

UPENDING

A PSYCHOLOGICAL COMEDY

By Esoderek Sonderfan

SCENE 1
January 23

Blackout. The words January 23 are projected against the back wall, and disappear. When the lights come up, the stage is divided width-wise. On the SR side is a small circular table set up, and in front of it stand LUNT, SIMMONS, BECKINBROUGH, CARLSTAFF, HEADMASTER, and SUPERINTENDANT are standing on the apron of the stage, staring out. SL is another table, longer, and seated as it are the test SUBJECTS M, L, G, X, H, and R. Still in blackout, the following speeches are said. After the first several sentences of each speech, the speaker continues speaking, quietly, while the next one starts, full volume. By the time everyone has started this montage, they are speaking quite loudly and over each other. It is ultimately cut off by R.

SUPERINTENDANT

Darwinian philosophy is based on the simple and often misused statement, “Survival of the fittest.” As was discussed at length in his book, “On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life”, any member of a species will survive by a simple process of natural selection, which is the ability to adapt to one’s current environment. Though there are certain skeptics to this theory that say the individual organisms within this species will thrive or become extinct on a basis more or less dependent on random chance, and not on the innate ability to adapt and, as Darwin suggested, evolve in a malleable suit to ones environment. He suggests that all species of organism ultimately can be traced back to the same initial organism, thus supporting the belief that in order to create the phenomenal amount of species, adaptation and a certain “specialization” process had to be undertaken.

LUNT

I find I disagree with the theory of the father of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud who stated that dreams are amalgamations of linear storylines and latent meanings, and that the latent content of a dream symbolized repressed thoughts. I do, however, concede that Freud was correct in assuming that the manifest content of a dream is easily manipulable by external stimuli. Carl Jung, I believe, was more accurate when he said the latent content represented someone’s inmost wishes and desires. Thus, if you were to manipulate the manifest content with external stimuli, the psychoanalytical determination of the latent meaning would change. I conclude you can mold a person’s ultimate dreams by such a process.

CARLSTAFF

So, yeah, I think the Kasparov vs. Deep Blue chess match showed everyone the value of artificial intelligence, right? But it's had its problems. Artificial intelligence makes computers think and act more like human beings, okay? Ultimate perfection in the AI field would lead to computers being able to reason like humans, learn like humans, and even correct its own errors, unlike humans. But like I said, there's problems, right? See, computers with complete Artificial Intelligence may ultimately learn the bad side of humanity, such as the benefits of warfare. As much Artificial Intelligence as we pump into a machine, right, it's gonna take a hell of a lot of programming to instill moral reasoning into a computer.

BECKINBROUGH

The five senses are routed directly to the brain by a complex series of neurons, axons, and other biological jargon. While each sense is independent in function, they are not *limited* to that function. By a simple process of rerouting one's neural pathways, it could be theoretically possible to alter the means by which one sense is achieved. Why limit sight to the tiny ocular surface space when you could experience sight with everything you lay skin on? Why not use your tongue to hear? I mean, besides the incessant gross sound you'd have to endure every time you swallowed...

SIMMONS

Uhh, The Chameleon Effect is one of those long-ridiculed, umm, scientific principles that, uh...that involves the complete reallocation of, of certain emotions, or rather of all emotions. Simply, it is like Pavlovian conditioning, but entirely, you know, emotional. It involves the gradual discovery of a neutral emotional state with which to, uh, take on, um, everything; and extracting emotions from that storage space, if you will, when needed. This, in theory, results in absolute, uhh, emotional control over oneself.

HEADMASTER

Pavlov showed, with his experiments with dogs, that organisms are subject to unwitting reactions to external stimuli if repeated properly. Certainly, in the minds of many scientists and power-mongers, this is an effective possibility for a rudimentary form of brainwash. In daily life, we are conditioned to hear our alarm clocks, frown at the mere smell of disliked food, reflexively retract from an object we perceive to be extremely hot, even if it is cool...

R

Hey! Can you pass the beans?

Lights come up to the table SL where the subjects sit, finishing their meal. The lights are still out SR, and HEADMASTER and SUPERINTENDANT exit SR. The STUDENTS all sit around the SR table and begin pantomiming their meal, which is happening concurrently with the SUBJECTS' meal. All of the SUBJECTS except M are close together, eating. M is slightly away from them, eating quietly.

SCENE 2

L
Is that what these are?

H
They sure as hell taste like ass.

R
I'm game. Food's food, you know?

G
[handing R the bowl] Here you go.

R
Thanks. Anyone know what type of beans these are?

L
I'm still not sure they're in the bean family.

H
They're small and ass-tastin'. That's all I know.

X
I don't know. I enjoyed them.

H
Zat so?

M
They weren't that bad.

H
If you like ass.

L
I just hope this isn't what we get served every day. Hardly worth the pay, in my opinion.

A momentary hush falls over the six. Some are eating, some are just toying with their food, and others are looking around. X breaks the silence merrily.

X
Well, I suppose some introductions should be underway, if we're all going to be eating together for the next year.

G

I'm not sure we're supposed to tell each other our names.

H

Why the hell not?

G

Did you read the pamphlet?

M

She's right. Not allowed to say our names. They'll call you by a letter, the first letter of your name. I'm M.

R

I don't need a pamphlet. Bring on the freaky experiments!

M

Patience. You'll get them.

X

I'm Xavier. There, you all know it. But call me X, apparently.

H

H here.

L

I'm L. Though I'm not positive because I don't go by my first name. It might be C. Call me L for now.

X

[to G] You are?

G

I'm G. It's nice to meet you all.

H

Yo G! Ha ha. That's funny.

R

And I'm R. Thrill-seeker and adventurer.

X

Do you have a business card?

R

I like that. Business card. Not a bad idea.

G

So does anybody know what we're supposed to do? These pamphlets aren't that informative and our orientation was sort of vague.

H

Alls I know is I'm suckin' down some more ass niblets.

R

Hear hear!

M

We all have our first assessment today with the Headmaster. The students will choose their projects, and then tonight we'll be assigned to one of them. Those who get chosen start getting paid for every day after today. The rest are released.

L

The sooner the better.

X

How do you know all this, M is it?

M

Yes, M. I just know. I remember.

X

You've been here before?

M

I don't know. Probably.

H

What the hell's that mean?

M

I know I'll be here next year, I know that. I understand the routine fairly well.

H

Hell with him. He's just as confused as us.

R

I just want it to be tomorrow already. See who I'm working under!

L

Yeah, me too. I need the cash.

G

I hope I get something that will...I don't know...

X

M, how do you know this stuff? Did I miss something? I thought I read all the material closely.

M

Talk to Skip. He's the janitor here. Everyone says he knows everything you'll need to know about The Academy. What to expect, old folklore. He's an amazing man.

R

Ah, forget that. Send me in blind.

H

A little excited, aren't we?

X

How do you know Skip, M? Have you talked to him?

M

I know I'm going to. That's what really matters.

X

All right. If you say so.

A mellow musical note is heard over a PA system. There is the voice of the HEADMASTER, but it shouldn't be easily heard over everyone talking, and everyone gradually dwindles down to hear the announcement.

H

What the hell's with the twenty questions, X? Let the man eat in peace.

X

I don't mean any disrespect. I'm just really anxious and curious.

R

I hear that.

HEADMASTER *[over PA]*

...your project ideas. Once again, this is the Headmaster. All Academy students are required to meet for the First Assessment in five minutes in my office. Be prepared to fully discuss your project ideas. Thank you.

Lights fade down on the SL table and come up on the SR table, while all action continues on stage, only silently with the SUBEJECTS.

SIMMONS

Finally. Couldn't take much more of uh, of this dinner.

CARLSTAFF

So anyway, I figured it would be better to come to The Academy than freakin' getting some BS in computer science or something, you know? Not really gonna learn anything with some Johnny Butterlump as my teacher.

LUNT

That's a fairly skewed view of higher education.

CARLSTAFF

Nah. You're reading it wrong. It's a really highly esteemed view of mad science.

LUNT

Do you really consider The Academy a mad science school?

SIMMONS

That's not what I signed up for!

CARLSTAFF

Hey, mad science is much easier on the tongue than experimental development and theoretical playground, or whatever they hype this place to be. *[Without even changing tone, to BECKINBROUGH]* What's your name?

BECKINBROUGH

[a concession] Beckinbrough, and yours?

CARLSTAFF

Carlstaff. You're cute.

BECKINBROUGH

Nice to meet you too.

LUNT

I see we have a real professional here.

SIMMONS

I'm Simmons.

CARLSTAFF

What's that?

SIMMONS

I thought, umm, we were doing introductions. I'm Simmons.

BECKINBROUGH

Nice to meet you, Simmons.

LUNT

Do you all have topics for your projects?

BECKINBROUGH

You are?

LUNT

Lunt. What do you think you will be working on?

CARLSTAFF

Beckinbrough naked.

BECKINBROUGH

Don't think for a second I'm going to reciprocate that sentiment.

CARLSTAFF

Oooh, now that's sexy talk.

SIMMONS

Lay off her. She doesn't need to take that, you know.

CARLSTAFF

I'm only joking.

SIMMONS

Well, uh, Lunt, I have a couple of ideas simmering.

LUNT

Care to share?

SIMMONS

Wouldn't want you to steal my ideas. *[he chuckles, but it is a bit of a serious fear]*

BECKINBROUGH

Don't worry. Most of us are professionals here.

CARLSTAFF

Wait...I'm now pretending I didn't understand that jab at my professionalism.

BECKINBROUGH

Should I spell it out for you?

LUNT

I see how this is going to be.

A loud but mellow BONG sound is heard and an announcement over the loudspeaker is heard. Again, they pay little heed to it at first.

CARLSTAFF

Yes, and I must say I'm looking forward to it immensely.

SIMMONS

Shouldn't we be listening to the announcement?

HEADMASTER *[over PA]*

...head over to my office now. All subjects can return to their rooms for the night and spend their time how they wish within the guidelines of The Academy pamphlet.

L

[from the dark] I think I lost my pamphlet.

H

They better allow smoking.

HEADMASTER *[over PA]*

Once again, students, please finish your meals promptly and head over to my office now. Thank you.

All the STUDENTS pick up their trays and exit the scene during the PA announcement. The stage blacks out. The SUBJECTS also get up and exit in the dark. When lights come back up, it is HEADMASTER'S office and she is standing behind her desk, with STUDENTS in chairs in front of it. As a note, HEADMASTER never speaks with any sort of emotional inflection unless noted.

SCENE 3

HEADMASTER

All right. I'm going to need your project idea, the thesis you will set out to prove or disprove, the number of test subjects you'd need, and what types of subjects would accommodate your individual style of testing. Hopefully from there we'll be able to match you to a subject. First is Lunt.

CARLSTAFF

Lucky duck.

LUNT

I had the idea for my project to dabble in Freud and Jung's philosophies of dream analysis with an emphasis on external stimuli. Using Jung's theory of the latent meaning of dreams to indicate the person's deepest wishes, I plan on molding the subject's manifest and latent dream content with external stimuli thereby altering his true desires and wishes. I will be, in essence, proving Jung's theory of dream analysis over Freud's view.

HEADMASTER

So we're basically altering the driving force behind a person's existence?

LUNT

In essence, but I don't plan on abusing the privilege.

HEADMASTER

No no. Not at all. It sounds remarkably interesting. How many test subjects?

LUNT

One should suffice. I will need someone who is totally frank and able to speak his or her mind. If they become deceptive to me, it will make my efforts fruitless.

HEADMASTER

Understood. *[flips through folders of papers]* You'll be given H. He'll tell everything just like it is, even if you don't want to hear it. Next. Carlstaff.

CARLSTAFF

So, yeah, I'm doing AI. But instead of instilling artificial intelligence in computers, I'm going to instill it in human beings. So that the humans act more like humans. And least of all, they could win a lousy game of chess.

