolutely require one, place it here. Duration: 10 minutes maximum.

ACT TWO

SECTION 4: EXPOSURE

(Approximately 43–58 minutes)

The alarm is off. Emergency lighting remains—cooler than before, but not harsh. The room feels more intimate now, smaller.

The door is unlocked. Everyone knows this. No one has moved toward it.

The INNER VOICES have settled into new positions—farther back than in Section 3, but still visible. They're present but quieter.

PRIYA

Are we staying?

JUNE

I think we are.

No formal decision was made. But the collective body language says: yes.

People resettle. Some sit on the floor now. The social formality is completely gone.

NOLAN

I should call my wife.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

You should have called her an hour ago.

NOLAN

I know.

He doesn't reach for his phone.

NOLAN

But if I call her now,
this ends.

AVA

This?

NOLAN

This room.

This—

(gestures around)

—whatever this is.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

Safety.

NOLAN looks at his INNER VOICE—actually turns his head and looks at it. He hears it.

NOLAN

(repeating it, testing it)

Safety.

LUCY

Is that what this is?

MARK

I don't know.

But it's not performance anymore.

LUCY

When did that happen?

MARK

When we couldn't leave.

BEN

So being trapped made us honest?

JUNE

Maybe.

Or maybe being honest made us stay.

This lands. The causality matters.

TESS

I don't want to go back to being funny.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

Then don't.

TESS

(to her INNER VOICE)

You won't let me.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

I'm trying to protect you.

TESS

(aloud, to herself but hearing her voice)

From what?

TESS'S INNER VOICE

From being seen and rejected.

TESS looks at her INNER VOICE—really sees it for the first time.

TESS

But I'm already alone.

Your protection is just...

solitary confinement.

Her INNER VOICE doesn't respond. Can't. The logic is sound.

ELI

My inner voice left.

MARK

When?

ELI

During the alarm.

When everyone was panicking.
It just... went quiet.

MARK

How did that feel?

ELI

(honest)
Terrifying.

PRIYA

Because?

ELI

Because I didn't know who I was
without it telling me.

His INNER VOICE stands behind him now—present but not controlling, not hovering.

ELI'S INNER VOICE

I'm still here.

ELI

(to his voice)
I know.
But you're quieter now.

NOLAN pulls out his phone. Looks at the screen. Twelve unread messages.

NOLAN

Twelve texts.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

Don't read them.

But he does. Scrolls through them slowly.

NOLAN

She's not angry.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

That's worse.

NOLAN

She says—
(reads aloud)

*"I hope you're somewhere safe.
I hope you're with people.
We can talk tomorrow."*

His hands are shaking as he holds the phone.

NOLAN

She's giving me permission
to not be available.

JUNE

That sounds kind.

NOLAN

It is.

He puts the phone down on the floor beside him. Leaves it there.

NOLAN

I've been so busy rehearsing the divorce
I didn't notice she was trying to save the marriage.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE moves away from him—creating physical distance for the first time. Several feet of space opens between them.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

Call her.

NOLAN

Not yet.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

Why not?

NOLAN

Because I need to remember this.
What it feels like to stay
when it's uncomfortable.

AVA has been quiet, processing. Now:

AVA

Claire isn't coming.

PRIYA

The donor?

AVA

She was never coming.

MARK

Never?

AVA

She doesn't exist.

I made her up.

This lands. The others absorb it.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

Say why.

AVA

Because I needed to believe
someone cared enough to save this place.

Beat.

AVA

To save me.

LUCY

From what?

AVA

From admitting I failed.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

(moving directly in front of her)

You did fail.

AVA

(to her INNER VOICE)

I know.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

And you're still here.

AVA

(realizing, surprised)

I'm still here.

AVA stands. Walks forward—through her INNER VOICE. The second person to do this.

AVA

The organization is closing.
The funding ran out.
We helped forty-three people in three years.
That wasn't enough to keep the doors open.

She looks around at all of them.

AVA

But tonight—
I don't know.
Tonight feels like it counted.

MARK

It did.

AVA

How do you know?

MARK

Because no one left
when they could have.

MARK'S INNER VOICE speaks—but differently now. Not accusatory. Quieter.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

You can't save everyone.
But you can stay present.

MARK hears this. Absorbs it. Nods slightly.

MARK

(to the room)
I couldn't save Sarah.
And I can't save any of you.

Beat.

MARK

But I can be here.

TESS

That's enough.

MARK

Is it?

TESS

Tonight it is.

ELI stands. Walks to the door. Puts his hand on the handle.

Everyone tenses slightly. Is he leaving?

