THE NEVER-AGAIN CLUB

by

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ABSTRACT

Seven decades and nearly as many genocides since the Holocaust, the slogan "never again" has been rendered all but meaningless. In the play The Never-Again Club, seventeen-year-old Alison, the Canadian granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, sets out to put things right. She plans to go to the Sudan as a humanitarian aid worker, encouraged from beyond the grave by a recently murdered Darfuri woman, but discouraged by her late grandmother. In the context of research that shows that the Holocaust can have psychological effects not just on survivors but on their children and grandchildren, the play examines the importance that the genocide of Jews continues to have in the lives of its survivors' families. As well, The Never-Again Club examines Western attitudes toward humanitarian activism more generally, and raises questions about the extent to which relatively affluent people should be expected to disrupt or even endanger their lives to help strangers.
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ACT I

SCENE ONE

Blackout. We hear Leykeh singing the Yiddish lullaby "Oyfn Pripetshik."


Dim light illuminates Alison asleep in bed. Marwa appears and approaches her.
MARWA: What you dreaming, Alison? Pleasant? Good. Not my child. He dream to his mother. But his mother don't come. Last time he see mother alive, I lie on him that he be safe, don't see no bad things. But he see the man with machete, into my shoulder, into my back. Mother blood on child, child urine on me. You dreaming pleasant, my dear? You living nice?

The lullaby stops abruptly as Leykeh, who looks like any middle-class Western grandmother but speaks with a heavy Eastern European accent, runs in and tackles Marwa.

LEYKEH: I told you no!

Alison bolts up in bed, confused, scared, and suddenly alone in the silence.

SCENE TWO

We hear Dennis singing Warren Zevon's "Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner" to himself before we see him enter a sparsely furnished bachelor pad. The room features a futon, stacks of books and magazines, and posters on the wall of Che Guevara and Mao. Dennis wears tight jeans and a corduroy jacket that he removes upon entering and tosses onto the floor. He exits into another room for a moment, returns, and stands looking around. He goes to the futon, kneels down, reaches underneath it, and finds a small bag of nuts. He chooses a magazine and sits on the futon, reading and snacking.

There is a knock at the door. Dennis looks up, waits, doesn't hear anything more and returns to his magazine. The knocking resumes.

DENNIS: Yeah?

ALISON: (offstage) Hello?

Dennis sighs, puts down the magazine, but takes his snack with him to the door. He opens it. Alison is dressed for a relatively formal evening out, perhaps a skirt and blouse.

DENNIS: Hello.

ALISON: Hi.

DENNIS: (after a beat) Yeah?

ALISON: (after a longer beat) I saw you tonight and I think you're awesome.
DENNIS: You saw me tonight?

ALISON: Your speech at the ceremony.

DENNIS: Oh. Thank you.

Dennis puts a handful of food into his mouth and chews noisily.

ALISON: It... Okay, how do I...? I'm just gonna... It... You made so much sense. Like, I've started to get this feeling recently that there's something wrong with me, that there's something wrong with... everything. But I've had trouble figuring out what it is, and I've been telling myself to ignore it. Because I have everything you could possibly want, and I don't just mean, you know... Money doesn't buy happiness, duh, but I have a loving family and friends and plenty of annoying guys who ask me out and every once in a while I say yes to one of them, and they're really not that bad... But something's been bothering me, something's been scaring me. I think it's that there's a... an inevitability... to my life. Like, I'm accepted into Health Science next year, first choice, and so fine, I'm gonna be a doctor, and that's great, but... You know, like, when you've had a good meal but you still feel like you have to eat something else to get the taste in your mouth just right? And now, suddenly, you walked in and said what you said... and... and suddenly, now I understand.

DENNIS: Did we used to go to the same high school?

ALISON: I don't think so.

DENNIS: Do you still go to high school?

ALISON: I graduate in two months. I'm Alison. Rosenthal.

DENNIS: Okay. Okay, I don't think... Well, okay. Okay, fine. I'm Dennis. Pleased to meet you.

Alison giggles.