HEADMASTER

And this would be to prove...the...what exactly would this prove?

CARLSTAFF

Do you want the whole hoo-hah? Basically, in the same way we try to invent computers to supersede our own intelligence, wouldn't it make sense to, you know, make ourselves smarter and stuff?

BECKINBROUGH

Very eloquently stated.

CARLSTAFF

You want me, don't you?

HEADMASTER

Personality amplifier? Analytical computer...Whatever, I'll give it a try. I always like to sanction one project that is a bit outrageous. How many subjects?

CARLSTAFF

Two, please. Girls if you got 'em. No, just need two, preferably two very average joes. No sense in making the eccentric more intense or working on the incredibly bland. Nobody wants that amplified.

HEADMASTER

[after flipping through his papers] L and G. Both female. G describes herself as "shy but exciting". That work? And L wrote pretty expressively that she's here specifically for the money.

CARLSTAFF

Ah, there's nothing more 'average joe' than that.

HEADMASTER

Accepted. Beckinbrough?

BECKINBROUGH

Sensory alteration in the form of neural conversion. I thought—

HEADMASTER

Say no more. It's accepted. I've wanted someone to work on this for years.

BECKINBROUGH

What?

HEADMASTER

I've accepted your topic.

CARLSTAFF

That's it?

HEADMASTER

How many subjects?

BECKINBROUGH

I only want one. This has the possibility to be fairly traumatic, and I don't want to risk the health of many subjects.

HEADMASTER

Understood. What type?

BECKINBROUGH

Only someone that is willing and ready. Gender is unimportant.

HEADMASTER

[looks through files] You will have X as your subject. Next, Simmons.

SIMMONS

I was, uh, thinking of grafting living organisms with the attributes of, say, inanimate objects.

HEADMASTER

Example?

SIMMONS

Well, umm, maybe take a hamster, uh, or something, and install a clock in him. Watch him, you know, bong every hour.

HEADMASTER

Rejected.

SIMMONS

What? I mean...that was a joke...I'd do more than just that, you know.

HEADMASTER

Rejected. What else do you have in mind?

SIMMONS

Well, I sort of anticipated, uh, having that, uh, sort of work.

HEADMASTER

No. What are your other ideas?

SIMMONS

Quite frankly ma'am, I don't have.....show some compassion...

CARLSTAFF

Someone didn't do his homework.

HEADMASTER

You've paid a lot of money to enroll in the Academy, Simmons. *[thinks]* I have a project for you. It's called The Merlyn Condition. Every year, someone works on this project. It's about memory reversal. Your subject will be M.

SIMMONS

Will I, uh, get briefed on it?

HEADMASTER

Ask M. He'll know what to do. Students, thank you and good luck. You may meet your test subjects tonight in their rooms. Your first of four assessments will be in six weeks, followed by subsequent assessments every sixth week. The superintendent will be at the second and fourth assessments. He will ultimately be the judge of your projects. But for now, good night. And good luck.

HEADMASTER takes her portfolio and leaves. The four stand there in confusion for a moment.

BECKINBROUGH

You know, for someone who doesn't know the Headmaster well yet, Carlstaff, you are sure testing the ropes.

SIMMONS

With how stern she seems, I'm surprised you didn't get, you know, drilled for it.

CARLSTAFF

Come on. I know her limits already. I'm gonna check out the guineas.

CARLSTAFF runs out and the lights fade. When the lights come up, there are six sections of stage. Each one will contain a STUDENT and his or her SUBJECT. The HEADMASTER and R are in the sixth section. When one section is active, it is lit up. All others are dark. Lights up on X's room.

SCENE 4

BECKINBROUGH

Hello, X. It's nice to meet you. I'll be working with you over the next term.

X

Great. What do I get to do?

BECKINBROUGH

You're ready for anything?

X

Yes. I'm incredibly excited.

BECKINBROUGH

You're going to be experiencing your senses in ways you never thought possible.

Lights down on X's room and up on L's room.

CARLSTAFF

Yo, guinea. I won't call you that. Hey, I'm Carlstaff. I'll be your tormentor for the rest of this term! That sounds so much more dramatic, doesn't it?

L

I'm L. Nice to meet you. Are you the person to talk to about the reimbursement?

CARLSTAFF

Nope. I'm the guy to talk to about tampering with your head. Want to play a game of chess?

Lights down on L's room, up on R's room.

R

Hello! Am I your test subject? Great! What stuff do you have planned for me?

HEADMASTER

I'm sorry, R. You aren't needed this year. We have all the subjects we need.

R

Ooh, is this already part of my testing? Great. Okay, I'm mad that I'm not needed!

HEADMASTER

I appreciate your enthusiasm, but we don't have the funds for additional subjects when they're not needed.

R

Are you serious? All right, I won't do it for money then. Please, let me do it.

HEADMASTER

I'm sorry. Reapply next year.

HEADMASTER exits. Light down on R's room and up on M's room.

SIMMONS

What is the Merlyn condition?

M

Memory reversal.

SIMMONS

What do you mean?

M

I remember things that haven't happened yet and forget them the instant they happen.

SIMMONS

But that's impossible.

M

Apparently not.

Lights down on M's room and up on H's room. R, M, and LUNT are there.

LUNT

Good evening, H.

R

I'm sorry to intrude. *[to LUNT]* You're the student, right?

LUNT

I am.

R

How would you like another test subject absolutely free of charge?

Lights down on H's room and up on M's room.

SIMMONS

And you've been here every year?

M

I don't know for how long. But I know I'm here after this.

SIMMONS

Why don't you leave?

M

It's irrelevant why. I just know I don't.

SIMMONS

Who started this experiment?

M

I have no idea. There are stories galore about the subject, but I don't remember. This is really Skip's department.

SIMMONS

Skip?

M

The janitor here at The Academy.

Lights down on M's room and up on H's room.

R

Great. Thanks a ton. *[he exits]*

LUNT

I am sorry about that H, but I can not refuse free help.

H

Damn straight. The price is right.

LUNT

I hear you are an honest man.

H

I'll be damned if I don't tell it like it is.

LUNT

That is exactly what I need. Because from now on, you are telling me about every single dream you have.

H

Sure. What the hell?

Lights down on H's room and up on G's room.

CARLSTAFF

Hello, my dear test subject.

G

Umm, hello there.

CARLSTAFF

I hear you're a little timid. Well, when we amplify that, you'll be callin' me Daddy in no time. I'm sure of it.

R *[entering]*

Excuse me. Sorry for the interruption. Would anyone here be interested in an extra test subject? I'll do anything, no questions asked.

CARLSTAFF

Oh, really? That's the kind of talk I like to hear.

R

Great. That's great. I'll see you later. I'm R! *[he exits]*

CARLSTAFF

Free guinea. Sweet.

G

What do you mean 'when we amplify that'?

CARLSTAFF

Well, to blatantly rip off a White Zombie lyric, I'm going to make you 'more human than human'.

Lights down on G's room, and up on X's room, where R is leaving.

R

Great, thanks a lot, Beckinbrough. I won't let you down. *[he exits]*

X

So I'm going to be tasting things through my eyes? That's so cool!

BECKINBROUGH

Essentially. It'll be a bit more complex than that, of course.

Lights down on X's room and up on H's room.

LUNT

Are you shy at all about talking about your personal life, because we're probably going to delve into that a bit.

H

Hell no. My life's wide open. And issin your hands.

LUNT

Great.

Lights down on H's room and up on M's room.

SIMMONS

If you don't remember Skip from the past—

M

Look, it's simple. Stories fly around The Academy fast enough that you'll know all the folklore within a month or two. All the students who get me always get flustered. At least, that's what I will read about, so I sort of have to assume it's happened before.

SIMMONS

But why couldn't I do my own topic? It's like the Headmaster is only interested in topics that deal with mind control. That's not what The Academy is about.

M

Seriously, ask Skip.

SIMMONS

Something's going on here.

R *[entering]*

Hey all. Are you the student?

SIMMONS

Yes. I'm Simmons.

R

Would you like another subject? Free of charge. I want the full experience.

SIMMONS

Well, at the moment I don't know how, um, memory reversal works, but hey, if I can find a use for you, I'll, you know, I'll let you know.

R

Thanks a million. *[he exits]*

SIMMONS

Good night.

Lights come up on all the sections.

BECKINBROUGH

Good night.

CARLSTAFF

Good night.

LUNT

And sweet dreams.

Blackout

SCENE 5
February 6

The mess hall again. Like the opening, there are two tables set up. The SUBJECTS—except R—are at the long table which is in black. The STUDENTS are at the round table talking when the lights come up.

SIMMONS

Is anyone but me finding it difficult to just adapt to the crazy rules they got here?

LUNT

Maybe it is just you.

CARLSTAFF

Every place has its quirks, Simmy.

SIMMONS

Don't call me Simmy.

CARLSTAFF

But Beckinbrough lets me call her Becky.

BECKINBROUGH

No I don't. That just doesn't stop you.

CARLSTAFF

Six of one, half dozen of the other.

LUNT

So, Beckinbrough, have you finished the first crossover?

BECKINBROUGH

Yes. X has had his vision and hearing switched since Thursday. He's had a noticeably difficult time adjusting. If each experiment takes this long for the brain to adapt, I may not get all the combinations I would have liked.

LUNT

Fascinating.

CARLSTAFF

Oh cram it, Lunt. You just want Becky to ask you how your experiments are going.

SIMMONS

How *is* H doing? Any progress?

LUNT

I am still deliberating what to do with his desires. He says as of now his only true goal in life is to “kick a bull in the balls and laugh”. That is pretty hard to work with. So I am looking for something a bit more ambitious to steer him towards.

CARLSTAFF

How about you, Simmy?

SIMMONS

I’ve been poring through annals and I can’t find a thing about the Merlyn condition. I’m going to talk to the Headmaster about a change. This is so aggravating.

BECKINBROUGH

Oh, by the way, what was decided about R?

CARLSTAFF

I’m using her, I just won’t tell the Headmaster about her until the final assessment.

LUNT

I agree with that.

SIMMONS

I don’t think I can use her at all.

BECKINBROUGH

Do us a favor; don’t mention her to the Headmaster, all right?

SIMMONS

Sure. I don’t think she’d notice anyway. The Headmaster is a statue.

Lights come down on the STUDENTS and up on the SUBJECTS.

H

You know what sucks?

M

Let me guess, the food.

H

No. This is pretty good ass roast. I’m talking about—

G

I’ve missed you guys.

H

Exactly. Why do they only let us eat together once every two weeks?

M

It's to avoid outside influence. The less we see each other, the less inclined we are to affect each other and our results. It makes sense. This is a delicate place.

L

Maybe we can make a request to eat together more. I mean, we're all lumped into this together.

H

Fight the power!

G

You've been quiet, X.

X has been looking down at his food and makes no movement at his name.

H

Hey, X, wake the hell up.

X looks up abruptly when H taps him on the arm. As a note, he turns his head sideways to see whomever he is talking to, and turns front to hear them.

X

Sorry, guys. I couldn't hear you. I was looking at my food.

L

That's right. You got the thing where they mess up your senses.

X

Yes. It's not that bad, though I'm not used to seeing out of my ears.

G

I can imagine.

H

That sensory mixing shit is what Lunt must have. She talks out of her ass.

G

What's it like, Xavier?

X

It's kinda cool. My vision is so enhanced because the ears are so much bigger and let me tell you, it's really freaky to be able to see in front and behind at the same time. But I can't hear *anything* unless I'm looking directly at it. You don't realize

how small your eyes are until you have to listen with them. Peripheral hearing is downright difficult to get used to.

L

So I gather you don't like Lunt, H?

H

She's all right. I'm just sick of hearing about her freakin' PhD's and BMVs and stuff.

X

How are your experiments going, guys?

R enters very stealthily and does a very cautious approach to the table.

G

I don't like it.