ELI'S INNER VOICE

You're testing it.

ELI

I am.

He opens the door. The hallway is visible beyond it—lit, empty, accessible. The exit is real.

ELI

I could go.

ELI'S INNER VOICE

You could.

ELI

But I came back once already.

And that—

(looks back at the room)

—that felt better than leaving ever did.

He closes the door. Returns to the group.

PRIYA

Why did you come back?

ELI

The first time?

PRIYA

Yes.

ELI

Because I was afraid

if I disappeared,

no one would notice.

Beat.

ELI

And then when I came back,
people did.

AVA

We did.

ELI

So I'm staying.

JUNE stands. She's been grounded throughout, but now there's a shift.

JUNE

I need to go soon.

AVA

Okay.

JUNE

Not because I want to.

But because I have—

(catches herself, decides to say it)

—someone waiting.

JUNE'S INNER VOICE

Your mother. Say it.

JUNE

My mother.

She has dementia.

I'm her caregiver.

If I'm not home by ten,

she gets confused.

MARK

That's why you're so steady.

JUNE

What?

MARK

In the room.

You anchor.

JUNE

I don't have a choice.
If I fall apart,
she falls apart.

JUNE'S INNER VOICE

And if you fall apart here—

JUNE

No one else falls.

She sits back down. Not leaving yet. Using her remaining time.

JUNE

I have twenty more minutes.

AVA

Thank you for staying.

JUNE

Thank you for not asking me
to leave early.

*The INNER VOICES have all moved back now—giving their OUTER SELVES space.
They're still present, still watching, but they're no longer hovering, no longer controlling.*

BEN

I usually leave rooms like this.

LUCY

What do you mean?

BEN

When things get heavy,
I crack a joke and exit.

MARK

That's leaving too.

BEN

I know.
But it's safer.

LUCY

For who?

BEN

For me.

BEN'S INNER VOICE moves closer—not threatening, just present.

BEN'S INNER VOICE

Say why.

BEN

Because if people really see me—
and then leave—
that's proof I'm not enough.

Beat.

BEN

But if I leave first—
I get to tell myself
I chose to go.

LUCY looks at him—really seeing him for the first time tonight.

LUCY

I don't want to leave.

BEN

Really?

LUCY

Really.

They sit together in new silence. Something has shifted between them.

TESS

Can I say something without making a joke?

MARK

Please.

TESS

I'm scared that if I stop being funny,
I won't be anything.

No one fills the silence. They let it sit.

TESS

Like—

what if the noise is all I am?

NOLAN

It's not.

TESS

How do you know?

NOLAN

Because you just stopped.

And you're still here.

TESS'S INNER VOICE and TESS look at each other across the space.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

He's right.

TESS exhales—a long, shaky breath.

PRIYA

I don't know how to not analyze.

MARK

You don't have to stop.

PRIYA

I don't?

MARK

Just analyze yourself
as much as you analyze everyone else.

PRIYA'S INNER VOICE steps in front of her—not blocking, but present.

PRIYA'S INNER VOICE

That's terrifying.

PRIYA

(to her INNER VOICE)

I know.

But maybe it's fair.

The room breathes together. Nine people. Eight INNER VOICES visible. All still present.

But the INNER VOICES are no longer in control. They're witnesses now, not prosecutors.

Lights remain in this cooler, more intimate state.

END SECTION 4

SECTION 5: CONVERGENCE

(Approximately 58–73 minutes)

The room has changed. People are tired in a real way—emotionally, physically. Some sit on the floor. Some lean against walls. The pretense is completely gone.

The INNER VOICES stand at the periphery of the shadow space—visible but distant. Watching but not intervening.

AVA

What time is it?

NOLAN

(checking his phone)

Nine forty.

JUNE

I need to leave in ten minutes.

AVA

Okay.

No one asks her to stay longer. They respect the boundary.

ELI

I don't want this to end.

TESS

It has to.

ELI

I know.

Long silence. Not awkward. Full. Complete.

MARK

What happens tomorrow?

PRIYA

What do you mean?

MARK

When we leave here.

Do we—

(searches for the words)

—do we remember this?

LUCY

How could we not?

MARK

Because remembering means
we have to decide
if it was real.

AVA

It was real.

MARK

Here, yes.

But out there—

He gestures toward the door, the world beyond.

MARK

Out there we have to integrate this
with everything else.

NOLAN

I don't know how to do that.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

(from far away)

Neither do I.

NOLAN

(to his INNER VOICE, surprised)

That's the first time

you've admitted you don't know.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

I'm tired of pretending.

NOLAN stands. Walks across the room to where his INNER VOICE stands in the shadow space. They look at each other.

