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Characters

This play can be performed with a single actor; or with multiple performers – as many as eleven, and as few as four.

If multiple performers are used, the actor cast as VINCENZO should play no other roles (with the exception of his portrayal of the CABARET GIRL).

VINCENZO PERUGIA

WALTER PATER

MISS MATTEL

BROTHER BENEDETTO

KEVIN LESSER

LARRY WORTHINGTON BUCKLES

MARCELLA ANTONELLI

MARCEL DUCHAMP

SOPHIA PERUGIA

BETH TUCKER

CABARET GIRL

In addition to these characters, there is the VOICE.

Recommended Character Breakdown (if using four actors):

Actor A:

Vincenzo Perugia
Cabaret Girl

Actor B:

Voice
Walter Pater
Larry Worthington Buckles
Marcel Duchamp

Actor C:

Miss Mattel
Kevin Lesser
Beth Tucker

Actor D:

Brother Benedetto
Marcella Antonelli
Sophia Perugia

Setting

The action of the play occurs largely in a garret (Act I) and in the gallery of a museum (Act II).

Production Note

The use of radio microphone headsets, as indicated in the play, is optional.

THE WOMAN WHO AMUSES HERSELF

by Victor Lodato

ACT I

Scene 1

(A spotlight up on VINCENZO PERUGIA, a thin man in his early to mid-thirties. He is on his knees, scrubbing a wooden floor with a brush. Beside him, a pail of water. He works feverishly. Small moans of effort. He works for a few beats, then looks up to address us. Italian accent. He speaks rather quickly; he continues scrubbing as he does so.)

VINCENZO. I spilled wine. I always do this. Red wine. I...I shouldn't drink. Look at this. A whole glass. *(Pause.)* Supposed to be good luck, right? Spilling wine. Who the hell made this up? Must have been a rich man. Had a glass to spare, this man. *(Pause.)* I shouldn't even drink. You know? Look at this. Ah! *(He stops scrubbing, exhales loudly.)* This is the thing. I have to have something to help me sleep. That's all. I get myself worked up. My hands shake. Sweating. Does that happen to you? I'm a young man. They shake. What is that? *(Pause.)* A person can think too much. Tick tick tick. This thing, that thing. Keep the room clean, keep things straight. And then the questions. Are you scared of something? Are you living your life? Are you pure? You have to ask yourself that sometimes. *(Pause.)* I have things in my heart. I don't know. I have...longings. *(Then, disgusted with himself, and somewhat embarrassed:)* Ah! Longings?! Go to sleep! *(Pause: he looks off into the darkness of the room, then looks back to us, whispers:)* She knows. That one. *(Gestures with his head toward the darkness.)* She knows what I'm thinking. But she...I don't know. She was so sweet at first. I couldn't do one thing wrong. Now, it's not the same. You always think a quiet person is so innocent. No. They see you, they see in the dark. Quiet person watches. Listens. A man says he loves this, he loves that. *Oh, I love you, I love you,* he says. And then he drinks a little, and he thinks maybe he's lying. Maybe he made everything up because he was lonely. Because he didn't want to be alone in his room. *(Pause.)* I'm a little drunk, so don't listen to me. *(Pause.)* But wait, wait—listen. I want to tell you a little story. I was thinking about this. The priest in Dumenza used to tell this story. When I was little. In Dumenza. In Italy. We're in Paris now, did you know that? In fucking Paris. But this story: in the church in Dumenza. And all the boys listening to the priest. Whispering about how there was once this monk. He was

young, a boy—like us. Chaste. And this monk was devoted to the Virgin. He kept a beautiful picture of her in his cell. The blue veil. The blood in her cheeks. Beautiful. And every day he would place a garland of roses around her image—and, whenever he did this, the Virgin seemed to incline her head toward him. Just a little. And his heart—well, imagine. Imagine that boy in his cell. So happy, so in love. *(Pause.)* But when the season of roses was over, he grew very sad: where now was he to find the flowers to adorn his beloved image? His abbot saw how distressed he was—terrible—how tortured the young monk was. And the abbot came to the monk's cell one day while the boy was crying, and he said to the boy: Every evening, whisper a prayer of twenty-five *Ave Marias* before the picture. And when the boy did this, he saw that at each *Ave*, the Virgin herself produced a red rose, until, on the twenty-fifth, she completed the garland. *(Pause.)* I loved that story so much. I remember sitting there. Hairy old priest. Telling this story to children. Little boys: eight, nine—our balls, small as figs. *Pray, pray to the Virgin.* And those roses out of nowhere. *(Pause.)* To have that story in your heart. Then to live a life. To become a man. To come to this. In a room. And she looks at you, she looks right at you—but she doesn't move. She *stares* at you. Makes a man nervous. *(Looks at his hands, which are shaking.)* Look at my hands. *(Holds out his hands to show us.)* It's to be expected, right? A little wine before bed. You spill some. Don't make something out of it. *(Pause; he scrubs with great intensity, and then—his eyes still fixed to the floor—he stops, shouts:)* What? What?! You think I can't feel you looking at me? I never said I was any better than this. Look at me, on my knees. And you smile. Don't look at me like that!

(Slowly, lights up to reveal a painting, which seems to float above and behind VINCENZO. It is Leonardo Da Vinci's untitled portrait of a woman on a balcony, known as "Mona Lisa" or "La Gioconda." The painting is unframed. Slowly, lights up on the rest of the room. We can now see it is a garret. Extremely slanted roof. The space is sparsely furnished: a long wooden table, two wooden chairs, a pallet on the floor, a trunk, a lantern, several candles. A small window set high in the back of the garret. An entrance door, stage left.)

(VINCENZO looks up. Without turning back to the painting, he speaks to it.)

VINCENZO. Everything in my head—all my thoughts—you make them seem so small. Bread. Wine. Money. What else? When I think I know something about love, you laugh at me. *(Pause.)* I don't know anything. Is that what you wanted to hear? I don't know anything. Small man. Very small. Nothing. *(Pause; he looks down.)* My god, look at my hands.

(Lights down on the room, then slowly down on the painting.)

Scene 2

(In darkness, a VOICE.)

VOICE. Please state your full name and the place of your birth.

(Lights up on VINCENZO, sitting on one of the wooden chairs. The rest of the room, and the painting, remain in darkness.)

VINCENZO. Vincenzo Perugia. I was born in Italy. In Dumenza.

VOICE. And what is your profession, Mr. Perugia?

VINCENZO. I am a house painter by trade.

VOICE. You have also worked as a glazier, have you not?

VINCENZO. Yes.

VOICE. And when was this?

VINCENZO. I started with the company in the winter of 1908. We worked at the Louvre from the autumn of 1910 through January of 1911.

VOICE. Would you please describe the nature of your company's work at the museum?

VINCENZO. Our job was to cover certain paintings from the collection with glass.

VOICE. And you were employed by the company at the time *La Gioconda* was put under glass—yes?

VINCENZO. Yes. In fact, I was the man assigned this particular job. Which I thought was a terrible thing to do.

VOICE. And why is that?