X

R! I thought you got the boot. That's what I heard through the grapevine, anyway.

R

But I'm here. Huh. Didn't work, did it?

G

Apparently not. It's good to see you, R.

H

How the hell have you been, R?

L

Wait, who are you testing for?

R

Whoever wants me.

L

What do you mean?

R

All them are using me later on, when they get their things going. Until then I'm on my own.

X

You're allowed to stay here?

R

Not really, but as long as I stay out of the Headmaster's way, I'm okay.

X
What was that?

H
Have some ass roast.

G
What do you do during the day then?

R
I found a great place here. It's like a library, with all the old experiments all stored up and stuff.

L
How the hell'd you get in there?

G
Wouldn't something like that be restricted?

R
Skip let me in. He's a good guy. Anyways, I found all sorts of stuff down there. Logs of old experiments, some of the old chemicals and equipment. And since none of the students are taking me now, I've started doing experiments on myself.

X
Like what?

R
I found this stuff called deevolutionary serum. Don't know what it is, but I've been taking some each day.

G
Why would you do that?

R
I want to return to my monkey state. Speaking of which, is my head any smaller?

X
Let me look.

R
Or is my jaw sticking out more?

X
It doesn't look like it.

R

Oh well. I've only been taking it a week. We'll see.

X

I want to see that library sometime. When do you go?

R

I go late at night. When Skip's done with his work. [*R clumsily knocks over a glass of milk and it spills all over the floor*] Oh, shoot. Damn opposable thumbs.

A loud clanging sound is heard over the PA system, and everyone sort of looks around confused.

L

What was that?

H

Damned if I know.

X

Are you going there tonight, R?

R

Yeah. Need to take my serum.

X

Can I come with you?

R

You'll have to sneak out of your room after lights out.

X

Come meet me at my room about an hour after lights out.

R

Got it.

Lights down on that table and up on the STUDENT table.

SIMMONS

Have any of you talked with Skip, the janitor yet?

LUNT

Briefly. He was delegated to clean the research room, but it was during my shift, so he just left peaceably.

SIMMONS

Because there's some shady stuff, you know, going on and M keeps saying Skip knows everything.

CARLSTAFF

They say the meek shall inherit.

SIMMONS

Meek or not, he knows more about The Academy than I do.

SKIP enters, carrying a mop and a towel.

LUNT

Speak of the devil, there he is.

SIMMONS

Where?

BECKINBROUGH

Over there. That's him, right Lunt?

LUNT

Yes.

BECKINBROUGH

Maybe that's what that god-awful sound was that screeched out of the PA system.

CARLSTAFF

Got 'em trained like a dog, don't they?

LUNT

That is what is known as manual labor, Carlstaff. You may not be familiar with it.

CARLSTAFF

Becky, correct me if I'm wrong, but that was an insult, wasn't it?

BECKINBROUGH

I'm staying out of this.

SIMMONS

Don't look at me.

CARLSTAFF

I'll give you that one, Lunt. Nice one.

The PA kicks in again, this time with the BONG sound heard in the first scene. Everyone quiets much quicker this time. The HEADMASTER is heard.

HEADMASTER

Five minutes remaining for lunch. At this time, the research area is open for Lunt. All other students and test subjects may use this time for leisure. Thank you.

Lights down on the one table, and up to the SUBJECT table.

X

Tonight at twelve, right?

R

Right.

Blackout. Everyone exits and the scene is changed to that of a research area. There is a table in the center of the stage, plus various chairs. A desk-like storage area is US, and this is where many chemicals and the like are stored. Lights come up to LUNT seated and H lying on the table, asleep. LUNT is waving lemons over H's nose. Next to LUNT is a few lemons, a lacy bra, a tree branch, and a bottle of water. He puts the lemons down and examines H's eyes, seeing if he is still in REM sleep. He then proceeds to lightly sprinkle water on H's head. After a moment, H darts up from the table.

SCENE 6

LUNT

Good morning, H.

H

Jesus Christ, that was scary.

LUNT

Was it another dream?

H

Yeah.

LUNT

Great. Tell me everything you can remember, while it is still fresh.

H

Jesus, okay. So I'm sitting in my room. It's not my room or anything, but it's one of those things where you just *know* it's your room when it really isn't. You know what I'm talking about? But there's all these freaking trees around, and they're brushing up against my arms, cuttin' 'em all up and shit. So I'm looking for something to wrap my arms up in so I don't bleed all over the place, and suddenly these freaking mermaids show up. Totally buck-ass naked. Huge breasts. I mean, freakin' could be used as archery targets big. So, don't ask me why, I start wrapping these mermaids around my arms to stop the bleeding. And you know they're just not that flexible, so they start screaming. And as they're screaming, instead of noise coming out of their mouths, lemons come shooting out and start pelting me in the head and all over. So I start cursing out these mermaids, and they turn into these freaky Gorgon-looking hydras. I'll actually be damned if I know what a hydra looks

like in real life, but I knew in my dream these were hydras. And they dragged me down by my hair into the water. And that's when I woke up.

LUNT

Very interesting. Anything else you can remember?

H

Nope, that's when I woke up.

LUNT

Interesting.

H

You know, all the times I tell you my dreams and we never talk about what they mean. Isn't that part of this? I keep having all these damn strange dreams and all I do is tell you about 'em and you nod and say "very interesting" and jot some notes and that's it.

LUNT

Well, now that you mention it, I was actually going to begin setting up appointments with my brother, a psychoanalyst. He will begin to interpret and we can begin the second phase of our experimentation.

H

When do these start?

The PA system blares out with the BONG sound again, with the HEADMASTER'S voice.

HEADMASTER

The research area will be closing for today in five minutes. Please clear out. Thank you.

LUNT

We will begin with him tomorrow. A little later than the normal Monday schedule. He will not be available before eleven, so you can sleep in a little longer tomorrow.

H

Am I done for today?

LUNT

Yes, have a nice evening.

H

See you tomorrow.

H exits. The lights blackout. They come back up to the library. There is a central desk in the room and a few bookshelves on the side. The room is very dark, lit by blues primarily. There is a pile of large books on the table and X is reading them through his ear. R is looking on the shelves.

SCENE 7

X

This is incredible.

R

What do you got there?

X

It's a total historical compilation of every project ever done at The Academy.

R

How long has it been running?

X

Twenty years next year. Come here, get a load of this. Fifth year open there were nine students. Guess the general interest is dwindling. Check out some of these topics. There's something called the Chameleon Effect. Student named Sampson. Here's his thesis: "It is possible to allot an anatomical storage bin, so to speak, for all human emotion to fill, thus rendering a patient at a 'permanent neutral state' emotionally. This is achieved partially by conditioning, partially by willpower. Finally, it is possible through rigorous repeated emotional exercises for the subject to willingly harbor whichever emotion he chooses from his storage bank. Thus, he would have absolute control over his emotional state, allowing him to adapt to any situation perfectly." Bet he failed. *[scans down the page]* Yup. Says right here he failed. Ha ha. Oh, check it out. The Merlyn Condition, some student named Van Goen. Man, M has been here since the sixth year the Academy was open. Blah blah blah. Cloning, hoody-hoo. You know, I bet if we look through these books, we can find out more about your deevolution serum stuff. See what the student was trying to prove.

R

Let me know if you find anything. *[R goes back to looking on the shelves]*

X

What are you looking for?

R

Just new experiments. I want something else besides drinking serum.

X

Did you take your dosage today?

R

Ooh, no, thank you.

R goes over to the desk and takes out a huge clear vial filled with liquid. She wipes the bottle clean with her shirt and drinks some. Meanwhile, X goes back to the book.

X

Hey, someone named Crank did a whole thing about Pavlovian conditioning. Says here she was dismissed because, in addition to her subject, she was secretly using other students as subjects. That's crazy.

R

She failed for using other students?

X

No, it doesn't say she failed, just dismissed.

R

Hey. *[having trouble with the big words]* What's electro-shock-therapy?

X

What?

R

Electro-shock-therapy?

X

I think they use that to treat nerve disorders.

R grabs two wires and holds them in her hands. Nothing happens. She walks over to a plug and plugs it into a socket. X sees this.

Hey, R, what are you doing? Let's just unplug that, okay?

A flashlight shines into the room. Shocked, R and X stand totally silent. After a moment, the flashlight leaves, and the two of them sigh.

We'd better leave.

R

Just Skip, I bet.

X

Either way, that might be enough research for tonight.

R

Okay, X. If you say so.

X

How about we come back next week? Same time?

R

Sound good me to.

X

All right.

X puts the books back where they were and shuts off the light. Blackout.

SCENE 8

February 20

The mess hall once again. The lights are up on the entire room but nobody is in it except SIMMONS and M. Curiously, SIMMONS drops a cup and it shatters. There is a slight pause and the obnoxious clanging noise is heard over the PA.

SIMMONS

I'll meet Skip one way or another.

M

Yes. He is a nice guy, from what I will remember.

SIMMONS

I don't care if he's nice. I have a few questions I need answers to.

M

Yes, I know. You've already said them in my memory.

SIMMONS

Right.

SKIP enters. He is wearing a plain janitors outfit and he is wearing a beat-up old baseball cap. He is unshaven and fairly unkempt. SIMMONS stops him as he goes to clean up the mess.

SIMMONS

You're Skip, right? The janitor?

SKIP

Yup.

SIMMONS

Word has it that you know an awful lot about The Academy, right?

SKIP

Yup.

SIMMONS

Are you on duty, or could you answer a few of my questions?

SKIP

I'm on duty.

M

He's going to answer them anyway.

SIMMONS

Are you sure?

M

I haven't ever been wrong.

SIMMONS

Okay, first off, what is the Merlyn Condition and why did I get stuck with it? No offense intended, M.

SKIP

Go to the library. All the Academy records are kept there.

SIMMONS

That has stuff about the Merlyn Condition?

SKIP

Yup.

SIMMONS

Good. How can I get in the library?

SKIP

I have keys.

SIMMONS

And you can let me in? Great. Second, what happens after you graduate The Academy?

SKIP

You might not.

SIMMONS

Well, yes I understand that, but what happens either way?

SKIP stops cleaning for a moment and stands up to address SIMMONS.

SKIP

The Academy was built with the premise of being a mad science school. It was only when the management shifted hands that it became a serious scientific school with all the mystery that currently surrounds it. Since then, graduates generally go on to

become successful in many areas of science, but few actually acknowledge that they graduated from The Academy.

SIMMONS

Why? With so much prestige—

SKIP

School policy.

M

You didn't read your pamphlet well, did you?

SKIP

Those that don't graduate go on to greater anonymity than those that do. Certain ambitious students change their names and earn some regiment of success, but not many.

M

Like, I'm assuming, the guy who created me.

SIMMONS

You said before that the management of this school changed hands? Do you mean that the Headmaster wasn't always the Headmaster?

SKIP

That's right.

SIMMONS

And the Superintendent?

SKIP

Not the original.

SIMMONS

When did all this happen?

SKIP

Five years after The Academy opened.

The clanging sound is heard again, and SKIP immediately resumes cleaning the broken cup.

They were students here the year before the transition. They were discharged and then a few months later returned to run the place.

SIMMONS

Why?

SKIP

Nobody knows.

M

Just so you know, everyone is about to come in for dinner.

SIMMONS

Another thing. Why would—

SKIP has finished cleaning the glass and immediately stands up and exits.

Hey! Hold on a minute...

A long bell is heard over the PA.

I want to get into that library. How do you think I can get Skip's key?

M

At dinner, the subjects talk about going tonight after lights out. Maybe you want to go with them?

SIMMONS

The subjects are allowed in there?

M

No. But don't worry, they tell me in two weeks that you went with them.

SIMMONS

I guess so.

All the STUDENTS and SUBJECTS come with their meals. SIMMONS sits with the STUDENTS and M joins the SUBJECTS. The lights go down on the SUBJECT table and stay up on the STUDENT table.