DENNIS: What did I say that's funny?

ALISON: Nothing. Dennis is a funny name.

DENNIS: It's a funny name?

ALISON: It's... I mean it's an old man's name.
DENNIS: Okay. You do understand that every name, at least in most cultures, is given at birth and sticks with a person throughout his or her entire life. You'll still be Alison Rosenthal when you're ninety years old if you live that long, which you probably will because I bet your family has a good health insurance pl--

ALISON: No, I understand that.

DENNIS: Plus you're gonna be a doctor.

ALISON: I'm not stupid. Look, I understand that I... but I'm not stupid.

DENNIS: I don't think you're stupid. I think you're flaky.

ALISON: Thanks very much. That's the same thing.

DENNIS: No, it's not. You seem like the kind of girl who knows her multiplication tables, but you also seem like the kind of girl who'd follow a guy to his apartment on the pretext that he appealed to your intellect.

ALISON: It's not a pret--

DENNIS: You did follow me here, right?

ALISON: No, I... Well... Yeah.

DENNIS: Okay. I'm flattered, but look, I don't have a lot of time tonight. There's an article I have to finish reviewing for the blog I write for, and I've got a deadline, so if you want to come in, come in, but I don't do bullshit.

ALISON: Yeah, neither do I.

Dennis snorts out a laugh as she shuts the door and enters.

ALISON: Hey, I understand why you think that the reason I'm here is to --

DENNIS: (offering the bag) Can I get you something to eat?

ALISON: Is that drugs?

DENNIS: It's soy nuts.

Alison reaches in, takes one, hesitates, then eats it.
ALISON: It doesn't taste like much.

DENNIS: Your taste buds have been ruined by artificial flavourings. I don't have anything to drink. I've got water from the tap.

ALISON: No fair trade coffee?

DENNIS: No. Most of the ones that say fair trade aren't.

ALISON: I didn't know that.

DENNIS: You'd probably have nice eyes without the mascara.

ALISON: Look, I think... Um... Yeah... Okay, what you did tonight was really brave. I like what you said and I want to talk about that.

DENNIS: Kid --

ALISON: To go into a Holocaust Remembrance ceremony and lecture --

DENNIS: You don't have to --

ALISON: To stand up in the middle of a guy speaking about his late mother and lecture everybody about their failure to uphold the spirit of Never Again, it's --

DENNIS: You can shut up. I don't think you're stupid, okay? (putting his hand on her face) And even if I did --

ALISON: (stepping away) I don't think you're hot. Shit. God. Don't touch me please. (beat) It's just... Cuz... Listen. What you said is exactly what I've always known, only I didn't know I knew it. And now... They all think you're crazy, but I want to tell them, no, he's not crazy, you're crazy. I want to tell them I agree with you, I want to tell them you're right. But I know that if I just start talking like that... I'm gonna end up looking like an idiot and I'm not gonna convince anybody of anything, so... I need... the courage. And I need... to know what to say. And you're the only person I know that I can discuss this with, who can... who can help me... So... Can you... I mean... Do you understand?

DENNIS: Yeah. You're not flaky. You're just fucked up.

ALISON: No.
DENNIS: What are you doing here?

ALISON: I just... I just told... Oh... What am I doing here... Can I have some tap water, please?

DENNIS: Yeah. But then you've got to go. I don't have time --

ALISON: That was my father that you interrupted.

DENNIS: You want me to be sorry?

ALISON: No. No, I mean... thank you.

Dennis exits. Alison goes to the futon, wipes crumbs away from a section at the corner, and sits down. She checks her cell phone. Dennis returns with a mug and hands it to her.

DENNIS: Water.

ALISON: (re: cell phone) My mom wants to know where I am.

DENNIS: Downtown Montreal, in the apartment of an older guy you don't know.

ALISON: This is a weird mug.

DENNIS: I took a bus and a metro and I walked four blocks.

ALISON: Who serves cold water in a mug?

DENNIS: And I got thrown out of the synagogue by two security guards.

ALISON: It's not really cold...