VINCENZO. It obscured her. The glass was like a mirror. A person could look at the painting and see more of themselves than Madonna Lisa. I could have shaved in it—my reflection was that good. In fact, after the glazing was completed—several days later—I watched a woman fuss with her hair in front of the painting. Looking into the glass like she was in her bedroom. *(Pause.)* This was a French woman.

VOICE. And was it during this work that you conceived of stealing the painting?

VINCENZO. *(Indignant:)* I think it's necessary to state that all the Italian paintings which are in the Louvre have been stolen. My plan was to return the painting to Italy.

VOICE. And when did you decide upon this plan, Mr. Perugia?

(Pause.)

VINCENZO. I would often look at her when I worked at the museum. It's a painting one can't really understand. It's difficult... the way in which it's painted is so sublime...it's difficult to...I wouldn't know how to discuss it. It's a very beautiful painting.

VOICE. Yes, that's not to be denied, Mr. Perugia. The question remains, though: When exactly did you decide upon this plan of yours—to return the painting to Italy?

VINCENZO. Well, yes, this is what I'm telling you. I would look at the painting. I would get upset that this great painting was on foreign soil. And when I did the glass work, I told her that I would come back. That I would take her home.

VOICE. To Italy?

VINCENZO. Well, that is where she's from. In the beginning. Leonardo. Da Vinci. Italian. Not French. Italian.

VOICE. Now, you left Italy at the age of thirteen, did you not? To live in France?

VINCENZO. I'm an Italian citizen. I left to find work. I have always sent money to my family in Dumenza, all these years. I was alone in Paris, without my family. I'm an Italian citizen. It was a very bad time in my country, when I left. My father made this decision for me.

VOICE. Let me ask you, sir: Upon returning, as you say, this painting to Italy, were you expecting some financial compensation?

VINCENZO. Well...I thought that there might be a reward of some sort. My sole motive was to return the Leonardo to where it belonged.

VOICE. If your sole motive, Mr. Perugia, was to return *La Gioconda* to Italy—then one is puzzled why it is that you remained in an attic in Paris for two and one half years before acting upon this patriotic motive of yours. Would you care to offer an explanation?

(Long pause. VINCENZO appears troubled by this question.)

VOICE. Mr. Perugia?

VINCENZO. It took time to arrange...to get things in order... I couldn't just pack up and leave.

VOICE. Understandably. But, two and one half years, Mr. Perugia?

VINCENZO. It doesn't seem it could have been that long. Yes, I understand it was. I...I took very good care of her. There was no damage. There was no damage to the painting.

VOICE. Were you trying to find a buyer, perhaps, during this lengthy period: a collector who might take the painting off your hands?

VINCENZO. No. No. Take her off my hands? No. I was...I looked at her every night. Every night. Two and a half years. It's a very beautiful painting. Have you seen it? Have you spent time with it? All these things. The shadow at the edge of her lips, you look at this and...you look at this, this shadow—

VOICE. Mr. Perugia—

VINCENZO. Listen to what I'm telling you. You would see something new every day. The stitching on her dress. The little bridge in the distance behind her. The folds in the left sleeve like it was part of the river outside the window. The folds in the right sleeve like it was part of the rocks. *(Pause.)* Two and a half years is not really a long time.

(VINCENZO bows his head, mumbles to himself.)

VOICE. Let us return to the issue at hand, Mr. Perugia.

VINCENZO. Other than this, I've lived a very common life.

VOICE. The question remains, sir—

VINCENZO. *(Looks up, speaks clearly and directly.)* There was no damage. To *her*, there was no damage.

(Lights down.)

Scene 3

(Lights up on the garret. VINCENZO and the painting are gone. The sound of a key in a lock. VINCENZO enters through the stage left door, wearing a long white workman's blouse. He holds onto the front of the blouse, under which he has something concealed. He locks the door and leans against it. He is breathing quickly.)

VINCENZO. Christ Almighty! Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god. *(He looks down toward what he is concealing.)* What have I done? *(Pause.)* I don't think I—I don't think I can breathe. *(Sudden laughter.)* Oh, my god. This is...I don't believe this. This is too easy. *(He walks into the room.)* How can I be in my room with this? *(Looks down again to his blouse.)* How can I have you? This is, this is ridiculous. *(He is pacing; he laughs again.)* This is not happening. *(He looks down at his blouse: a big burst of laughter.)* Look at this! *(He waddles across the room; he holds the item under his blouse, exaggerating its presence.)* They let me walk out like this? No. This is ridiculous. *(Waddles some more, looks to his right, then left—as if speaking to people.)* *Merci beaucoup. A bientôt.* *(Stops in the*

center of the room. I think I'm going to be sick. Oh, my god. I have to sit down. (He goes over to the table, pulls out a chair—then looks down at his blouse, speaks to what is concealed underneath it:) Are you alright?

(VINCENZO glances over at the door, then, slowly, carefully, removes the parcel from under his shirt: a rectangular panel, roughly 30 inches by 20 inches, wrapped in white cloth.)

VINCENZO. I'm just going to put you down on the table. *(He gently lays the parcel on the table, then sits down.)* That's better. Sitting down. Breathing. Very good. *(Pause. Deep breath. He touches the wrapped parcel.)* This is too much. *(He begins to unwrap the parcel, then stops.)* No. Just leave it. *(Suddenly, he stands, walks in a circle.)* Just leave it. *(Pause; then he addresses the parcel on the table:)* You know what I keep thinking? This is my mind. I keep thinking that when I take you out of that sheet, you won't be smiling anymore. *(Pause; he looks about the room.)* And the room, it's so filthy. I wouldn't want you to see that. I should have cleaned it. I'll clean it. I'll make it to where you would want to be. I'll make it to where you would be happy. *(Pause. Then, addressing the parcel:)* My name is Vincenzo Perugia. From Italy. From Dumenza. From Italy.

(Lights down.)

Scene 4

(Spot up on WALTER PATER, an influential Oxford don who penned a famous essay on "La Gioconda" in 1869—from which the text below is composed. He is seated on a chair. He wears a radio microphone headset, a silk robe. Next to him, on his left, is the painting, resting on an easel. On his right is a small table, on top of which sits a glass of water. When the actor speaks, it is with an English accent. The radio mike amplifies his voice, disembodies it. He speaks to the audience, though occasionally seems to be talking to himself. We can detect, in his voice, both fear and fascination—and, at times, a slow-rising disgust.)

WALTER PATER. *La Gioconda* is, in the truest sense, Leonardo's masterpiece... We all know the face and hands of the figure, set in its marble chair, in that circle of fantastic rocks, as in some faint light under the sea. *(He looks at the painting.)* Perhaps of all ancient pictures time has chilled it least... *(Away from painting:)* The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters is expressive of what men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all "the ends of the world are come," and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by

cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. (*Glances at painting.*) Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek Goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed! (*He coughs.*) All the thoughts... (*He coughs, clears his throat, touches his neck.*) Excuse me. (*He takes a sip of water, then replaces the glass.*) All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there. To look at her is to know the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the Middle Ages with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. (*Looks at painting, then away.*) She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; (*Touches his throat.*) and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; (*Coughs.*) and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

And what of the future? What she dreams of it, we cannot know. Yet we sense that what she dreams...will surely come to pass.