CARLSTAFF

[pulling chair out for BECKINBROUGH to sit] There you go, baby.

BECKINBROUGH

Thank you.

LUNT

I will not ever get used to this.

CARLSTAFF

Me winning? Don't worry, it's surprisingly easy to get used to.

LUNT

Don't they forbid inter-student relations at the Academy?

CARLSTAFF

Who cares? Not me, not Becky.

BECKINBROUGH

Funny, I don't recall giving you permission to call me Becky.

LUNT

What made you cave in, Beckinbrough, settling down with this?

CARLSTAFF

Ooh, ow, ah. My pride. It hurts.

BECKINBROUGH

Don't get me wrong, he's still crass, rude, and obnoxious.

CARLSTAFF

Shouldn't there be a but here?

BECKINBROUGH

But he's my crass, rude, and obnoxious boy.

CARLSTAFF

Thank you, Becky. *[To LUNT]* Nyah.

SIMMONS

Hey guys. I just had a talk with Skip. There's some weird goings-on. Turns out Headmaster used to be a student here. Same with the Superintendent.

CARLSTAFF

Yeah, so?

SIMMONS

They were just spontaneously promoted one day. Doesn't that strike anyone else as a little odd?

BECKINBROUGH

Yeah, that is strange.

SIMMONS

And have you guys heard about the library?

BECKINBROUGH

Yes, Simmons. It's typically a place people do research. Everyone's quiet—

CARLSTAFF

Point for Becky.

SIMMONS

No, there's a library here at the Academy; a sort of, you know, catalogue of all the old projects.

BECKINBROUGH

Really? Where is it?

SIMMONS

I don't know, I'm going to go check it out with some of the subjects apparently.

Lights down on that table and up on the other table. All but R are there. As a note, X has to touch things to see them, and he can feel everything simply by looking at it.

X

There is so much stuff there. R and I have gone a couple of times now.

H

That sounds wild. Mind if I tag along some time?

X

Sure. We're planning to go again tomorrow night.

G

How is R doing?

X

Between you and me, I'm worried about her. The past couple of days, she's been really, I don't know how to put it, dumb. She's been taking that deevolution serum, and it's been working, I suppose. I'm worried what'll happen if she keeps it up.

G

I'm sorry to hear that.

H

Hi L. How the hell have you been?

L sits in a trance, not really responding to the question.

Hey, L. Wake up.

G

She's processing, H. Give her a second.

H

Processing? What?

G

She's more advanced in the artificial intelligence than I am. For a while, Carlstaff says, I'll be acting as the control subject, whatever that is. So he's been programming L more than me.

H

What's the hell's that mean?

G

She's currently sifting through a database of answers based on a number of factors; the previous week's events, current environment, future plans, her mood, etc. So she's computing.

Everyone stares at L, except X who touches her to see.

X

How long will it take?

L

I'm fine, thank you. How are you, H?

M

Oh god. I suddenly don't feel quite so bad about my condition.

X

You're going to have to go through that too, G?

G

Not if I can help it. I hate it here. I want to leave as soon as I can.

L

I don't blame you, G.

H

That was a quick response.

L

Not many options to consider.

G

I'm going to talk to Carlstaff soon. I can't take this anymore.

L

King's rook to Queen's knight four.

There is a bit of a pause, not really knowing how to take this.

G

It's part of the experimentation. Carlstaff and L play chess. That move just took a while, I guess.

Suddenly, X pulls away from L.

Oh God!	X
What's up, X?	M
I have to close my eyes.	X
What happened?	M
My sense of touch and my sense of sight are switched, and I just...looked at...yeah. <i>[indicating to the fact that L is wearing a low-cut blouse]</i> I'm sorry L. I didn't mean to...you know...	X
Are they nice?	H
Stop it, H.	X
Just a joke.	H
And now she's probably computing how that makes her feel. It's awful. How can they subject people to this?	G
I want what X has, that's for damn sure.	H
It's all right, X. I'm not offended.	L
I'm sorry. I'm just going to eat my food. <i>[he smells it]</i> It tastes good for a change.	X
You haven't had any yet.	M
	X

Smell and taste are also exchanged.

H

Damn.

Lights go down on them and up on the STUDENTS.

BECKINBROUGH

Are you going to do some research on the Merlyn Condition while you're there?

SIMMONS

Hopefully.

BECKINBROUGH

You'll have to tell us how it was next time.

SIMMONS

Oh, definitely.

BECKINBROUGH

Hey Simmons, do me a favor. If you bump into R, tell her I'd like to start using her as soon as possible. I need more exchanges.

SIMMONS

Okay, Beckinbrough.

CARLSTAFF

Hey, and see if anyone's done anything with computers before.

SIMMONS

If I remember.

LUNT

Who has the research room after dinner today?

CARLSTAFF

'Tis I, Lunt. And what devilish plans I have in store, too.

LUNT

Professional courtesy is a totally unfamiliar term to you, isn't it Carlstaff?

SIMMONS

I have to go talk to the subjects.

CARLSTAFF

I do too, Simmy. I'll go with you.

SIMMONS and CARLSTAFF get up and walk over to the other table, and the lights follow accordingly.

SIMMONS

Who's going to the library and when are you going?

H

Me, X, and R are going tomorrow night. Why?

SIMMONS

Is it all right if I come along?

X

It's fine by me. Anyone have any objections?

H

Nope.

X

Fine. Meet us by my room—

M

Can I come?

H

What the hell for? You already know all about this place.

M

I want to know more about me.

SIMMONS

Yes, I think M should come.

X

Then it's set. Everyone who's going, meet at my room two hours after lights out. Just to be safe.

CARLSTAFF

[to L and G] Hello, my guineas. Would it be all right that we start our research today a little early? *[L begins processing and G just doesn't want to answer]*
Processing processing processing processing processing...

L

That would be fine.

CARLSTAFF

Great. See ya in a bit.

Blackout. Lights come back up the library the following day. The door opens by SKIP, followed in by X, R, H, M, and finally SIMMONS. They all wander around, R doing so in a much more lumbering manner. SKIP stays for a few minutes, not having anything to attend to.

SCENE 9

SIMMONS

Where are the history annals kept, X?

X

They're over here. They have four volumes of them. I think they're organized chronologically. The first five years of the Academy are in this book, the next five are in here, and so on.

SIMMONS

[taking Vol. 1] Was the Merlyn condition in Volume 1, do you remember?

X

I'm not sure. I've been reading through them all, and they all begin to blend together after a while.

M

How far'd you get, X?

X

I'm just starting Volume 4.

SIMMONS

M, wanna read over my shoulder? This might interest you as much as me.

M and SIMMONS look through Vol. 1 while X reads Vol. 4. H, R, and SKIP are talking by the door, with H devoting equal attention to the surroundings. As a note, X reads everything simply by touching it. In other words, his senses are still altered in the same way as the last scene.

H

This place is pretty damn big.

SKIP

Nineteen years of record-keeping and many of the projects still intact.

R

The stuff is good, too.

H

Why do you let us in here, Skip? Can't you get in trouble for it?

SKIP

No. The Headmaster has never officially put the library off limits. I have a key more for security purposes, make sure nothing gets stolen.

R

[touching a book against the bookshelf] Book.

H

Very nice, R. Skip, outta curiosity, how'd you know that the Headmaster and the Superintendent went to school here?

SKIP

I was a subject here once, fourteen years ago. You'll find that everyone who works for the Academy was once—

A crashing sound is heard over the PA, and SKIP stops his sentence and leaves the room immediately.

H

Hey, Skip! Skip!

R

Yeah! Skip!

H

Hell with it. I'm doing some research too.

R

I'm gonna take the devulsionary syrup. Ha.

H

X, can I read one of those books? I want to see something.

X

Sure thing. Volumes 2 and 3 are free.

H

Hell, two's my lucky number. Hey, does anyone know the Headmaster's last name?

X

No. What are you looking for?

H

I wanna know what the hell the Headmaster and Superintendent studied while here. And Skip said he was a subject once. I wanna see if I can find him.

X

Look for S. All subjects use—

H

Yeah yeah, I know. The first letter of their name. Xavier.

Everyone commences to reading except R, who is lumbering around the library clumsily. She knocks over a stool, picks it back up and sits on it. She takes a vial of the deevolutionary serum and holds it up, but falls off her stool, spilling it all over herself. She gets back on the stool and opens a drawer, finding a very large beaker filled with the liquid. She pours more into the vial, spilling much of it. She is trying to pour another vial when suddenly X reads something startling.

X

R! Put that down!

R

I gotta take my syrup.

X

No! Stop. Someone stop her.

H runs over, confused, and stops her from drinking the serum.

H

What the hell's gotten into you, X?

X

In the sixteenth year, a student named Carter tried to invent deevolutionary serum and was failed at the end of the year. The Superintendent's comments were, "The serum was a potent mixture of various hazardous materials that succeeded only in destroying large quantities of brain cells in small amounts of time. While the effort and the idea are commended, the project failed due to health concerns."

R

But I need to take more.

H

The hell you do!

X

Don't you realize, R? That stuff is killing you.

R

But, but...if I don't take it, I got no more to do.

SIMMONS

[suddenly remembering] Oh, R. Beckinbrough wanted me to tell you she wants to start testing you this week.

R

Really?

SIMMONS

Yes. She'll get in contact with you soon.

R

Woof!

X

Here, R. Come on. Thank you, H. Let's go have you hide for the night. Come on.

R

We're gonna walk?

X

Yes. Let's go for the night. We've had enough research.

R

I didn't take my syrup.

X

Promise me you won't take that anymore, R.

R

But I'm spose-to.

X

Please, promise me.

R

I won't.

X

Goodbye, everyone.

X and R leave. Slowly, some calm returns to the room. M, realizing it is quite late, yawns.

M

I've got to go too. I'm tired. Let me know tomorrow if you find anything, Simmons.

SIMMONS

Don't you already know what I'm going to tell you tomorrow?

M

I also knew I was going to remind you to tell me. What's your point?

SIMMONS

True.

M

H, I'll see you in two weeks.

H

Have a good one, M.

M exits.

SIMMONS

Okay, let me see...Skip had said something about the place changing management after the fifth year. So that means the Headmaster would have been here the fifth year as a student.

H

I thought you wanted to know about M.

SIMMONS

Yeah, but you said you wanted help looking for some info about Headmaster, and I still think something big is going down here.

H

You're one of them damn conspiracy theorizers, ain't you?

SIMMONS

C'mon, there's something weird going on here. Two students suddenly get promoted to running the place? The secrecy that is around here? There's got to be an answer somewhere.

H

Doubt you'll find it here. These ain't very thorough.

SIMMONS

What do we know? We know the Headmaster and the Superintendent were students here in the fifth year.

H

And Skip was a subject fourteen years ago.

SIMMONS

How many years has the Academy been open?

H flips open the fourth volume to check.

H

Nineteen.

SIMMONS

So Skip was a subject when the Headmaster was a student. See, yeah, here are the entries for the fifth year. Let's see. Nine students; five passed, two failed, two dismissed.

H

Is there an S as a subject?

SIMMONS

Ummm, yeah, there's an S. Worked under Crank. Are we assuming S is Skip?

H

Damned if I know.

SIMMONS

Holy shit! I just remembered that Skip told me they were discharged.

H

Who was discharged?

SIMMONS

The Headmaster and the Superintendent. Let's see. Crank and Chagas were discharged it says.

H

Headmaster's female. Does it says their sex?

SIMMONS

Oooh, uh. . . .Crank . . .dah dah dah. . . .*[reciting]* "was dismissed in the fourteenth week because, in addition to her subject, *she* was secretly using other students as subjects."

H

Crank is the Headmaster?

SIMMONS

Looks like it.

H

What did she research?

SIMMONS

Pavlovian training. She did this whole...oh my god. Oh my god. Headmaster. That's how she became Headmaster.