NOLAN

Can we try something different?

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

Like what?

NOLAN

Like not knowing together.

His INNER VOICE nods.

They both sit down on the floor, side by side. Not touching, but parallel. Both facing the same direction.

This is the first time an OUTER SELF and INNER VOICE have sat together as equals.

TESS

I think I need to fire my therapist.

AVA

Why?

TESS

Because she told me
the goal is to quiet the inner voice.

TESS looks at her INNER VOICE across the room.

TESS

But maybe the goal is just
to stop letting it decide everything.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

I'm still going to speak.

TESS

I know.
But I'm going to decide
if I listen.

MARK has been quiet, processing. Now:

MARK

I've spent three years
trying to save people retroactively.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

Save Sarah.

MARK

Save Sarah.

Beat. He lets it sit.

MARK

I can't.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

No.

MARK

And I couldn't save her then.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

No.

MARK

So what do I do?

His INNER VOICE moves toward him—close but not threatening. Standing in front of him.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

Grieve her.

Stop trying to fix the past.

Stay present.

MARK nods. His eyes fill with tears.

MARK

I don't know how.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

(looking at the room)

You just did.

PRIYA

My book.

AVA

What about it?

PRIYA

I don't think I can write it anymore.

LUCY

Why not?

PRIYA

Because I came here to study social anxiety
from a distance.

She looks around at all of them.

PRIYA

But I'm not distant anymore.

PRIYA'S INNER VOICE

You're a subject now.

PRIYA

(to her INNER VOICE)

I always was.

I just didn't want to admit it.

ELI

Will you write something else?

PRIYA

I don't know.

Maybe.

Beat.

PRIYA

Maybe about tonight.

TESS

Without names.

PRIYA

Without names.

AVA

What would you say?

PRIYA

That being seen
is different than being studied.

JUNE checks her watch. Her time is up.

JUNE

I need to go.

Everyone knows. No one protests. This is right.

JUNE

I want to say something first.

AVA

Okay.

JUNE

I spend my life
keeping someone else steady.
And I'm good at it.
It's not a complaint.

Beat.

JUNE

But tonight—
for two hours—
I got to fall apart a little.

JUNE'S INNER VOICE

And no one else fell.

JUNE

And no one else fell.

She stands. Gathers her coat from a chair.

JUNE

Thank you for that.

AVA

Thank you for staying as long as you could.

JUNE moves to the door. Pauses with her hand on the handle. Turns back.

JUNE

This was real.

ALL

(quietly, overlapping)

It was.

JUNE

Good night.

ALL

Good night.

JUNE exits. JUNE'S INNER VOICE rises and moves beside her—they walk to the door together, parallel. They exit together.

This is the first integrated exit. The INNER VOICE leaves WITH the OUTER SELF, not following, not separate.

The remaining INNER VOICES shift positions slightly—watching this happen, understanding something.

TESS

She took it with her.

MARK

What?

TESS

Her inner voice.

It didn't stay behind.

PRIYA

They left together.

This matters deeply. Everyone feels the significance.

BEN

(to LUCY)

I'm glad we came.

LUCY

Me too.

BEN

I almost didn't.

LUCY

Why not?

BEN

Because I was afraid
it would be exactly this.

LUCY

Uncomfortable?

BEN

Honest.

LUCY nods—understands completely.

LUCY

I'm going to quit my job.

BEN

(not surprised)

I know.

LUCY

You do?

BEN

I've known for six months.
You've been saying it
without saying it.

LUCY

Why didn't you say something?

BEN

Because you weren't ready to hear it.

LUCY'S INNER VOICE moves forward.

LUCY'S INNER VOICE

Are you ready now?

LUCY

I think so.

She stands, gathering her things.

LUCY

I'm going to go too.

AVA

Okay.

LUCY

(to BEN)

Coming?

BEN

In a minute.

LUCY moves to the door. Her INNER VOICE rises and walks beside her. They exit together—integrated.

Now: Seven OUTER SELVES remain. Seven INNER VOICES.

ELI

They're all leaving together.

MARK

The voices?

ELI

Yes.

NOLAN

(still sitting beside his INNER VOICE)

Is that the goal?

MARK

I don't know.

Maybe it's just
one way to end.

BEN stands.

BEN

I should—

MARK

You don't have to explain.

BEN

I want to.

Beat.

BEN

I usually deflect.
Make a joke. Leave.
But tonight—

He looks at MARK specifically.

BEN

Tonight I stayed until I was uncomfortable.
And then I stayed longer.

MARK

Good.

BEN

Is it?