(He reaches for the glass of water. His hands are visibly shaking. As he drinks, the trembling increases.)

(Lights down.)

Scene 5

(Lights up on the garret. Evening. VINCENZO is seated at the long wooden table, slicing a pear with a small knife, eating the fruit as he goes. A bottle of wine; a glass, from which he drinks at intervals. Stage left, just to the side of the table, is the painting. It rests on the same easel from the last scene. VINCENZO eats slowly, thoughtfully; he does not look at the painting as he speaks to it.)

VINCENZO. You know what happened today? At lunch? Someone put pepper in my wine. I took a sip, spit it all over my white shirt. They think this is funny. Pepper in the Italian's wine. Then they have a big, fat French laugh. Ho, ho, ho, funny, funny. (*Pause.*) I don't understand this country. (*Pause; he eats.*) The fruit is good, though. (*Pause, as he continues eating.*) You know what I miss more than anything? My polenta. (*Laughs.*) Big bowl of polenta. Every day until I was thirteen I ate this. With butter and cheese. (*He looks at the painting.*) They don't eat this in Florence, do they? (*He lights a cigarette, begins to smoke.*) No polenta in Firenze. You prefer your pastaciutta. (*Pause.*)

I've never been, you know. To Florence. Never seen the Duomo. The Uffizi. This is where you belong, Signorina. *(Pause.)* We're going to go there. When the time is right. The Uffizi. They have many statues. White marble. And the paintings. I would like to see the Raphaels. All those amazing reds. Vermilion. Carmine. I know something about this. Painting houses, you know, I have a good sense when it comes to color. *(Pause; he drinks some wine.)* Firenze. When we go, we'll stop on the way in Milano. The church of Santa Maria delle Grazie. See *The Last Supper*. *(Pause.)* They say, these days, it's not much more than a few spots on the wall. Very faded. They say angels steal the color, to paint their pale faces. To delight Leonardo in heaven. *(Pause; he looks at the painting.)* And you. How is it that you come to us? After all these years. So perfect. All those cracks in the paint, in your face, and still you don't look old. Maybe—what?—a little darker, a little more yellow than in the beginning. *(He touches his own face. Pause.)* You really are...it's still hard to believe I'm here with you...beautiful, yes...but...you really are a strange girl.

(He continues to stare at the painting.)

(Lights down, to isolate VINCENZO. The painting is no longer visible.)

Scene 6

(In darkness, a VOICE.)

VOICE. Mr. Perugia. *(Pause.)* Sir, I am addressing you.

(VINCENZO remains seated on one of the wooden chairs, his head turned to the side, as if he is still staring at the painting in the garret.)

VOICE. Mr. Perugia.

VINCENZO. *(Slowly turning his head, confused:)* What is the question? I'm sorry. Could you please repeat the question?

VOICE. Why is it that you chose *La Gioconda*? There are a great many other Italian masterpieces in the collection of the Louvre. Why did you decide to take this particular painting?

VINCENZO. There is no other painting. Yes, of course, hundreds of others, thousands—wonderful paintings. I could have taken a Correggio or a Mantegna. Bellini's *Portrait of a Man*. But. She is the one. Even the old women who have never left their farms know her. The idea of her. All of Italy is comforted by her.

VOICE. Do you have a background in art history, Mr. Perugia? You are a house painter, are you not? You have no formal education in the fine arts, do you?

VINCENZO. No, I do not. But I know a thing or two about painting.

VOICE. House painting.

VINCENZO. I've read books. Some books. I spent time at the Louvre when I wasn't working. I studied the paintings. I would stay sometimes at the museum until late.

VOICE. During these visits, did you check to see how *La Gioconda* was hung—to determine how you might remove it most expeditiously?

VINCENZO. No, I did not. I already knew how it was hung from the time I executed the glazing. It was quite simple to remove, actually.

VOICE. I see. Would you tell us, please, how you accomplished this removal on the morning of the theft—the morning of August 21, 1911?

VINCENZO. I took the painting. I am not denying that. I just lifted it off the wall. The details are not important.

VOICE. For the record, Mr. Perugia, it is necessary to have the details. On August 21, 1911, you entered the Louvre in the early morning: is this correct?

VINCENZO. Yes. I woke at five, which is my hour. I drank a cup of coffee—this was cold. I ate three peaches. Before this, a little cheese. Then the peaches.

VOICE. Your breakfast is not relevant, sir. Please move ahead to your arrival at the Louvre.

VINCENZO. I entered the Louvre around seven o'clock in the morning. I was wearing my workman's blouse. I went straight to the Salon Carrée. This is where the picture was hung. The room was deserted. This, to me, seemed a sign that certain spirits were collaborating with me.

VOICE. Certain spirits? What do you mean by this?

VINCENZO. I have always felt, and this feeling grew as I worked at the Louvre—I have always felt that I was connected in my soul to the great artists, living and dead. Not that I have any greatness in me. An understanding between us—merely that. And, on this morning, I felt that I was attended by these spirits.

VOICE. Please continue.

VINCENZO. The salon was deserted, in that there was no bodily person other than myself. I saw her from the doorway. She saw me, it seemed. Again, that sense of collaboration. That she had been waiting for me. This sounds strange—I know it’s a painting—but there is a will there. A willfulness, even. I had the sense that I was now the agent of that will. What she wants. I walked over to the painting, took it from the wall—it was simply attached. I carried it into the stairwell where I removed the frame. I slipped the panel under my blouse, and left the same way I came in. This was all done in a few minutes.

VOICE. And then you carried this masterpiece of western art, under your shirt, through the streets of Paris, and up to your apartment in rue Hôpital Saint-Louis—yes?

VINCENZO. Yes. To my apartment. It was only the one room. Terrible. Badly painted.

VOICE. Where it has already been established that you resided for two and one half years with the painting in your possession.

VINCENZO. More truthfully, I was under the possession of the painting. That would be more accurate.

VOICE. Nevertheless, it remained in that room, until you transported it to Italy in December of 1913: is that correct?

VINCENZO. Yes.

VOICE. And during the years spent in that room, did you write any letters?

VINCENZO. Only to my family.

VOICE. And did you not write in one of these letters to your family that—and I quote: “I am moving forward. I feel I have come upon my fortune.”

VINCENZO. I recall something like that, yes.

VOICE. “I feel I have come upon my fortune.”

VINCENZO. Romantic words, sir.

VOICE. Do you deny that this is a direct reference to the money you hoped to obtain from the sale of the painting?

VINCENZO. Yes, I do. I do deny that. Fortune, sir. *Fortuna*. The wheel. What my life will come to. This is good or bad, a man’s fortune. I felt I had come to stand in the center of my life, and what was to be was set in motion. Yes, I admit that when I wrote this, I imagined things were coming. Going home. Some honor. Yes, maybe some money—but not only that. I was writing to my mother, my

father, from this filthy room in a country not my own—and I drink sometimes when I write letters, I make romantic words, I think of what is the best thing possible: what is the best idea a man can have.

VOICE. Do you drink often, Mr. Perugia?

VINCENZO. A man drinks wine after work.

VOICE. Every day?