H

What the hell are you talking about?

SIMMONS

Don't you see? Crank does her whole thing, testing other students, brainwashes the headmaster at the time, and voila, she becomes the new headmaster. She probably had herself dismissed so nobody would catch on.

H

Why?

SIMMONS

You got me. But it makes sense. All those gongs and crashes over the PA. She's . . . [a realization] She's still testing. She's using us as her pawns. Head. . .master! Oh my god. She's just tampering with our heads.

H

We should be getting out of here, Simmons.

SIMMONS

She's just going to have class after class of fresh students who will serve as more fodder to her psychological warfare.

H

Keep your voice down!

SIMMONS

She's not getting away with this.

H

Screw it, I'm getting outta here. I don't need to get caught because of your loud ass.

H exits.

SIMMONS

She's not getting away with this.

Lights go to black. In the blackout, the voice of the HEADMASTER is heard after the bonging sound. Meanwhile, the stage is being set up for the HEADMASTER'S office.

HEADMASTER

All students please report to my office for their first assessment. Please bring your updated reports, synopses of the goals of the next six weeks, and your weekly research area schedules. Subjects may go to their rooms or the lounge area where we've taken the liberty of setting up several ping-pong tables. Thank you. All students report to the Headmaster's office. Thank you.

SCENE 10

March 6

Lights up to the HEADMASTER'S office. The STUDENTS are sitting in four chairs against the wall, and the HEADMASTER is pacing slightly behind her desk. She takes BECKINBROUGH'S folder first. SIMMONS is exceptionally fidgety and CARLSTAFF is his usual lax self.

HEADMASTER

Beckinbrough: I've looked over your files thoroughly, and based on the several visits I have made to the research room, I'm very pleased with your results. You will, however, need to fully develop a hypothesis to either prove or disprove.

BECKINBROUGH

Yes, ma'am. I have one. Basically, it states that the human brain's capacity to adapt to sensory alteration will increase as more variables are thrown into the formula, so to speak.

HEADMASTER

Ah yes. Your findings seem to agree with that. But it appears that you are considerably behind on your expectations of how many alterations you will be able to achieve. Will you make your goal?

BECKINBROUGH

[remembering R] Yes, ma'am. It won't be a problem.

CARLSTAFF

[singing] We love you R, oh yes we dooo...

BECKINBROUGH

Shut up.

CARLSTAFF

Sorry, honey.

BECKINBROUGH

[giggling] Shhh.

HEADMASTER

Good. I have very little to say to you. Keep working in this same way. Carlstaff, on to you. Based on my evaluations from my visits, it seems you are actively *disproving* your theory of artificial intelligence in humans acting to bolster their human qualities rather than proving it. If this continues, your success here at The Academy is in jeopardy as you are directly contradicting your hypothesis.

CARLSTAFF

Yeah, see, it's like Deep Blue. At first, it seemed like it was making very human-like decisions, right? But after long, he began making very computer-like decisions. That's what will happen with the guineas, only in reverse.

HEADMASTER

Still, this is not a favorable assessment, and if more promising results do not surface before the Superintendent arrives in six weeks, you may be failed.

CARLSTAFF

Don't sweat it.

HEADMASTER

Lunt, when last I visited, you hadn't figured out a goal for H to reach. Have you since determined that?

LUNT

Yes, ma'am. I have determined that I will cater his dreams to support becoming a rodeo clown. I feel this would, if successful, garner the most evident results, as he has never expressed an interest in being a rodeo clown, and furthermore has never mentioned the rodeo.

HEADMASTER

From your session logs, it seems you have begun work with Dr. Craig. I must also assume that you are not having your brother merely lie to aid you in achieving your hypothesis?

LUNT

My brother has never been told the goal I have set for H.

HEADMASTER

You are on the right path, Lunt.

LUNT

Hopefully, more concrete results will be forthcoming.

HEADMASTER

Finally, Simmons. I will be succinct. I've seen no progress in M's condition.

SIMMONS

Well, you see ma'am—

HEADMASTER

In your session logs, you merely make note of M's memories and then verify if they come true, which they invariably do. That's not your assignment.

SIMMONS

Well what was? I mean...I've been doing research steadily...

HEADMASTER

This is your first six week assessment. The research should have been properly taken care of in the first week or two.

SIMMONS

[quite angry] How can I? You throw this topic at me, saying thirteen other people have worked on it, with nothing more than their notes to go from?

HEADMASTER

If your performance does not show improvement by the Superintendent's first visit, you may be failed.

SIMMONS

I know what it is. It's because I know about you, isn't it?

HEADMASTER

I thank you all for coming today. You may have the remainder of the day off.

SIMMONS

You can't kick me out for failing a project I have no desire to do. You're not going to win, Headmaster *Crank*.

CARLSTAFF

Yowzah.

HEADMASTER

[There is a slight pause, but nothing to reflect on] I will see you in the following weeks for my visits. And then again for the Superintendent's assessment in six weeks. Good day.

HEADMASTER exits.

SIMMONS

You're not getting away with this!

BECKINBROUGH

What's 'this'?

CARLSTAFF

Simmy, you're buggin'. I may act up in front of the Headmaster, but you can't be calling her stuff, man. You're gonna be canned in a second.

BECKINBROUGH

What is the 'this'?

LUNT

Who cares? Simmons is obviously paranoid.

SIMMONS

You can't see it, Beckinbrough?

BECKINBROUGH

No. What's the "it"? What's the "this"?

SIMMONS

I don't know. That's just it.

CARLSTAFF

You're speaking in a language that is close to, but not exactly, English.

SIMMONS

The Headmaster is trying to do something, I just don't know what. It's the fact that nobody knows that makes it all the worse.

LUNT

Right. Well, I'll see you all at the next dinner.

LUNT *exits.*

BECKINBROUGH

Simmons, seriously, if you keep this up—

CARLSTAFF

“This” this, or just this?

BECKINBROUGH

Funny. If you keep this up, they're going to dismiss you.

CARLSTAFF

I'm surprised they haven't already.

SIMMONS

I just want to stop the Headmaster before it goes too far.

CARLSTAFF

If you can ever figure out what “it” is.

SIMMONS

Forget it.

BECKINBROUGH

Let's just go, Carlstaff.

CARLSTAFF

Your tiny uncomfortable room or mine?

BECKINBROUGH

I'll come by your place. Good night, Simmons. Get some rest.

CARLSTAFF

Yeah, Simmy, take it easy. *[they exit]*

SIMMONS

She's not going to get away with this.

Blackout.

ACT II, SCENE 11
March 20

Lights come up to a research room. L and G are sitting in chairs next to a computer console. They are clearly waiting for CARLSTAFF to show, who is late. They are surveying the room and analyzing.

G
What should we do, L?

L
I don't know. I suppose we should wait another twenty minutes or so.

G
He's usually not this late.

L
True, but then again, we get paid to sit here, so don't complain.

G
Let's just leave.

L
No. I need to get the new software.

G
That's just it. If he puts the new program in, we're never going to have this opportunity. This is the first time since he started that we haven't had the software installed. We can think without processing.

L
I'm sor—

G
We're not going to ever see this again. After he reinstalls the software, he probably isn't going to take it out until after the next assessment, at the very earliest.

L
I'm sorry, G. I need this.

A silence falls in. G anxiously gets up and wanders around, often checking the door to see if CARLSTAFF is coming. L is waiting patiently on the chair.

G
I'm going.

L

Give it a few more minutes.

G

No, I mean I'm going. I'm not coming back.

L

Oh come on, it's not that bad. You're the control subject. You get the easier job.

G

I don't care. I hate it here. I'm leaving before he puts in the new disks.

L

That could be any second now.

G

You're right. Goodbye.

L

G! You can't leave.

G

I have to. This isn't science, this is torture. I have to leave for my sake.

L

You *can't* leave for *my* sake. [*G stops, but remains silent*] You're the control subject. If you leave, Carlstaff has nobody to compare me too. His theory is gonna be shot.

G

What do you care if his theory is gone? You wouldn't have to be hooked up to any computers anymore.

L

If his theory is gone, so is he. You heard about his assessment two weeks ago, didn't you? If he's dismissed, that means we're dismissed. I can't afford to have that happen.

G

Is money all you care about?

L

With two kids to support on my own, yes it is.

G

[*A small silence, then*] I'm sorry, L.

G exits.

G? Come back here. G! L

R peeks her head in.

Is anyone here? R

Yes. It's me; L. I'm right here. L

I can't hear you. R

You won't see me either unless you look at me. L

I needa lick you. R

What are you talking about, R? L

Where you? R

R fumbles into the room. She has had her taste and sight switched, as well as her hearing and smell. She fumbles over and manages to grab L's arm.

Are you all right? L

I see the inside of my mouth. R

Has Beckinbrough switched your sight? L

All of 'em. R

All of what? Your senses? L

Nose and ears. Tongue and eyes. R

L

So can you hear me all right?

R

When I sniff.

L

But you can't see me?

R sticks her tongue out to try to lick L, but L withdraws.

No no no. That's not necessary. I'm right here.

R

Okay. Cha doin'?

L

Waiting for Carlstaff to show.

CARLSTAFF enters.

CARLSTAFF

Oh, oh, I am good. Right on cue.

R

Who's there?

L

It's Carlstaff.

CARLSTAFF

Hello ladies. I'm sorry I'm so late. Got a little wrapped up in my leisure time with Beckinbrough. Man, the separation rules here really blow.

L

Umm, Carlstaff, G left.

CARLSTAFF

Oh. I thought that was G. Hi R.

R

Hi. *[waving]*

CARLSTAFF

Eh, no biggie.

L

But I think she's really gone. Like, leaving the Academy.

CARLSTAFF

Whatever.

L

What about your control subject?

CARLSTAFF

[slight pause] R, how would you like to start experimenting with me?

R

Kay. Can I lick ya?

CARLSTAFF

Man, I should have picked you as my subject from the start.

L

Her senses have been switched. I think her smell and, uh, her hearing are switched. And obviously sight and taste.

R

[looking at CARLSTAFF] You taste. . . .salty.

CARLSTAFF

There's one I haven't heard before.

L

Are we going to install today?

CARLSTAFF

I guess with all that's gone down today, we'll scrap it. But tomorrow, normal time, I'll begin the installation with you and R. Sound good?

L

Sounds fine by me.

R

Oop.

CARLSTAFF

I'm assuming that means yes.

L

I'll see you tomorrow then?

CARLSTAFF

You bet, my little guineas. Have a good day off.

L

Bye, Carlstaff. Bye R.

CARLSTAFF and L exit. R stands in the middle of the room using all of her senses to desperately try to figure out where she is. She stumbles her way out of the room, knocking things over in the process. Blackout. Lights come up to the mess hall, the SUBJECT table. L, M, X, and H are there.

SCENE 12

Where's G? X

She took off. M

She's really gone, M? *[M nods]* L

What the hell'd she leave for? H

She said she couldn't take it anymore. I didn't think she was really serious. L

You're responding quickly, L. X

The chip is out. Don't worry, it'll be back tomorrow, worse than ever. L

Sounds like fun. X

Wait, X, you seem to be fine too. H

Beckinbrough gave me a little reprieve while she has R to experiment with. Since the assessment, I've been back to normal. She said it's so my senses don't forget their correct assignment. X

Well, it's good to know we're all fine. L

H

Figures...what the hell...all you guys get vacations but I'm stuck with a damn dictator. If this were middle school, Lunt would be the teacher that never got sick and had a substitute teacher.

X

I had one of them. Mr. Gailor.

M

Mrs. Cunningham.

L

Mr. Potsworth.

They all have a little laugh at this.

M

You guys have nothing to complain about. Talk about not getting a vacation.

X

Oh, yeah. I'm sorry we brought this up.

H

Damn, sorry.

M

It's all right.