MARK

Yes.

BEN moves to the door. BEN'S INNER VOICE rises and walks beside him. They exit together—integrated.

Now: Six OUTER SELVES. Six INNER VOICES.

TESS

I don't want my voice to leave.

AVA

Why not?

TESS

Because I'm afraid
if it goes,
I'll forget.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

Forget what?

TESS

That I can choose.

TESS and her INNER VOICE look at each other across the space.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

I'm not leaving.
I'm just—
getting quieter.

TESS

Promise?

TESS'S INNER VOICE

I'm part of you.
I'm not going anywhere.

TESS nods. Accepts this truth.

NOLAN

(still sitting beside his INNER VOICE)
I need to call Julia.

AVA

There's a quiet room in the back.

NOLAN

Can I use it?

AVA

Of course.

NOLAN

If I come back—
will you still be here?

AVA

Some of us.

NOLAN

Good.

NOLAN and his INNER VOICE stand together—in sync. They walk to the back room exit together. They exit together—integrated.

Now: Five OUTER SELVES in the room. Six INNER VOICES visible (NOLAN'S is still present at the threshold of the back room, waiting).

PRIYA

What happens to the organization?

AVA

It closes.

January fifteenth.

MARK

What will you do?

AVA

I don't know yet.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

Yes you do.

AVA

(to her INNER VOICE)

I do?

AVA'S INNER VOICE

You're going to do this again.

Not the fundraiser.

But the room.

The space for people to—

AVA

—to not perform.

She sits down slowly. Realizes.

AVA

I'm going to do this again.

MARK

That's good.

AVA

Is it?

MARK

Yes.

NOLAN re-enters from the back room. His face is different—softer, raw, tear-stained. But he's smiling.

NOLAN

She answered.

TESS

And?

NOLAN

We're going to try.

His eyes are red but his smile is genuine.

NOLAN

We're going to try.

AVA crosses to him. Takes his hand briefly—a moment of connection. Lets go.

AVA

Good.

The five of them stand/sit in the room. Their INNER VOICES at various distances—present but not hovering.

Lights remain intimate, warm-cool balance.

END SECTION 5

SECTION 6: RELEASE

(Approximately 73–85 minutes)

Later. Not much later, but enough. The room is quieter still. The energy has fully shifted from event to aftermath to something new—not quite closure, but acknowledgment.

Some people sit. Some stand. No one performs anymore.

The INNER VOICES stand far back in the shadow space now—present, visible, but no longer urgent. They watch with something like curiosity.

AVA

(reaching for the stack of brochures, stopping herself)

I don't need to fix this.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

(from far away)

No.

She leaves the brochures uneven. Leaves the table imperfect.

NOLAN looks around slowly—taking it in, committing the space to memory.

NOLAN'S INNER VOICE

Don't turn this into something you replay forever.
Just be in it.

NOLAN hears this. Nods to himself.

TESS gestures toward the plate of cookies on the table.

TESS

These are actually good.

NOLAN

They are.

TESS

I didn't expect that.

NOLAN

Nothing tonight went the way I expected.

A small, real smile passes between them. Not flirtation. Recognition of shared experience.

PRIYA

(studying the back of a blank brochure)

*Do you ever notice
the important information
is never on the front?*

MARK

Yeah.

MARK'S INNER VOICE

(from the shadows)

And yet we keep pretending it is.

ELI stands near the door—but not testing it this time. Just standing near it, comfortable with its presence.

ELI

I keep thinking someone's going to tell me
this was inappropriate.

AVA

It wasn't.

ELI

Unprofessional.

AVA

It wasn't.

ELI

Too much.

AVA

It wasn't.

ELI nods. Finally accepts it.

ELI

Okay.

MARK steps toward the banner—the one that reads "FINAL OPEN HOUSE / THANK YOU." He reads it as if for the first time.

MARK

You never really said what this place does.

AVA

I know.

MARK

I think it did it anyway.

AVA absorbs this. Her eyes sting with tears. She doesn't hide them.

AVA

Thank you.

MARK

Thank you for not trying to fix me.

AVA

I didn't know how.

MARK

Exactly.

TESS stands, beginning the process of leaving.

TESS

I'm going to head out.

AVA

Okay.

TESS

(to the room)

*I don't know how to say
what this was.*

PRIYA

You don't have to.

TESS

I want to.

Beat. She searches for it.

TESS

I came here to be brave.

I thought bravery was—

I don't know—

louder.

She looks across the room at her INNER VOICE.

TESS

But maybe it's just
staying when you're scared.

TESS'S INNER VOICE

It is.