VINCENZO. Of course. What man doesn't drink wine after work? Don't you need a drink when you go home? Don't you need a little bit of something? I'd be worried about the man who didn't. *(Pause.)* That's the man to worry about.

(Lights down.)

Scene 7

(Lights up on a screen, descending from the rafters. It stops at least six feet from the stage floor. A slide is projected: the painting in question—but upside down and out of focus. A VOICE is heard in the darkness. New Jersey accent.)

VOICE. Can everybody see that? In the back? Is the screen too low?

(Lights up on MISS MATTEL, third grade schoolteacher. She is sitting on top of the wooden table. She wears the radio microphone headset, and a colorful silk scarf. She speaks directly to the audience.)

MISS MATTEL. Can you see back there? *(She turns to look at the screen.)* Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy—you have the slide in upside down. *(Looks out into the audience.)* Take it out, put it in the other way. *(She turns to look back at the screen, which goes blank for a moment, then is filled with the projection, correctly positioned but still out of focus.)* Alright, now focus it—she looks like she's been through the wash. *(The image grows even more blurry.)* Jimmy. You're killing her. The other way. Turn the dial the other way. *(She looks back into the audience, annoyed.)* Watch what you're doing, Jimmy. Watch the screen while you turn the dial, so that you can see what your hand is doing. *(She looks back at the screen; the image slowly comes into focus.)* Right there, stop. Perfect. Let go of the dial. *(Back out to audience:)* Thank you, Jim. Now, go sit down—take your seat. *(Pause.)* Alright, everybody. This painting... Yes, Kate I'm sure you have seen it... *(A bit strained:)* Oh, how nice—last summer, really? ...No, I've never been to France, never been. *(Pause.)* Okay, everybody: this painting is a very famous work of art. Painted at the beginning of the sixteenth century by Leonardo da Vinci. Does anyone know what it's called? Not you, Kate...

Yes, Mark... That's right: The *Mona Lisa* ...No, she doesn't have two names; *Mona* is short in Italian for *Madonna*, my lady—so the title is something like calling her Lady Lisa—or Mrs. Lisa. Because she was a married woman—or so it is believed. Young wife to a rich man. Not a bad deal. Lisa de Giocondo. In Italy, they call the painting *La Gioconda*—which is very interesting because this means two things: It means that she is the wife of this Giocondo, but it also means, if one translates it, “the woman who amuses herself.” ...What is so funny, Mr. Hoster? Mr. Funnypants? (*She regards a student sternly, points a finger at him.*) None of that. I am warning you. (*Pause.*) Alright, now: This painting is so famous because, before this, no one had really ever given such incredible expression to the human face in art. With this portrait, you really can feel—look at it, kids—you really can feel that there are things going on in this woman's head. You can feel that there is a big life beyond this little moment. I know I do. This woman has hopes and dreams and secrets. You get a sense—don't you?—that this woman is not going to just let her life pass her by, mindlessly, in a rich man's house—but that she is going to embrace life to the fullest, even if sometimes it's a little sad. Because, I think there's a little sadness there, too. A little bit. Can't you picture her, at night, a hundred thoughts in her head, she can't sleep, she gets up, all by herself, takes a walk in the garden? I know I've done it. (*Pause.*) Look at the expression on her face. Those confident eyes. That little *perky* smile. They say that Leonardo worked on this painting for many, many years—and that when he had Mrs. Lisa sit for him, there would be musicians playing beautiful music—flutes and lyres—so that she would be able to maintain that wonderful expression. And sometimes someone would read a little poetry. Sing a little song ...Well, I don't know what the songs were back then. Something festive. The point is the music played, and she held that expression—and Leonardo recorded it. One of those *rare* instances of a man really understanding a woman. Because, I'm telling you, *that* does not happen very often. (*Pause.*) Now, I want you to look at what she's wearing: dark colors, a black veil. What a person wears when someone has died. And in the little that is known about this woman, we know that one of her children—a boy—died when he was very young. We come back to the sadness. Maybe this painting was begun while she was still in mourning—and maybe the musicians were an attempt to distract her from her grief. We don't really know. And that's kind of wonderful, though—to *not* know. To make up one's own story. (*Pause.*) And that is what I want each of you to do. (*She picks up a pile of papers from the table, and begins to hand them out to the audience.*) I have made a color copy of the painting for each of you. I want you to take them home tonight, and I want you to hang them up in your bedrooms. Over your desk, over your bed, wherever. And I want you to take a little time over the next few days to really give the

picture some thought. Every day, look at it for a little while—maybe right before you go to sleep. Don't talk to anyone else about it. Keep your ideas to yourself, write some things down. And by Monday ... No moaning. By Monday—that's plenty of time. By Monday, I want all of you to have written a little story about the painting: who this woman is, and what's going on. It can be anything you dream up. There's no right or wrong. Then, on Monday, we'll read them to each other. Alright? ...No, you're not going to get graded on it. How could I grade something like that? There's no right or wrong. It's just your story, your own little story. Alright? ...Good. This'll be fun. *(She looks at one of the color copies; pause, then almost wistfully.)* All our little stories.

(Lights down.)

Scene 8

(Lights up on VINCENZO, seated, in the garret. Evening. Several feet away from him is La Gioconda, resting on the easel. He speaks to the painting, though only looks at it occasionally.)

VINCENZO. Sometimes, sometimes I do. I try not to think about it. I used to think about it all the time. I used to go out in the evenings, looking for...to meet someone. After work, with the men. Drinking. We went once—a couple of times maybe—to see the girls. The cabarets. That was something. *(He looks at the painting, smiling, embarrassed.)* Terrible, I know. But, boy, that's something. *(Looks away from the painting.)* Dancing like that. I stopped going. I turn all red. *(Short pause.)* I have experience, I'm not a...it costs too much to get in, anyway. Besides, it only buys you to look. Then you go home and you have a headache and...other things. Trouble sleeping. *(He looks at the painting.)* Other things. *(Pause.)* I'm a young man. Blood's moving. These girls, though—they don't look you in the eye, they look in your pockets. That's fine, just don't pretend, don't lie about it. If I go out for it, that's one thing...if I go looking for it. But a girl comes up to you and sometimes you don't know: is this for real, or is this...is this something else, a little business. *(He begins to walk around the room as he speaks.)* I see them outside the Louvre, this kind of woman. This is one of their favorite spots. *(Looks at the painting.)* Did you know that? *(Away from the painting.)* I used to see some of the same girls every day. They know I work there, I know they work there—we say hello. You see one inside, sometimes—in the museum. Looking at the paintings. In between the men. *(Short pause; he looks at the painting.)* In the end, everyone comes to see you. *(Pause.)* I used to watch people—how they looked at you. Men, sometimes—they keep a little distance. A little nervous, maybe. I think not too many of the wives smile like

that. (*Short pause.*) And the ladies—the proper ladies—there’s always one with her hands on her hips, looking at you—like this (*Assumes the attitude and pose.*) Suspicious, you know? Trying to find something wrong with you. And then, the old men, sometimes—with their shaking heads—looking at you like they know you. As if you were a picture of someone they might keep next to their beds. (*Pause.*) And the shy girls—these are my favorite—the way they watch you: always their mouths open—like this (*Opens his mouth slightly.*) Ahhh. Like little Saint Teresas. (*Laughs.*) Beautiful. (*Pause.*) Even the whores get their moment with you. (*Short pause.*) I went with a few of these women. I don’t deny that. One time a girl came up to me outside a bar and grabbed my arm. *Je suis jolie, n’est-ce pas?* Lifting her dress to show me her legs. *Viens avec moi. J’ai une chambre en bas de la rue.* I was so drunk, you know, and it made me sick to listen to her, to that language. And I pushed her off of me and she fell and we were shouting and the police came. I had to spend eight days in prison. Eight days. For what? For nothing. Arguing with a whore. (*He looks at the painting; pause.*) Why are you looking at me like that? I tell you the truth when I say I don’t go with these women anymore. (*Short pause.*) You don’t believe me? (*Pause.*) I tell you: I am sorry for all the sins on my soul. Believe me, *Madonna: penitente...penitente.*