L

You know something? We've been here for almost two months and I still don't know everyone's name.

M

It's against policy.

H

Screw policy. I think L's right. See, it's stupid calling her L.

M

If you do it, you can't let the bigwigs know.

X

I won't tell if you guys don't. Well, you already know mine. I'm Xavier.

L

My real first name is Cheryl. But my middle name is Lynn, and that's what I go by.

H

I'm Henry.

And you, M? X

I don't remember. M

You don't remember your name? X

I'm always called M. M

That sucks. H

Is there something we can call you? L

I'm fairly sure the letter M was given to me because of the Merlyn condition. I suppose you could call me Merlyn. M

Merlyn, Henry, Lynn. It's nice to meet you. X

Lights go down on the SUBJECT table and up on the STUDENT table. Clearly, BECKINBROUGH and CARLSTAFF are together. Their seats are pulled right next to each other. LUNT is closer to them than SIMMONS, as SIMMONS is isolated a bit. They are all eating in silence.

SIMMONS

So I do this research on the Merlyn Condition, right? And it seems that practically every other student who has had the Merlyn Condition has failed. And those that have passed have had very vague assessments and notes.

CARLSTAFF

So what you're saying is that you're screwed?

BECKINBROUGH

There's nothing that will help?

SIMMONS

It's all gibberish. I'm going to be kicked out because of this asinine project.

BECKINBROUGH

Maybe you can try to rationalize with the Headmaster.

CARLSTAFF

Oh come on. It'll be easier to do the Headmaster than to rationalize with her.

LUNT

Wonderfully put.

CARLSTAFF

Well, maybe not in Lunt's case. She's probably need roofies breath spray to get a kiss at the kissing booth.

LUNT

Well, that was uncalled for.

SIMMONS

But everything's starting to fall in place.

BECKINBROUGH

What do you mean, Simmons?

SIMMONS

I'm figuring out what the 'it' is. When the Headmaster was a student here, she studied Pavlovian conditioning and she was discharged for practicing on the other students. Well, she was also studying on the Headmaster at the time. She got herself promoted one way or another because of it. So now Headmaster Crank, that's the now Headmaster, is *still* running these experiments on us. Skip, the janitor, was Crank's subject. Look at him now. When a crash is heard over the PA, he's in here in less than a minute.

LUNT

Please...where is this going?

SIMMONS

He's conditioning all of us. But to what?

CARLSTAFF

Simmy, I say this in the kindest way possible: you're off your tits.

BECKINBROUGH smacks him in the arm.

Sorry honey. To clarify, Simmy: you're off your rocker.

SIMMONS

Get this: they're threatening to dismiss me, and even you, Carlstaff. Fine, whatever. But doesn't anyone find it a bit odd that R is still here? There's something to that.

BECKINBROUGH

Yes, Carlstaff and I are still using her.

SIMMONS

But from the Academy's standpoint, she shouldn't be here. In fact, with all the strict codes about anonymity and such, keeping her here is *dangerous*. Why are they doing it?

BECKINBROUGH

Maybe they don't know.

SIMMONS

Nobody can stay hidden for this long. Especially in her condition. She can't even walk straight anymore. She doesn't have the sense to remain hidden.

LUNT

This is ludicrous.

SIMMONS

Think. Why would she be allowed? She's got to be part of the plan.

LUNT

Plan? Oh, I can't stomach any more of this rubbish. Good day.

LUNT takes her tray and exits.

CARLSTAFF

Did she mean the food? I thought it was pretty good today.

SIMMONS

I don't know how yet, but R is integral in this whole deal. Maybe the Headmaster is using her to somehow condition us into...something or other.

BECKINBROUGH

Simmons, you've been a little crazy since the assessment. Nobody wants to see you get booted, but—

SIMMONS

Think...she's got Skip trained. She's got R under her spell. She's whipping us into some type of subservience. There's no greater control than controlling the minds of science.

CARLSTAFF

What a great pitch for a psychological thriller.

SIMMONS

This isn't funny, Carlstaff.

CARLSTAFF

What's "this"?

BECKINBROUGH

Stop it.

Lights go down on the STUDENT table and up on the SUBJECT table. They're all still eating, and R stumbles into the scene.

H

So I'm in this huge-ass cornfield, right? Only there's no corn. Just bulls. Swarms and swarms of bulls. I wasn't scared of 'em or anything, you know? Hell, I woulda taken 'em all on, right? But that wasn't it. Shit, instead I start running around and picking up all these orphans. I guess they were orphans. Pretty much, when I see a dirty kid in old clothes, they're orphans to me. So I'm pickin' 'em up, all heroic and shit, and it's great. I'm loving it. It's like I'm the new King of the Toreadors or something.

X

R! It's good to see you!

R

Found you! Can I lick ya?

L

Go on, Henry.

X

R, Henry is telling us about his dream.

R

Henry?

X

We're going to start calling each other by our real names. I'm Xavier—

H

Henry.

L

Lynn.

M

Merlyn, I suppose.

X

And you, R?

R

Me what R?

X

What's your name?

R

[slowly and methodically] Row...rowmpr. *[very pleased with herself]*

H

What the hell was that?

X

Excuse me?

R

Rowmpr.

L

I'm going to just keep calling her R, I think.

H

Good call.

X

Finish your dream, Henry.

H

Well, nothing really more happened. But damn, if I didn't feel like king of the mountain at that point...So I talk to Lunt's brother, and he says something about me beginning to show evidence of my life drive or something like that.

L

Your life drive?

H

Beats the hell out of me.

R

[singing, sorta] I'm looking at the food. The food is good. I wanna eat the food.

L

Should she really be allowed out here?

X

You're right. She'll get caught.

L

That's not even what I mean. She's not fit for...anything. Are they going to reverse this before she's dismissed?

M

I wouldn't bank on it. This marks my fourteenth year as a subject here. Think they're reversing me?

R

Ping!

X

When do you leave?

M

From what I remember, I'll be like Skip. I'll never really leave the Academy as long as it's open.

H

That blows. Another helping of ass chunks, please...

Lights go down on that table and up on the other.

SIMMONS

I'm going to the library heavily for the next two weeks. Would anyone like to come?

CARLSTAFF

We get the formal invitation to the shrine?

BECKINBROUGH

No thanks. Research puts me to sleep, and I'd rather sleep in my bed.

CARLSTAFF

Yeah, and I'd rather sleep in her bed too.

SIMMONS

All right. But I need to do some heavy research to get to the bottom of all this.

CARLSTAFF

All what?

BECKINBROUGH

[Laughingly] Shut up.

Blackout. Lights up to the HEADMASTER'S office. She is on the phone, talking emotionlessly.

SCENE 13

HEADMASTER

Yes, Superintendent, the first assessment is coming soon. I have a weird feeling. Something in me isn't ready for this assessment. I know we've done fifteen of these

before, but I'm much more unsettled this time. I am trying to be relaxed. Do I sound particularly uneasy? I know, dear. I know. I just wish I could shake this feeling. I feel totally powerless again. Right. Right. Okay, I'll see you then. Thank you. Goodbye.

She hangs up the phone and sighs. Blackout. Lights up to the library. Entering the room are SKIP and SIMMONS, followed by M and X. SKIP unlocks the door and is ready to leave, but SIMMONS stops him.

SCENE 14
April 3

SIMMONS

Hey, Skip! Hold on a minute. You, uh, you got a minute?

SKIP

Sure.

SIMMONS

The Academy fronts itself like it has this strict security, right? Then how is it that R is still here after being asked to leave? And that other subject—I don't know her letter—she just up and left and they didn't say anything.

SKIP

Yeah?

SIMMONS

It seems contradictory.

SKIP

How?

SIMMONS

Okay, hold it. When a student graduates, they aren't supposed to tell anyone they went to the Academy, right? Then why's it so prestigious?

SKIP

Just because you don't tell someone doesn't mean they don't know. In the science world, you just *know* if someone went to the Academy. It's in their research. It's in their work ethic.

SIMMONS

Fine. But why do the subjects keep mum as well? [*SKIP shrugs.*] See, you're supposed to know everything and you don't even know it all.

SKIP

The way I see it, the subjects get pretty messed up here. Most of them want to take the money and run, forget about their experiences if possible.

SIMMONS

Makes sense.

While this is going on, X and M have opened some of the annals and have started reading through them. It is assumed their two conversations are simultaneous. X is seeing with his eyes, but is always touching someone to hear them. In this scene, he is holding onto M the entire time.

X

I've must have read through all these books five times now, and they just keep getting more interesting.

M

Do you know more than half the people who have had me failed?

X

How do you know?

M

I remember reading it.

X

Hey, have you ever been wrong with your memory?

M

Do you have to hold my arm?

X

If you want me to hear you, yes.

M

All right.

X

So have you?

M

Nope. I mean, if it's an event that won't happen for a few years, my memory is pretty fuzzy, but it becomes clearer the closer the event is.

X

Have you ever tried to change something you remember?

M

Yeah, but it's like Oedipus. Okay, one time, a few years ago—I only remember this because I wrote it down—I totally fell for this student. Gorgeous brunette. Funny.

That was key. She managed to make me forget about, well, me. So I knew I was going to ask her on a date and I knew she was going to say no. So I figured I would *avoid* asking her at all costs. I cold-shouldered her all year, playing it real cool. So another wise-ass student comes along and sees that me and this girl are constantly at each other's throats, right? So he bets me fifty bucks that I wouldn't ask her out. The worst part was that I knew this bet was going to be the reason for me asking this girl out. But hey, fifty bucks, right?

X

So it didn't matter the reason, the result was the same?

M

Basically.

X

I guess you don't believe in free will or anything, do you?

M

I do, I just believe I'm really poor at it.

They laugh and go back to reading their books. SKIP and SIMMONS are continuing where they left off.

SIMMONS

[giving a look over to M and X] Skip, you've been here longer than just about anyone, and you know the place well. Give me an honest opinion. Do you think a student or a subject could ever control the Academy?

SKIP

The Headmaster controls the Academy. Well, her and the Superintendent.

SIMMONS

Yeah, I know. But let's be serious. Some of the people who come here are really clever. People have dealt with mind control before. Could they ever pull a fast one on the bigwigs?

SKIP

Where is this coming from?

SIMMONS

Look, you know R, right? She was excused the first day here, but she stuck around. And now the other students are secretly using her for their experiments. For a while, I thought she was part of this whole plan that the Headmaster was doing to control us. But I've been rethinking. What if R was somehow the mastermind?

M

[poking into the conversation] R? The same girl who can't walk erect anymore?

X
What?

M
I was talking to Simmons.

X
What'd he say?

SIMMONS
Who's to say it's not all a ruse?

X
What's he saying?

While the next bit of dialogue is happening, M walks X over to SIMMONS, so he can touch them both and understand the conversation.

SIMMONS
Maybe R's really a student here, and it's part of our assessments. The Academy would certainly be great grounds for stuff like that.

M
You've seen her, Simmons. She doesn't know her own name anymore.

SIMMONS
Which is *exactly* why she could do something that big. Nobody suspects her.

X
Why not just accuse the Superintendent while you're at it?

SIMMONS
Holy shit! You're right. I forgot entirely about the Superintendent! Who's to say he isn't running this whole show?

SKIP
Because his topic was Darwinian philosophy. Nothing to do with mind control.

SIMMONS
Oh? Weeding out the weak? Isn't that what the Academy is all about?

X
Simmons, I think—

SIMMONS
The fifth year of the Academy seems to be the pivotal year that everything happened. Headmaster Crank and Superintendent Chagas were both students here.

Skip was a subject. Two people discharged, two failed. The next year, M was created. There's something big there.

X

Simmons, I'm starting to agree with the other students. You're going a little overboard.

SIMMONS

I seem to be the only one who cares about what's going on.

X

Or what may not be.

SIMMONS walks over to the books. He opens to the fifth year. X and M follow, SKIP stands by the door and waits.