DENNIS: What are you, an Iroquois tracker?

ALISON: Teach me how not to become one of them.

DENNIS: An Iroquois tracker?

ALISON: No. You know what I mean.
DENNIS: I have two glasses. They're both soaking in the sink. This mug is from Nicaragua. A crafts fair in the city of Granada. I bought it from a thirteen-year-old boy who picks through garbage to find pieces of broken pottery that he can glue together and sell, and by the way, he sure as hell also eats whatever food he finds in those dumpsters. I'm sorry the water's not cold, I'm sorry the mug is weird, I have to read an article, and you are already one of them.

He returns to his magazine.

ALISON: No, I'm not. I wasn't complaining. I was just asking about the mug. And if you just let the water run for a little, it'll get cold. (beat) But then you're wasting water. Okay. You see? I'm learning already. I don't actually understand how wasting water works, because it comes up through the pipes from a lake or something, and then whatever goes down the drain goes back through the pipes and into the lake again. Cuz water's a renewable resource, right? (beat) But hey, you can teach me how I'm wrong about that. Hey, did you notice that my dad took out his cell phone and put it on the podium before he started speaking? It wasn't to see the time. It was so he'd know if the score changed in the hockey game. (helps herself to soy nuts) A delicate earthy bouquet with hints of almond and basil and... sorry, tree bark. The emperor has no clothes, okay? This tastes like shit.

Dennis devours a mouthful of them.

ALISON: You'd be happier if I was here to hook up?

DENNIS: Go home, kid.

ALISON: Hey. If you actually meant what you said... Your words had an effect on me. It worked. Shouldn't this be what you want?

DENNIS: Yeah, the thing is I can see why you're doing this. Like everyone else, you're pissed at your father, and you want me to help you be a rebellious teen.

ALISON: That's bullshit.

DENNIS: That's your motivation.

ALISON: Well, even if it was, so what? What's your motivation? Peace and goodwill towards all men?
DENNIS: And women, yes.

ALISON: Fine. But all of a sudden? Like, why tonight? Why didn't you barge into our ceremony last year and scold us for only thinking of our dead relatives when there are people in the world suffering right now that we're not doing anything about? That was true last year too. What, you were busy a year ago? Your favourite TV show was on? (pause) Well?

DENNIS: What do you want from me exactly?

ALISON: Guidance.

DENNIS: What am I? A guru on a mountaintop?

ALISON: Clearly not. I just don't have anyone else.

He grunts, chooses a magazine from the stack and hands it to her.

DENNIS: Read this.

ALISON: Now?

DENNIS: No. Take it home, come back, and you can ask me questions about it.

ALISON: (takes it) Okay. Thank you. (starts out) Why not last year?

DENNIS: CSI: Miami. Season finale.

ALISON: Seriously?

DENNIS: No. I was in Colombia.

SCENE THREE

Marwa sits alone in a spotlight.

MARWA: When I was alive, I did not believe in afterlife. I thought, the world has so many people and it is so crowded. Where could there possibly be room for all people who ever lived? But there is a place. Perhaps not for all people. Perhaps only for people like me.

Lights up on the full scene, Marwa and Leykeh at a fancy restaurant table elaborately appointed with a red floral
centrepiece, champagne, and baskets of fruit and bread. Leykeh is halfway through her meal, but the dish in front of Marwa hasn't been touched.

LEYKEH: I'm going to tell them what you did.

MARWA: So what?

LEYKEH: They are going to kick you out.

MARWA: You think I care about that? Big shame, I only be regular dead. No more fancy restaurant consolation prize. Don't have to be for eternity with bloody Bosnians, Cambodians, Armenians, and you.

In an instant, Marwa is once again alone in her spotlight.

MARWA: When I died, I was greeted by... by a waiter, in a black suit and bowtie. Just as I imagined there must be at fancy hotels in Khartoum. Very handsome. Stood up straight, with a towel on his arm, and a perfect smile. All his teeth. He led me to a glass door with a sign painted, beautiful, red and gold: The Never-Again Club.

Lights up on the whole table.