(*Lights down.*)

Scene 9

(*Lights up on BROTHER BENEDETTO of the Archconfraternity of San Giovanni Decolatto in Rome, fifteenth century. A young man, he wears a black robe, tied with a white cord. On his head, is the radio microphone headset. He speaks directly to the audience. His voice is soft, gentle—though the mike amplifies it.*)

BROTHER BENEDETTO. May I please speak with you? My name is Benedetto. A moment of your time. Please...forgive me for taking this up. (*Pause.*) I am here on behalf of the Archconfraternity of San Giovanni Decolatto in Rome. Perhaps you have heard of us? We are doing good work for men. Listen, dear people: We need your help. Yes, for money, I’m sorry to say. But, no, wait—please, listen. This is what I ask you. (*He pulls a piece of paper from inside his robe.*) This is what I ask you... (*He reads from the paper; attempting to sound grand, he is merely stiff and awkward.*) What of murderers, of thieves, of men who break the laws of heaven, the laws of the State? Shall they die without the chance for redemption? What comfort can one offer a man condemned to death in the dark moments prior to his execution? Words would seem futile. Our brotherhood, the Archconfrater-

nity of San Giovanni Decolatto, has been assembled to offer solace to such men. We are not priests. We are simple men who wish to help the afflicted. (*Pause; he speaks simply now, and does not refer to the paper.*) It is our belief that we can help these men with pictures. (*Pause.*) Let me tell you of the first execution at which I was present. This, I think, will tell you everything. It was in the year 1471. I was fifteen. It was the first time I held the *tavoletta*: this is the small painted image we use in our work. One of the Brothers holds this before the condemned man's face as he walks down the street to the place of his execution. The man on this, my first time, was a thief. He was to be hanged. And I walked with this man, down many streets, and I held the *tavoletta* before his face. On one side was painted an image of the Crucifixion, and on the other side there was a painted scene of the beheading of Saint John the Baptist. Very beautiful. The knife had a light, it seemed, inside of it. And the Saint, humble, on his knees. (*Pause.*) I walked backwards in front of the man, and from the sides of the street, people were shouting and spitting, happy for to send a sinner to his death. I turned the *tavoletta* in my hands—showing the man one side and then the other, back and forth between the two images, so that he might contemplate his crimes, and look to God for forgiveness—and for redemption. All the way down the street, I walked with the man to the place of his execution. I walked with him up the ladder, still with the images held near to his face. When he was pushed, I leaned down from the ladder, even now, as he was swinging from the rope, keeping the *tavoletta* before the face of this poor *afflito*. I held it for many more minutes—until I was sure the man had departed from this life. And I felt the image in my hands to be a fire—burning away his sins. Always, they make my hands burn—the pictures. (*Pause.*) I tell you, these images have great power. They give solace to the hearts of fallen men. The image declares and makes present that which is hidden: the invisible glory that is everywhere, waiting for all of us. (*Pause.*) To this end, then, I hold the *tavoletta* before the condemned—so that his mind might ascend to what otherwise he could not grasp. (*Pause.*) Please. Please do help us. Any offering you make will help ensure that our work continues. It will allow us to continue to employ the blessed painters who create our beautiful *tavolette*—who paint the images through which the grace of God bleeds. (*Pause.*) Thank you. All of you. Thank you. (*Pause.*) Brother Ridolfo will take your donations at the back. Thank you.

(*He smiles sweetly.*)

(*Lights down.*)

Scene 10

(Lights up—a small circle of light—on KEVIN LESSER, one of Miss Mattel’s third grade students. On his head, a baseball cap—and, over this, the radio microphone headset. He holds a single sheet of paper, from which he reads.)

KEVIN LESSER. I put the picture of the Mona Lisa up on the side of my desk, which I can see from my bed. I shined a flashlight on her in the dark. Which spooked out my sister because she thought it was a picture of Elvira, Mistress of the Dark. Who does the late night monster show on television. But what I decided is: The Mona Lisa has a toothache. Because her face looks like how you get when you have one. I said this to my mother, who said, “She’s smiling, you idiot. A person doesn’t smile when they’re in pain.” But this is what I think: She went to the dentist, they did some work in her mouth, and her cheek is still swollen from the shot they give you. And the smile maybe is because of the pill. When I had a tooth fixed a couple of months ago, afterwards it hurt, and the dentist gave my mother some pills that I could take—which made me feel really good. And I only took a half of one. So probably the Mona Lisa took a whole one. Which explains the look on her face. I have seen this face on my own mother. Because my tooth got better pretty quick, and I only ever took that one half of a pill. My mother kept the rest for herself and I have seen her take even two at a time. And then she goes around the house like a walking Mona Lisa. My mother stays home all day if she’s not shopping and is probably bored while my father is at work. Like Miss Mattel said how she was the young wife of a rich man. She meant Mrs. Lisa not my mother. But my mother is too. But she’s Irish, not Italian. *(Pause.)* And then I thought if the smile’s not from a pill, then it could be from a couple of gin and tonics. Which if they don’t get your mother crying, they get her a face like the face on the Mona Lisa.

(He looks up, smiles.)

(Lights down.)

Scene 11

(Lights up on VINCENZO in the garret. He is eating some bread and cheese at the table—cutting the cheese with a knife. The painting rests on the easel, many feet away. VINCENZO seems troubled. Sometimes, he turns his face away from the painting as if to avoid it. He grows more and more agitated, until finally he slams the knife down on the table, stands. Without looking at the

painting, he marches past it, goes over to his trunk, opens it. He pulls out some brushes, some rags, some clothing, until he finds what he's looking for: a red blanket. He carries this over to the easel, which he stands behind. He pauses, then covers the easel and painting with the cloth. He stands behind the draped easel for a moment, then returns to the table. He drinks some wine.)

(Lights down—or, perhaps: lights down on the painting and the room, isolating VINCENZO.)

Scene 12

(In darkness, a VOICE laughs, then speaks:)

VOICE. Are you comparing yourself to Leonardo, Mr. Perugia?

(Lights up on VINCENZO, seated. The rest of the room, and the painting, remain in darkness.)