M

What are you doing?

SIMMONS

I am getting a new topic. I'm obviously going to fail out if I work on the Merlyn Condition, so I'm going to try desperately to get something else to work so I can stay around here and figure this all out.

M

You're stopping the Merlyn Condition?

SIMMONS

I'm sorry. I don't have a choice.

M

What's going to happen to me?

SIMMONS

You tell me. *[this quiets him]* Let me see. Something on cloning...no, too trite. Levitation? That's ridiculous.

SKIP

Do you need me anymore, or can I go?

SIMMONS

I'll see you later, Skip. Thanks for letting me in.

SKIP leaves.

X

What will M do?

M

I'll be fine. I'll still get paid.

SIMMONS

The Chameleon Effect. This sounds juicy.

X

Sounds vaguely familiar.

SIMMONS

It's about emotion control. Apparently some guy did it in the fifth year...fifth year, go figure. He failed, though. It says here that this allows someone to store all their emotions and then recall them specifically to match the need. It would then allow a subject to be in total control of his emotions at all times. That's something I can sink my teeth into.

M

With all due respect, your assessment is in two weeks. Do you think you're going to be able to get this experiment in shape?

SIMMONS

I don't have a choice.

M

If you need help, I'll be glad to. In fact, I know I do.

SIMMONS

Well, that's settled, then.

X

Speaking of the assessment, is it standard practice for the Headmaster to visit in the lab unexpectedly, without clearing it with the student first?

M

Not common, but not unheard of.

X

It just strikes me as weird.

SIMMONS

Haven't I been pointing out weird things for weeks now?

X

I don't mean to be rude, but I don't know how much more conspiracy I can choke down. I am going to start coming to the library later.

SIMMONS

Why is everyone blind but me?

X

You know, sensory jokes just aren't funny right now.

M

He didn't mean it, Xavier.

X

Whatever. I'm leaving.

X exits. SIMMONS is standing there looking blankly at M. There is a bit of a silence.

SIMMONS

The Superintendent comes in two weeks.

M

Will you be ready?

SIMMONS

I have a good feeling about it.

M

You're being pretty optimistic.

SIMMONS

[laughing] Couldn't you just tell me what happens?

M

They don't let subjects attend the assessments.

SIMMONS

I may try to convince them to let you in.

M

I'm here to help you.

SIMMONS

I know. Thank you.

The lights slowly fade to black. The set is cleared and reset for...

SCENE 15

April 17

Over the PA, while the set changes, we hear...

HEADMASTER

The primary research facility is reserved now for Beckinbrough. As a reminder, after the hour is completed, lunch will be served at the normal time, followed by the second assessment. The Superintendent will be present, so punctuality is essential. Thank you. Once again, the primary research facility is reserved now for Beckinbrough.

Lights come up to reveal a lab room. In it are X and R, with their senses altered massively. For X, he smells through his touch, and touches things through his smell. For R, she touches through sight, hears through taste, sees through hearing, and tastes through touch. BECKINBROUGH is walking around with a clipboard.

BECKINBROUGH

All right, R. How do you feel?

R

With my eyes. *[looking at X]* Touching your nose. Touching your nose.

BECKINBROUGH

I mean, is your body adapting to these new modifications?

R

I swallow so loud!

BECKINBROUGH

R, are you confused at all?

R

[turning her head quickly back and forth, indicating that she's really curious about being able to see out both ears] Whoa!

X

What's been done to her?

BECKINBROUGH

Well, four of her senses have been interchanged. With her, I've moved from swapping to interchanging. She touches through sight, hears through taste, sees through hearing, and tastes through touch.

X

This has to become confusing for you.

BECKINBROUGH

Probably not as confusing as for you.

X

What's she doing?

BECKINBROUGH

I think she's experiencing 360° vision.

X

Yeah, I gotta admit that was pretty cool.

R

My shirt tastes bad! My shirt tastes bad!

X

Oh, why did Headmaster leave so quickly? She left before we even started.

BECKINBROUGH

I have no idea. Not that I mind. I'm able to work with R now.

X

When do you plan on telling Headmaster?

BECKINBROUGH

Carlstaff and I decided to get past this assessment, and then when we're not in danger of failing out, we'll break the news.

X

Good plan.

BECKINBROUGH

How are you feeling?

X

Fine. It's not bad only having touch and smell switched. Although it really makes it evident when people haven't showered. And I can smell wind. Do you know how cool a feeling that is? The only thing better than it was when I could see through my touch. I could see wind. It was something of a cathartic moment for me.

BECKINBROUGH

I'm sorry this is a letdown.

X

No. Believe me, my body needed a reprieve.

They pause and look at R. She is taking chewing gum and sticking it to various parts of her face and arms, getting disappointed when they don't stick.

This program has its share of casualties, doesn't it?

BECKINBROUGH

It's somewhat sad to see.

X

Is she trying to...?

BECKINBROUGH

I think she's just trying to taste her gum. By touching it.

X

Ah. Yes, that would be it.

SIMMONS runs into the room somewhat frantically and disheveled.

SIMMONS

Sorry to bust in, Beckinbrough. I need R.

BECKINBROUGH

What for?

SIMMONS

I can't tell you now. But I need her before the assessment.

BECKINBROUGH

But I'm still testing—

SIMMONS

It's essential. You said yourself at lunch two weeks ago that you weren't going to use her until after the assessment.

BECKINBROUGH

Fine. Take her. But what's going on?

SIMMONS

You'll find out at the assessment. I figured out the 'it'. You'll find out at the assessment!

He grabs R's arm and leads her out.

R

Tasting hairy! Hairy and sweat!

BECKINBROUGH and X exchange a look and the lights fade out to black. The mess hall is set. Seated at the student table are BECKINBROUGH and CARLSTAFF. Seated at the subject table are H, M, X, and L. Their meals are all done and they're just waiting for the assessment.

SCENE 16

BECKINBROUGH

I guess Simmons isn't even going to make it to lunch.

CARLSTAFF

Could be his last.

BECKINBROUGH

Oh stop it. It could be your last too.

CARLSTAFF

Eh, don't sweat it, babycakes.

BECKINBROUGH

But what if it is?

CARLSTAFF

Hey, if a brain-damaged monkey woman can last here this long, so can I.

BECKINBROUGH

I hope you're right.

CARLSTAFF

You know what pisses me off? Lunt. Does she think she's *that* much better than us that she can't even sit with us anymore?

BECKINBROUGH

It could be the 'she's so pathetic she'd need to pay people to be her friends' jokes. Might have something to do with it.

CARLSTAFF

Eh. Hey, kooky idea. Wanna sit with the guineas until the assessment?

BECKINBROUGH

Sure. Sounds like fun.

BECKINBROUGH and CARLSTAFF get up and move to sit at the subject table. The lights follow accordingly.

CARLSTAFF

Hey guineas.

BECKINBROUGH

Is it all right if we sit with you?

X

Sure!

H

Why the hell not? As long as Lunt's not with you.

CARLSTAFF

Don't worry. She's in Haughtyville right now, pretending to have friends.

X

Carlstaff, what's with Lynn? She hasn't said anything all lunch.

CARLSTAFF

Lynn? Oh, L. Right now, she works best with direct questions. Check this out. *[to L]* How are you today, L? *[back to the others]* See, right now she's running a diagnostic, factoring in every variable...her personal mood, the amount of sleep she received, the weather outside, how close she is to her period, El Niño...you name it. And she'll produce the most human-like answer. Most humans would probably shrug it off and say "eh, not bad," but that's not the right answer. It's *an* answer, but not the definitive one. With this program, she'll give you the absolute right answer. It won't...oh wait, she's coming up with it.

L

Eh, not bad.

BECKINBROUGH

You were saying something ironic, honey?

CARLSTAFF

Shut up, sweetie. *[they kiss]*

M

Am I the only subject going to the assessment?

X

I didn't think we were allowed.

M

Apparently, Simmons convinced the Headmaster to let me go. He says it's essential.

H

Hell no. How come we're gettin' the shaft?

M

Why don't you show up anyway?

X

Can we do that?

H

Who cares? We have every right to be there. It decides our fates too.

X

You're right.

The PA bongs and the voice is heard.

HEADMASTER

Attention Academy. The second assessment will be underway in ten minutes. Would all the students please begin making their way to the Headmaster's office? Thank you.

CARLSTAFF

There's our cue.

H

Ours too.

L

Yes, M, you're the only subject going.

X

What was that in reference to?

CARLSTAFF

An old question. Don't worry, she does that all the time. Let's go.

X

Break a leg.

L

What was what in reference to?

Lights blackout as everyone gets up to leave. Lights come back up into the HEADMASTER's office. CARLSTAFF, LUNT, and BECKINBROUGH are sitting in chairs. Standing against the wall are M, X, H, and L. Behind the desk, standing austere and emotionless are the HEADMASTER and the SUPERINTENDENT. The HEADMASTER looks at her watch a few times, then begins.

SCENE 17

HEADMASTER

I suppose we'll begin without Mr. Simmons. First off, I would like to thank everyone sincerely for their hard work in the Academy this half term. There is a chance that you will not be invited back to continue this term. In this event, the subject will be paid a full term regardless, and the student will be asked to evacuate his or her room. But let's get right on to the assessments. This is the Superintendent, and I turn it over to him now.

SUPERINTENDENT

[picking up a folder] Beckinbrough.

BECKINBROUGH

Yes sir.

SUPERINTENDENT

Your subject is X.

BECKINBROUGH

Yes sir.

SUPERINTENDENT

And your topic was sensory alteration and the human capability to adapt.

BECKINBROUGH

Yes sir.

SUPERINTENDENT

[there is a pause as he is perusing the documents] Judging by your research, your observation logs, and the Headmaster's recommendation, you have passed the first half of this term. I would hope you continue this successful path.

CARLSTAFF

That's it? That's all? Boy, they sure over-hype this.

SUPERINTENDENT

Carlstaff.

CARLSTAFF

Yes?

SUPERINTENDENT

Your subjects were L and G.

CARLSTAFF

Yeah, but G left a few weeks ago. I found a repl...I'm still looking for a replacement.

SUPERINTENDENT

And your topic was artificial intelligence instilled in human beings and its repercussions?

CARLSTAFF

You got it.

SUPERINTENDENT

Based on your first assessment and your overall work ethic, you clearly do not match up to the credentials of the Academy. However, you chose an exceptionally difficult and admittedly intriguing topic. In addition, you have shown significant progress since the first assessment and we have decided to allow you to continue on to the second half of your experimentation.

CARLSTAFF

Thank you, sir. And Headmaster. Ma'am.

BECKINBROUGH hugs CARLSTAFF.

SUPERINTENDENT

Lunt.

LUNT

Present, sir.

SUPERINTENDENT

Your subject was H.

H

Damn straight.

LUNT

Yes, sir.

SUPERINTENDENT

Your topic was the proving of Carl Jung's theory of the meaning of dreams.

LUNT

Correct.

SUPERINTENDENT

And you enlisted the assistance of your brother, Dr. Craig?

LUNT

Again, correct.

SUPERINTENDENT

We understand the process of this experiment is one that would require a massive timeframe. As such, the results you've rendered have not been conclusive—

SIMMONS walks immediately into the room without knocking or saying anything. R is stumbling behind him.

SIMMONS

Chagas, please stop talking!

LUNT

Simmons! I am in the middle of my assessment.

SIMMONS

And I'm in the middle of not giving two shits.

BECKINBROUGH

Simmons, that's the Superintendent.

SIMMONS

Yeah, I know. How are you, Superintendent Chagas?

LUNT

Headmaster, do something about this!

SIMMONS

Yes, Headmaster Crank. Please do something about this. Maybe you'll want to tap into your anger here.

HEADMASTER

What...what are you talking about?

SIMMONS

Oh, fine time to get cautious about your emotions, Crank. I think you seriously need to get angry right *now*.