LEYKEH: You looked at me in the eyes. You told me, "Don't worry. I will leave her alone."

MARWA: I lied.

LEYKEH: I should kill you.

MARWA: Too late.

LEYKEH: This is funny to you?

Back to Marwa's spotlight.
MARWA: Bloody stupid woman. Funny? I don't laugh, I don't smile even one second since I be here. This place. So big like in my life I never see. Tables over the horizon, with red flowers and red lace tablecloths. People, so many people, talking a hundred languages, eating, drinking. A man with long hair playing the piano, and a woman with short hair singing happy songs. My waiter took me to this table with an empty chair, soft on my behind like sitting on a camel's stomach. He bring me food, he pour me to drink. But I don't smile one time. All through, I have only one thing to my mind: What happen to my boy?

SCENE FOUR

IRENE: (offstage) Brian!

Brian Rosenthal, in a suit that he's been wearing long enough tonight for it to become slightly disheveled, is on a cell phone. He stands in a modern and tastefully appointed kitchen.

BRIAN: R-O-S...

Irene enters with a portable phone to one ear and a cell phone in her hand on which she texts constantly. She is also still dressed for an evening out.

IRENE: Brian, I need you to go calm down your father.

BRIAN: E-N-T-H...

IRENE: Brian!

BRIAN: I'm on the phone.

IRENE: Just one?

BRIAN: (to the phone) Sorry. H-A-L.

IRENE: (to the phone) Yes, Lauren, hi. This is Alison's mom.

BRIAN: No, just one H. Look, could you put me through to Officer Tremblay, please? We've already...

IRENE: Is she at your house, by any chance?

We hear a dog barking.
IRENE: (to Brian) Brian, he's... I think, out of frustration, he's been throwing things at the dog.

BRIAN: So let him throw things at the dog.

IRENE: (to the phone) No, at the moment, no. You wouldn't happen to know where she could be?

BRIAN: (to the phone) All right, well as soon as he can, please. Tell him...

IRENE: No, we've tried there.

BRIAN: Could you tell him...

IRENE: Yes, it's been several hours. Now, I don't want to get you...

BRIAN: That's... Okay. Well, as soon as you can. Thank you. (hangs up) Irene, the police say --

IRENE: (to Brian) Go deal with your father.

BRIAN: Irene!

IRENE: See if you can convince him to go home. Then come back here and tell me what the police say. All I need on top of everything is your father screaming and a dog carcass in the dining room. Or vice versa, god forbid.

BRIAN: God forbid.

He exits.

IRENE: (to the phone) Yes. Sorry. Yes. The police are... We've spoken to them already many... Just now. Listen... She disappeared at the... We were at the Holocaust Remembrance, at the Beth Israel, and my, and my husband was speaking, and then a crazy man came in, and security kicked him out, and when everything calmed down, Alison was gone... All night, but she doesn't answer me when I... Listen, tell your friends, please. Call... Call everyone you can call. And let me know as soon as --

Alison enters holding the magazine. Irene drops both phones.

IRENE: Oh, shit.
Irene runs to Alison and hugs her. Alison doesn't resist but neither does she participate with enthusiasm.

IRENE: Brian!

Brian enters.

BRIAN: I'm gonna throw him into a taxi whether he... Oh my god.

He runs over and joins in the hug. After a moment, Zaida enters in a panic. He wears a three-piece suit, old fashioned but stylish, and he speaks with an Eastern European accent.


Zaida runs to her. She's being hug-sandwiched by her parents, but he finds whatever body parts of hers that are available and showers them with kisses.

ZAIDA: Oy. Oy. Oy. I was so worried. Where you was? What's happen? We call the police. Oy, mamenyu. Thanks god. Thanks god. Oy.

BRIAN: (ending the hug) Dad, stop it. Calm down.

ZAIDA: I'm so happy.

BRIAN: She's here, all right? She's okay.

With the parental hug finished, Zaida seizes the opportunity to hug Alison himself.

ZAIDA: Oy, Alison. Ziese mamenyu tayyes. What's happen? You run away?