VINCENZO. No. This is not what I'm saying. The painting began to disturb me. It would do this to any man if he had to see this... this face, every day. Leonardo kept this painting until he died—this is what I'm saying. He kept it with him always. Even though it must have mocked him constantly, he never sold it. Most men would have had to get away. But I lived for twenty-eight months with this *leonessa*. Most men would not be able to spend two days in such company.

VOICE. And why is that?

VINCENZO. Are you even listening to me? Do you hear what I'm saying? Let me say this again. To look at her, it is impossible to lie. To her. Or to yourself. Every secret you have: out! You love something: out. You hate something: out. You are afraid of something: out. Even the very dark things. *(Pause.)* Do you understand? To spend a few minutes with her at the museum, yes, well, you have your little moment—you confide in her, you leave—you go. But to be two years in her company! And to have to tell her everything. *(Pause.)* I would have lived with her longer had I been a stronger man.

VOICE. But, sir, have you not told us that you took the painting to sell it—or, as you say, present it—to Italy?

VINCENZO. Yes, yes, for Italy. We're going around and around with this. You're trying to make me say something. What? To say something different? I say the same thing, though. *(Short pause.)* I took the painting for Italy. I lived with it for a little while. This becomes a long while because when, again, would I have the chance to live with something like this. A common man. Live with such a...this paint-

ing...sometimes a painting, I think, is like a mirror—and in this mirror...there is an angel. This is how I came to think of her. *(Pause.)* I stare at this picture, this perfect face, and sometimes it seems maybe it is my own face. And that my heart, you know, maybe it's good... pure. But then you look, and the angel is laughing at you. *(Pause.)* A man lives a very small life. And she sees that. But how does a man make his life less shameful? I felt that I must take myself away from her influence. I thought maybe, you know, I'm going crazy. One night I wake up and I think to destroy her, I think to—

(Quick transition: Blackout, in which Vincenzo immediately lights a match.)

(We are in the garret. Evening. VINCENZO is standing across the room from the draped painting on the easel. He stares at it, distraught. He lights a candle on the table, and carries it over to the easel. He whips off the red cloth.)

VINCENZO. A good old piece of wood will burn right up. Crack. Crack. Crack! I can do this, you know. Destroy you. Crack! I'll do it, I swear. I'll do it. *(He is right before the painting now; he holds the fire close to the face; he regards it for a moment, his hands shaking, then breaks into a sob.)* But look at you in this light. Dear god, look at you!

(He remains regarding the painting by candlelight.)

(The garret door flies open: a great gust of wind blows into the room, extinguishing the candle. Blackout.)

End of Act I

ACT II

Scene 1

(Lights up. We are no longer in the garret. The stage is practically bare: a great, white room. No furniture. Upstage, seeming to float high in the air, is the painting; now elaborately framed, it leans at an angle down toward the stage. On the stage floor, several feet downstage from the painting, is a red velvet rope held between two poles. Upstage, right and left, are exquisite flower arrangements. A pristine symmetry prevails. VINCENZO is standing extreme downstage right, looking sadly out of place in a rumpled suit. He faces away from the painting.)

VINCENZO. I wrote a letter to Giovanni Perducci, head of the Uffizi Gallery. I told him I had the painting in my possession—and that I wanted it to hang again in Italy. We met in December. In Florence. I rented a room at the Hotel Tripoli-Italia. He came to meet me here. I remember very well. Filthy room—I'm embarrassed. He comes in the morning. We shake hands. I lock the door. I take my trunk from under the bed. I know he's thinking: This man doesn't have the painting—because I'm pulling out, you know, my brushes, house painting brushes, my overalls, some rags. But I had her at the bottom. I had built a false bottom, and she was under this, wrapped in the red cloth. *(Pause.)* I carry her over to him; he's standing by the window. He's looking at me, a little bit afraid, I think. This is my feeling, too, because I think maybe this is the last time I have the painting in my arms. This is the end of the story. The lovers have to part. *(Pause.)* And I want to go back—but...I give her to him. He takes the cloth away. Makes a little sound. I know this sound: catching the breath. *(Pause.)* He compares the painting to a photograph he's brought; he looks at some numbers on the back of the panel. No doubt in his mind: he knows this is the work of Leonardo. I think, maybe, the man is going to cry. So this, you know, makes me think we are like brothers. *Paisani.* An understanding between us. He was an old man. A lover of art. I could see this in the way he held her. *(Pause.)* I gave him my full name: Vincenzo Perugia. From Dumenza. An Italian citizen. *(Pause.)* He took the painting from me. I let him leave with it—with only a promise that I would receive a reward for this. Maybe I'm a stupid man—but I didn't care anymore. I had done what I set out to do. *(Pause.)* After he leaves with her, I think to lie down on the bed... because, something in my legs, in my... I feel like I can't stand up. Just then, the police come in the room. I give myself to them, because—why not? I'm falling, and these men, they hold me. I say nothing. I go. *(Short pause.)* They put me in prison faster than a man can say: welcome home. *(Pause.)* And the painting: She stayed in Italy for only ten

days before being escorted back to Paris. The French authorities—so nice of them—gave Italy “permission” to exhibit the painting before returning it. When she went on view for the first time, she caused a riot outside the Uffizi—so many people. They pushed the police aside to get in the museum. To see her. To see what was once theirs. The museum made the people pay. This, I find, disgusting. But even the poor paid for this privilege. Taking the few lire they had hidden behind their kitchen saints. No donation for the church this week. Instead, they went to pay their respects at the Uffizi.

(Lights down.)

Scene 2

(Lights up: a spot on LARRY WORTHINGTON BUCKLES, an English journalist. Before him is a radio microphone on a stand: He speaks into this. In his hands are some papers, to which he refers as he gives his report. The text is drawn from an actual 1913 newspaper article. LARRY WORTHINGTON BUCKLES speaks with a showman’s hyper-enthusiasm.)

LARRY WORTHINGTON BUCKLES. Yes, everywhere it’s *La Gioconda*. Florence seems the apotheosis of beauty. No word is spoken but *La Gioconda*. Nothing is sought but *La Gioconda*. Nothing else takes place but talk of how long her Italian journey will last, and the pleasure of seeing her again. Yesterday, 30,000 people went to the Uffizi—more visitors in a single day than it normally has in a month. *La Gioconda* will remain here until Thursday, before going to Rome. It is said that she is enjoying herself and smiling all the more. Those who saw her found her in good health and in beauty. The rest has been good for her. She is composed. She had a rather pallid tint. But the cheeks were full, the look serene. “I’m here, do not fear,” she seems to say. “I shall not leave so soon. Paris—yes, Paris: Things are well in Paris, I cannot deny that. But Florence! I have always had a weakness for Florence.” And what a city, dear listeners. Florence is always the city of art, in spite of the futurists. The poor futurists! They must in desperation be pulling their hair out—if they have any: a wretched painting of 400 years ago! *(Pause.)* The procession continues. One must stop for an hour, stamp his feet, puff, elbow his way in order to enter the sanctuary. But, for her, the Italian people have patience. *(Pause; then in hushed tones.)* And, at last, the waiting is over. We are inside, inside and in front.

(Lights slowly up, softly, on the painting.)