HEADMASTER

[exploding in a fit of rage] How *dare* you burst into this room during an assessment, you ignorant student. Your puerile attempts at proper scientific experimentation have not gone unnoticed!

SIMMONS

[yelling] Neutral, Crank. Neutral!

HEADMASTER stops talking and falls into her normal stoic stance. The SUPERINTENDENT hasn't moved either.

Chagas, perhaps you should be embarrassed by this entire ordeal.

HEADMASTER

This was what I meant, Chagas.

SUPERINTENDENT

I'll fight it.

SIMMONS

I don't think I said fight. I think I said embarrass. Be ashamed!

SUPERINTENDENT

[suddenly extremely embarrassed] Oh my God. I'm sorry. I. . .I can't believe this. Oh my God. I...

SIMMONS

Neutral, please.

Confusion abounds to all except SIMMONS. He finally looks at the rest of the people in the room.

Oh now come on, that really deserved a round of applause. A congratulatory remark? But no, I get dumbfounded looks.

H

What the hell just happened?

SIMMONS

Ladies, gentlemen, Carlstaff, I would like to introduce you to a physical demonstration of the Chameleon Effect.

X

Hey, I remember reading about that. That's the thing with the emotional tank, right? And the permanent neutral?

SIMMONS

Very good, X. I see you've done your research.

X

How'd you get it to work in only two weeks?

SIMMONS

I've had fourteen years.

CARLSTAFF

Okay, I'm thoroughly confused.

SIMMONS

Fifth year of the Academy: Crank is studying Pavlovian conditioning and Chagas is studying Darwinian philosophy. Crank uses a subject named S, a *student* named Sampson, and the headmaster of the time as her experimental subjects. Now Sampson was a good kid. Smart. He had a promising topic called the Chameleon Effect, but because of Crank's interference, Sampson wasn't ever fully capable of working on his project. Crank is rightfully dismissed, but is able to manipulate herself into the position of Headmaster. Her boyfriend of the time, Chagas, takes over as Superintendent.

R claps and falls over.

But whatever happened to Sampson? His promising topic failed, and we all know that students who fail out of the Academy go on to lead relatively dull lives in obscurity. Now see, Sampson was a bitter student. He didn't like that he unwittingly had his life ruined by another student. So Sampson re-enlisted to the Academy in the sixth year, under the name Van Goen.

CARLSTAFF

Is there a Cliff's notes version of this story?

SIMMONS

Van Goen had a young willing subject named Matthew who he tested an unusual hypothesis on: the Merlyn Condition. Hello M.

M

Hi.

SIMMONS

But Van Goen didn't stick solely to the Merlyn Condition. No, Van Goen was still upset that his Chameleon Effect never reached full exploration. So he continued testing the Chameleon Effect...on Headmaster Crank and Superintendent Chagas. Only he put in a twist. Instead of the subject controlling their own emotions, Sampson found that *he* could control the subject's emotions, letting them stay in that perfect neutral. Brilliant. Only he miscalculated. Since the Chameleon Effect relies on long-term conditioning, it would take a while to fully enact. So, over the next several years, Sampson, Van Goen, whatever his name was, would come back and inexorably end up with the Merlyn Condition as his project. How? Easy, he manipulated the Headmaster's sympathy into giving him the assignment, all throughout which he would implement his Chameleon Effect. So anyway this continues until present, when a student named Simmons comes to this school, receives the Merlyn Condition as his assignment, and is able to implement the last phases of the Chameleon Effect on the Headmaster and the Superintendent. And that, my friends, is the magical "it".

R

I'm tasting your pants.

SIMMONS

Try it. Try to get under Headmaster's skin. I bet I can. Watch this. Headmaster, why don't you . . .oh, I don't know, why don't you go through a joyful bliss?

HEADMASTER

I can hold out. I can.

SIMMONS

I don't think so, actually. I think you're too happy to hold out.

HEADMASTER

I can...ha ha, I can, man this is great. *[laughs]* This has to be the best day of my life. I can not even begin to tell you. *[she skips around the office, clapping]* Isn't everything just absolutely beautiful?

SIMMONS

Okay, you're making me sick. Neutral, please.

H

I still don't know what the hell is going on.

SIMMONS

H, let me put it like this. I run the Academy. My name is Curtis J. Sampson.

CARLSTAFF

Let me get this straight. You planned for thirteen years to get revenge?

SIMMONS

I had to make absolutely sure the experiment was complete, or I'd blow my chance.

BECKINBROUGH

How is it complete now?

SIMMONS

Let me introduce you to R.

R

ME!

SIMMONS

I preyed on the Headmaster's resoluteness to choose around R, leaving her out. But I knew R's zeal would keep her here. And when months went by and the Headmaster knew full well of R's presence and the potential danger it caused, and seeing that she couldn't summon the courage or the anger or the fear to do anything about it, I knew my experiment was a success.

LUNT

This is ridiculous. Why the whole charade?

CARLSTAFF

Yeah. I can't help feeling like this is the end of an episode of Scooby Doo.

SIMMONS

Oh, that's the beautiful part. Take a look at this. *[he takes out a huge bound book]* Upending the Academy by Curtis J. Sampson. Over the past fifteen years, I've been able to amass a wealth of scientific data and experiments of my own. "How students handle paranoia" was one experiment I hatched this year. I've been jotting notes for years, and combined with the information in the library, which I now run, this is going to be the hottest-selling science book in history.

LUNT

You're stealing the work of all the students of the past?

SIMMONS

Stealing is so harsh. And besides, who's going to tell? If one of the students of the past tries to sue, nobody's going to believe they went to the Academy. The secrecy of it all worked out incredibly well for me.

H

Well, um, at the risk of sounding stupid, now what?

SIMMONS

Good question, H. I am now the self-appointed Headmaster of the Academy. Oh, I should really ask permission first. Crank, is it alright if I supercede your position as Headmaster of the Academy? [*HEADMASTER doesn't speak*] Really? Now would be the best time to voice an objection. [*silence again*] That settles it, I guess.

BECKINBROUGH

This is so weird.

CARLSTAFF

So, you're just taking over?

SIMMONS

It's not like I haven't been running things for the past few years anyway. The only difference now it's official.

CARLSTAFF

I gotta commend you. You're a clever bastard. Not that bright, but clever.

SIMMONS

Flattery. How sweet.

LUNT

So was everything just a ploy to get you a title?

SIMMONS

It's not about the title, Lunt; it's about the power. It's about the revenge. Hell, it's about how I'm going to earn my paychecks for the next many years. Science journals make a mint.

X

Even though you're the Headmaster, won't the Superintendent still preside over everything?

SIMMONS

No, actually, he won't. The Superintendent is really more titular than anything. The Headmaster is the authority, and the Superintendent is there to instill a little fear.

LUNT

Who will be Superintendent?

SIMMONS

My good friend Matthew.

H

Aw, hell. That mean you were in on this too? Don't tell me you've been acting like this for thirteen years. I don't care *how* good the pay is, it ain't worth it.

SIMMONS

Nope. Matthew was a genuine subject thirteen years ago. But before I altered his memory, I asked if he would make the Academy a full time job for a long time, with the promise that I would promote him to Superintendent when it was all over.

H

So the Merlyn Condition is crap?

SIMMONS

It's as real now as it ever was.

H

Okay, M, what's the next thing that will happen in this room?

M

R will lick the Superintendent.

R

[licking the Superintendent] He's noodley.

SIMMONS

Now, if you don't mind, I would like a little time to rearrange my office. We have half a term to get by still.

LUNT

So do we all pass the assessment?

SIMMONS

[perusing the folders] Yes, everyone passed...except Simmons. It's a shame but he failed his assignment before the second half of the term. That's going to leave a scar on the Academy records.

Everyone begins to leave. R is on the desk, eating paper.

X

What's going to happen to R?

SIMMONS

She can finish her testing with Carlstaff and Beckinbrough as planned.

X

But I mean, afterward. She's...not well.

SIMMONS

[a reflective thought] Maybe Skip needs an assistant. Who knows? Now everyone enjoy your day. I'm going to make my first trip to the bathroom as the Headmaster. Thank you for stopping by, and I wish you all the best of luck here at the Academy.

SIMMONS leaves. Slowly LUNT, CARLSTAFF, X, L, and H leave, helping R up and out as well. HEADMASTER and SUPERINTENDANT pack up their briefcases and leave. Finally, BECKINBROUGH goes over to M, who is definitively sad.

BECKINBROUGH

You okay?

M

Yeah.

BECKINBROUGH

I get the impression if you had AI, you wouldn't say that.

M

You're right, I'm not okay.

BECKINBROUGH

You just got promoted to a no-work job with great pay and you're not all right? It takes quite a bit to please you.

M

Perhaps you didn't realize that my memory is backwards.

BECKINBROUGH

I know. I didn't mean to be rude. I understand how frustrating that could be. Thirteen years like that.

M

That's not the worst part.

BECKINBROUGH

What is?

M

I've been helping Sampson for 13 years to get to this point.

BECKINBROUGH

And that's bad?

M

[there is a long silence] The Academy gets shut down after this term is done.

BECKINBROUGH

What? Are you sure?

M

Positive.

BECKINBROUGH

Does Simmons know?

The question is met with silence. BECKINBROUGH and M exchange looks.

Didn't you always know this was going to happen?

M

Thirteen years ago, my memory of right now was very hazy. I assumed I was just forgetting. Besides, at the time, it was something to do. And as the years grew closer, I realized he was going to succeed but just before it closed down.

BECKINBROUGH

And you didn't have the heart to crush his dream?

M

How do you tell someone that fifteen years of work is going to be for nothing?

BECKINBROUGH

Will his book sell?

M

I don't know, I pretty much lose touch with him.

BECKINBROUGH

[pause] Prove yourself wrong. Tell him now. Change it all. Maybe he can keep the Academy open longer!

M

I don't tell him, though, that's the thing.

BECKINBROUGH

You're not driven by Fate. You have a say in your life, Matthew. Change your memory. Tell him now, give him time to prepare.

M

He'd know how long I've known, though.

BECKINBROUGH

Better now than letting him find out later and curse you for not telling him at all.

M

I can't.

BECKINGBROUGH

As a subject in a science-driven organization for so long, you should know better than anyone that free-will is—

M

You don't understand my condition!

BECKINBROUGH

I don't think you know it yourself! Do you really know the limitations? There are no boundaries! You can do what you like!

M

Then why haven't I yet? Explain that.

BECKINBROUGH

You're scared. Scared of your own will.

M

See, I already know what you're going to say, and I know I'm not going to follow your advice.

BECKINBROUGH

You *have* to tell Simmons! Both of your futures are at stake.

M

I can't do it!

SIMMONS comes back in, quite proud of himself.

SIMMONS

Can't do what?

M

Nothing. We were just talking about science stuff.

BECKINBROUGH

I was just leaving. Good luck, Headmaster. *[more intentful]* Good luck, M.

BECKINBROUGH exits. SIMMONS walks slowly up to the desk, takes the folders, and puts them in a neat pile on the corner. He sits in the cushy chair, taking extra time to fold his hands behind his head and put his feet up on the desk.

SIMMONS

Well, we did it.

M

You did it.

SIMMONS

We did. Don't sell yourself short.

M

I didn't have much say in the matter.

SIMMONS

Either way, I couldn't have done it without you.

M

I'm glad I could help.

SIMMONS

Shall we begin?

M

Sure. *[SIMMONS starts setting up the room. M gazes away.]* Sampson?

SIMMONS

Yeah? *[nothing]* What is it, Matthew? *[no response]* There's no point in delaying your speech. You know exactly what and when you're going to speak. What is it?

M

[slowly] Nothing.

SIMMONS

You sure?

M

Yeah. Let's get started. What can I do?

The lights slowly fade on the scene, with SIMMONS in his glory and M in his state of torment.