TESS hears this—actually hears it without judgment, without correction.

TESS

Good night.

ALL

(quietly)

Good night.

TESS moves to the door. TESS'S INNER VOICE rises and walks beside her. They reach the door at the same moment. They exit together—integrated.

Now: Four OUTER SELVES. Four INNER VOICES.

PRIYA

I'm going too.

She stands. Gathers her notebook, her coat.

PRIYA

(to AVA)

Can I ask you something?

AVA

Of course.

PRIYA

Would you do it differently?

Tonight?

AVA

(thinks genuinely)

No.

PRIYA

Even though the donor didn't come?

AVA

Even though.

PRIYA nods—gets what she needed.

PRIYA

(to everyone)

*Thank you for letting me
stop observing.*

MARK

Thank you for stopping.

PRIYA moves to the door. PRIYA'S INNER VOICE rises and walks beside her. They exit together—integrated.

Now: Three OUTER SELVES. Three INNER VOICES.

MARK, AVA, and ELI remain. Their three INNER VOICES stand far back in the shadow space—barely visible now in the dim light.

MARK

I usually leave before this part.

AVA

What part?

MARK

The after.

Beat. He considers this.

MARK

I'm glad I didn't.

AVA

Me too.

MARK moves to the door. MARK'S INNER VOICE rises and walks beside him. They exit together—integrated.

Now: Two OUTER SELVES. Two INNER VOICES.

AVA and ELI. Their INNER VOICES barely visible in deep shadow.

ELI

Can I help clean up?

AVA

You don't have to.

ELI

I want to.

They begin small tasks together. Folding a tablecloth. Stacking chairs quietly. Working in comfortable silence.

Their INNER VOICES watch but don't speak.

ELI

I came here because I was afraid
I was disappearing.

AVA

Are you still afraid?

ELI

(thinks honestly)

No.

He looks at her.

ELI

Because tonight I was seen.

AVA

You were.

ELI

And I didn't disappear.

AVA nods. Simple truth.

AVA

No.

They continue cleaning in comfortable silence for a moment.

ELI

What will you do tomorrow?

AVA

Start planning the next one.

ELI

Next one?

AVA

Next room.

Next event.

Next space for people
to not perform.

She looks around at the space.

AVA

This felt important.

ELI

It was.

He finishes stacking the last chair.

ELI

I should go.

AVA

Okay.

ELI

But I'll come back.

If you do it again.

AVA

I'd like that.

ELI moves to the door. Stops. Turns back one more time.

ELI

Thank you.

AVA

For what?

ELI

For creating a room
where I didn't have to be anyone
but myself.

AVA's eyes fill with tears.

AVA

Thank you for staying.

ELI and ELI'S INNER VOICE move to the door together. They exit together—integrated.

Now: One OUTER SELF. One INNER VOICE.

AVA stands alone in the room. The social space is empty now.

AVA'S INNER VOICE emerges slowly from the shadow space—walks toward her across the empty room.

They stand facing each other. Not adversaries. Not quite allies. But present.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

You did good.

AVA

Did I?

AVA'S INNER VOICE

Yes.

AVA

It failed.

The fundraiser.

The organization.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

The event failed.

The night didn't.

AVA absorbs this distinction.

AVA

I didn't save the organization.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

No.

But you created something else.

AVA

What?

AVA'S INNER VOICE

A space where people could stop hiding.

AVA looks at her INNER VOICE—really looks at it.

AVA

Will you ever be quiet?

AVA'S INNER VOICE

No.

I'm part of you.

AVA

Will you ever stop criticizing?

AVA'S INNER VOICE

Probably not.

Beat.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

But maybe you'll stop listening
to every word as gospel.

AVA nods. This is enough.

AVA

Maybe.

She turns off the remaining lights. Only emergency lighting remains now—soft, dim, just enough to see by.

AVA and AVA'S INNER VOICE stand in the dim room together.

AVA

Ready?

AVA'S INNER VOICE

For what?

AVA

Tomorrow.

Her INNER VOICE moves beside her—not behind, not in front. Parallel. Present but not controlling.

AVA'S INNER VOICE

As ready as you are.

They walk toward the door together. Reach it at the same moment.

Just before they exit, all eight INNER VOICES briefly reappear in the shadow space—a moment of collective presence. A constellation. They watch AVA and her INNER VOICE leave.

Then they fade.

AVA and AVA'S INNER VOICE exit together—integrated.

The stage is empty.

The banner still reads: FINAL OPEN HOUSE / THANK YOU

The brochures still sit uneven on the table.

The room is as it was—but changed.

Slow fade to black.

END OF PLAY