Behold, the image we know, which is familiar, which joins the company of cherished apparitions, of beloved faces. It is she, in all her beauty. Even those who heretofore were saying: Yes, but after all she is nothing but a fat lady, rather pretty, who smiles—even those who reduced her to her real and linear proportions were overcome, won over and conquered by her. Ah, the emotion that wells up when the Italians have her here in their hands—an emotion of almost religious zeal. *(Pause.)* We thought of Leonardo and if he were present in spirit at this triumph of his and his creation. Through the large windows of the Uffizi you can see the Arno River and the Ponte Vecchio, the fifteenth century. Perhaps *La Gioconda* would smile even more if she saw once more the city that was hers, and where she was born first to life, then to immortality. They have for a little while placed her in prison in that room. *(Pause.)* When the gallery closes, when twilight falls, we hope that, with two guards for safety, she will be placed at the window, so that she can watch dusk descend upon the Arno. *(Pause.)* This is Larry Worthington Buckles. In Florence.

(Lights down on actor. Lights remain on painting.)

Scene 3

(Lights up on MARCELLA ANTONELLI, an old Italian woman. She wears the radio microphone headset, and a winter coat. She is standing behind the red velvet rope—upstage from it, facing the audience. Though the painting is behind her, she sees it before her. She prayerfully crosses herself, then speaks to the painting in hushed, confidential tones—though the mike, of course, amplifies her voice.)

MARCELLA ANTONELLI. You. It is you. *Madonna.* You come home. *(Pause.)* So beautiful! *(She touches her chest.)* Be calm, I have to be calm. I'm an old woman. You, too, huh? Look at you. Never do I think I see you, *Madonna.* *(To someone beside her:)* Hey, hey, stop pushing, stop pushing! I'm an old woman. Let me breathe a minute. *(Back to the painting:)* These people! Out of their minds. For you. *(Pause.)* Look at you. *(Pause.)* You know, I know what you did. What you did to that boy. You put the eye on him. Make him to bring you here. Bewitch him. You devil. You want to come home—no? *(Laughs.)* You do this, I know. I was a devil, too. Years ago. Yes. I was very beautiful. All the men, they wanted me. All the boys loved Marcella Antonelli. Long time ago. I was like you. I knew how to look at them. Oh, and my clothes! I had such clothes. Such lovely dresses. And hats with the feathers of birds. *(Pause.)* We have all these years missed you. Beautiful lady. We miss you. *(Reacts to someone at her side:)* Ah! They're pushing me. I can't stay with you. *(Pause.)* I will remember

your face all the time. *(Pause.)* I think of my mother. How she would have loved to see you. *(Pause.)* Bless us, beautiful lady. They say we will have to go to the war, our boys made to go do this. Smile to keep the death away. All the boys come home. *Madonna.* Smile for this.

(She makes the sign of the cross.)

(Lights down on the actor. Beat. Lights down on the painting.)

Scene 4

(Lights up on VINCENZO.)

VINCENZO. I received a sentence of one year and fifteen days. This by an Italian court. The government understood nothing. But, I think, maybe, the people understood. Gifts were sent to my cell. Every morning, someone sent me milk and coffee—and, at noon, a little lunch, a few cigarettes. One evening, a box of figs was brought to my cell. There was a note which...I keep this note... *(He pulls it from his pocket.)* A lady wrote this to me: "Dear Mr. Perugia. When she was here, my mother and I came up from Volterra to see her. My mother is very old, but she insisted we come. We have spent many nights talking about the lady since that visit. We do not know art, but we were changed in our hearts. Thank you, dear sir, and please enjoy the figs." *(Pause.)* I keep this. *(He puts the note back in his pocket.)* People wrote to me, sent me things, the whole time I was in prison. This tells you something—no? *(Pause.)* And all the things that were left in my room, at the hotel, when I was arrested: my old house painting brushes, my hat, my tools—people wanted to buy these things. And the police sold them. Even my rags, covered with paint. My unpaid bills—people even wanted these—to have something with my name on it. *(Pause.)* No money was paid to me. That's fine. I only wonder where they keep these things. You know? Maybe they put them out where people can see them. Show them to the children: This is from the man who brought home *La Gioconda.* *(Pause.)* From Italy, from the government, I never received any money. There was no appreciation. Nothing. When I got out of prison, all I had was the shirt on my back. A little money I saved from what people had sent me. When I was first out, I didn't feel ready to go back to my parents, to Dumenza. I wanted to stay a little longer in Florence. I walked by the hotel where they had arrested me. They had painted a picture of Madonna Lisa on the wall above the entrance. This was very badly done. The smile was...it was too much on one side. Like she has a toothache. *(Pause.)* I walked around the streets for a few hours. No-body knew who I was. I...I thought to go to the Uffizi, then I think:

I can't bear this, to see the pictures. The Raphaels. I can't bear this. To see the angels. (*Pause.*) I took the train to Dumenza. And why I wasn't happy to be going home, I don't know. This is what I wanted—no? (*Pause.*) On the train, I kept having...I kept crying. The lady sitting across from me—no sympathy—she got up and moved to another seat. I hadn't taken a bath for a few days. My hair, I needed to have it cut. Maybe I looked like...maybe she thinks there's a man not to be trusted. A man like that might do anything. Right? Bottle of wine in his coat pocket. Get away from that man. (*Pause.*) A drunkard, no doubt. A shame to the State.

(Lights down.)

Scene 5

(Lights up. Stage right, there is a portable bulletin board on coasters. Blank. MARCEL DUCHAMP enters from stage left, and crosses to the board. He wears the radio microphone headset and a black turtleneck sweater. He carries a rolled-up poster, some tacks, and a thick black pencil. With the tacks, he puts up the poster: a reproduction of "La Gioconda." At the bottom of the poster is a thick white border, which will afford MR. DUCHAMP room to add some writing. For now he prints only a capital L, followed by a period. He stands to the side of the image, and turns to the audience. French accent.)

MARCEL DUCHAMP. L. This is where I begin. L. Elle. She. This woman. A woman. The woman. Nightmare to artists. Nightmare to me, Marcel Duchamp. The dreaded dream, here in reality. Perfection. Why try anything else? Why pick up one's brush? Look at her. The *morbidezza*: the exquisite softness of the flesh. The mystery of it, the light dying into the dark, the *sfumato*. The man could paint, couldn't he? And as easy as if he were drying the varnish on his fingernails. *(He waves his hands, blows on his fingertips.) Sprezzatura, children, sprezzatura.* Make it look easy, light—never show the gears. Look at her. She is the dream we've had since we were children. The sweet dreadful dream that keeps us asleep. So innocent, she seems. But what a stir she's caused. All her life. And, now, such a ruckus since she's been returned to Paris. Back in our hands! Back in our hearts! (*Pause.*) You know, I can't help myself, I must be one with her, I must give myself to her.

(He turns to the poster, blocking it from our view. He works with the pencil. When he turns back to face us, we see that he has drawn a little beard and a moustache.)

Oh, I feel so much better. And look at her, she's enjoyed it, her moment with me. Her little smirk is quite appealing; I find myself more and more attracted to her. There's just something about her—no?

(He writes next to the L, an H, followed by a period, then an O, followed by a period. He considers what he has written.)

Ashe. Oh. *(Pause.)* Elle. Ashe. Oh. *(Turns back to audience.)* Allow me my scribbling: they are the cryptic beginning of something I am, as yet, afraid to admit. Don't say I desecrate her. Really, I act only out of necessity. Our survival depends on a bit of opposition. And really, she wouldn't want us to be such pious farts. Kneeling down before her like midgets. I love her as much as the next man, but please! She's up for a little play, wouldn't you say? Look at her. She's asking to be chased around the room. The tease! I know she's got something profound under that dress. It's a fertile bottom, I guarantee. She wants to get with us, beget with us—she's not sterile. God forbid! That would be the end of it. The end of the line. If we couldn't mate with her, she'd be the world's last painting. The critics would say art ended with her. So there's no choice but to tumble with her. Men, put your hairy face up to hers and rub it in. Become one with her. *(He makes kissing sounds.)* Give her a piece of your mind. She'll welcome it. How lonely she's grown on the shelf. Take her down. Give her a spin. Give her a pinch. She's no prude, I can tell you that.

Oooh, there's just something about her—but *what is it?*

(He continues writing, adding to L.H.O., another O, followed by a period, and then a Q, followed by a period: so the caption now reads: L.H.O.O.Q.)

Yes, that's it. That's it! El. Ashe. Oh. Oh. Coo. That's it: say it again. *(Perhaps, he gets the audience to say it with him.)* El. Ashe. Oh. Oh. Coo. Yes! Now, we're talking. Dear sweet French. The language of love. *(Triumphantly:)* *Elle a chaud au cul*. It's what I've been trying to say. The truth about my beloved. *Elle a chaud au cul*: She's got a hot ass. *(Short pause.)* It's as simple as that. Dear children, as simple as that. Yow! *(Pause.)* Please, children, don't be offended. Don't be alarmed. She's safe in her tomb at the Louvre. I only prick the idea of her. I only prick that.

(He shakes the black pencil between his legs.)

(Lights down.)

Scene 6

(Lights up on SOPHIA PERUGIA, VINCENZO's mother. She wears the radio microphone headset and a kitchen apron. She

speaks to the audience. Note: perhaps the actor playing Marcel Duchamp might pass the headset to Sophia as he exits and she enters.)

SOPHIA PERUGIA. It's like we don't know him. You expect a boy to come home, and in walks a man. And how he looks, this man. His eyes. The way he stares at things. This I don't like. *(Pause.)* When he first came home, he slept for a whole week. I went into his bedroom, I say, Vincenzo, get up, do something, this is no good. *(Pause.)* I should have let him sleep. I should have kept my mouth shut. Because he gets up, and in his mind he gets the idea to wreck my house. To fix it up is what he calls it. Nothing wrong with the house. But he says, no, no, to make it beautiful for you, Mama. Ah! What can I say? *(Pause.)* Now, I have green walls in my kitchen. A green like...I don't know what. Like someone hit you in the head. *(Pause.)* His bedroom, nothing, he keeps it white. But my room, he paints blue. It's a beautiful blue. But it scares me. Like you're in the middle of the sky. You walk in there, you think you've gone to heaven. You wait for the trumpets. The angels are going to come for me, I sleep in the middle of this, I tell him. But he says, no, no, it's the right color. I told my husband about the angels, and he said, don't worry about the angels—God will send us to hell for a blue like this. But he doesn't say anything to Vincenzo, my husband. I say, talk to him, Luchino, talk to the boy. Because, soon, maybe he goes to the war. But no, nothing. When Vincenzo gets talking all his ideas, my husband gets up, pats him on the back, then goes to his room. So then it's me and Vincenzo, alone in the kitchen, and half the time I don't know what he's talking about. I listen to him, but...I don't know. He was always a smart boy. But, this now is like trouble in the head. Thinking always about that picture. Thinking: why? Why nobody gave him a medal. I want to say a medal for what, Vincenzo—you stole the picture. But I don't say anything. *(Pause.)* He sits next to me on the bench when I make the polenta. He can talk for an hour. Crazy talk. This thinking in his head is not happy. I don't know what to do. *(Pause.)* I invited Camille to the house. He went to school with her—when they were children. She was so excited to see him. I thought to make something sweet for them. I made *zabaglione*. But... no good. Not the *zabaglione*—that was delicious. But him. He talks about nothing but the paintings he saw in Paris. He asks the girl questions about this artist, that artist. She doesn't know about these things. He makes her feel stupid. No, he doesn't mean to do this, but...and he talks like this is important, like people care about these things. I told him later: people don't care about pictures. This is not what a girl wants to hear. *(Pause.)* I'm not telling him what to do, what to say to people. Only...I think, if he is made to...if he has to go in the army, to fight—if he is made to do this—I think, better for him

to have a girl waiting at home. I was hoping with Camille...maybe. I think to have a girl waiting helps to bring the man home. Otherwise, God says: Alright, take that one, he's got no one to come home to. In the wars, the mothers don't count. All the boys have mothers. *(Pause.)* I don't think Camille will come back to the house, though. *(Pause.)* Maybe he gets to live through it anyway. Maybe the war will knock all the crazy ideas out of his head. *(Pause.)* I pray in the blue bedroom—in this room, I think, somebody hears me. I pray to make him well. *(Pause; she shakes her head.)* It will be better when everyone forgets about that awful picture.

(Lights down.)

Scene 7

(Lights up on BETH TUCKER, another of Miss Mattel's third grade students. She wears the radio microphone headset. She reads from a piece of paper. She is rather shy. She wears eyeglasses.)

BETH TUCKER. "Who is the Woman in the Window?" By Beth Tucker. *(Pause.)* I used my beach towel to look at. I have a big beach towel with Mona Lisa's face on it. I hung it from my closet door. It's much bigger than the picture Miss Mattel gave us, and I could see it better at night without my glasses. The light from the supermarket across the street shines in my window and I could see her face if I woke up from a noise. Or just how you wake up in the middle of the night sometimes. Then I could look at her. But I didn't think of anything about her. I couldn't even make up the beginning of a story. I had seen her face a million times on my towel, but I couldn't come up with anything. It's like when you can't talk sometimes, and you feel sick in your stomach. Because you're supposed to say something and nothing comes out. *(Short pause.)* But then I had two dreams. Which is what I am putting as my story. I don't think this is cheating because these dreams came from my head. *(Short pause.)* There was the first dream which is this: A woman is dying in her bed. Her skin is all yellow like in the picture. She tries to say something but the words come out all in a cough. I put my ear up to her lips, and she says: "How do I look?" "Not too good," I tell her. When I say this, she starts laughing. I ask her what's so funny, and she says, "This is the end of the day." She says how tired she is and she closes her eyes. I shake her, but instead of waking her up, I wake up. *(Short pause.)* That was the first dream. The second dream is the one where I see the Mona Lisa sitting by the window with her hands crossed, just like she is in the painting. Except she is alive. And I am watching her, and she unfolds her arms and lifts them up, and then there are

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NOT OVER!**

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