ALISON: No.

BRIAN: Dad.

ZAIDA: Somebody hurt you?

IRENE: Zaida, stop, please.

ZAIDA: I don't understand it.

BRIAN: Dad!

ALISON: Zaida, you want a coffee?

ZAIDA: No!
ALISON: I'm gonna have a coffee. I'll make you one. I'm fine. I just got lost for a little bit. I'm fine.

ZAIDA: Oy.

*Alison puts down the magazine and goes about preparing the coffees.*

IRENE: Zaida, sit down.

ZAIDA: (obeying) Yeah. I don't understand it.

IRENE: Alison, I can make you a coffee. You drink coffee?

ALISON: I'm seventeen.

IRENE: Well, sit down. I'll do it. Are you okay?

ALISON: Yeah.

ZAIDA: (to himself) Oy, oy, oy, oy.

BRIAN: Where were you?

ALISON: I'm sorry I left without saying anything. I needed some air. I just needed to think for a bit.

IRENE: To think about what?

BRIAN: Where did you go?

ALISON: You know what, I don't actually need any coffee. I'm just gonna go to bed.

*Alison gets up and takes her magazine.*

BRIAN: No, you're not.

ALISON: (kissing Zaida) Good night, Zaida.

ZAIDA: Good night, mamenyu.

BRIAN: Alison, you're going to stay here and explain... Alison! Alison, get back here. Hey!

*But she's gone. Brian and Irene take the situation in until:*

ZAIDA: Yeah, a coffee. (to Irene) Tell me, you have maybe some danish?
SCENE FIVE

At the restaurant table, Leykeh eats. Marwa sits with her eyes closed, speaking inaudibly. Leykeh notices what she's doing.

LEYKEH: What you doing? You stop. Get out of her head!

Leykeh shakes Marwa, slaps her, tries everything she can to make her stop, but Marwa maintains her focus, and her voice gets louder.

MARWA: ... a good boy, my Wahid. You like him, Alison. One time he play a chasing game with the other boys, and Wahid he is so fast, he always win the prize, fresh mango. But the one boy he cry, he never don't win. Wahid give him the mango so he stop to cry.

LEYKEH: I will make you shut up.

MARWA: A gentle boy, Wahid. At six year old, he tend sheep. One time, sick baby orphan lamb.

LEYKEH: Please.

MARWA: He wake up many times all night, feed it, care to it. My Wahid, he make it strong.

Leykeh closes her eyes and starts to sing her lullaby as Marwa continues.

MARWA: When I am lying on him outside our home, everything burning, machete in and out and in and out my back, Wahid say to me, "Don't worry, my mother. It not hurt long. I be strong. I run faster than anybody. I be all right." Eight year old. Eight year old, Alison.

SCENE SIX

Alison and Lauren, 17, sit on a park bench. They wear school uniforms. Lauren eats fast food souvlaki; Alison eats a salad.

LAUREN: I still don't get it.

ALISON: Well try, Lauren.

LAUREN: I am.
ALISON: Then what don't you get?

LAUREN: Ali... How old is this guy?

ALISON: That's what you don't get?

LAUREN: I don't get any of it. You ran off without telling anybody and followed this guy home who had just gotten, like, thrown out of the shul, and then he gave you warm water and, like, a politics magazine and now you won't talk to your parents about it so now you're in a fight with them. And I don't blame them, Ali. Your mom called me at one o'clock in the morning to try to find you cuz she didn't know where you were.

ALISON: So, what, you're pissed at me cuz my mom woke you up?

LAUREN: I'm not pissed at you. And she didn't wake me up, actually. I had just gotten off the phone with Josh, who, by the way, I talk to every night now, cuz I don't think I could fall asleep if I didn't. His voice is like, you know the British guy who does nature shows? "The wildebeest is on the grasslands of... something." I mean I don't watch that stuff, obviously, but my dad does, and when we go to Florida for winter break, he has it on at night in the hotel room, and I love falling asleep to a deep British voice, and Josh's voice is kinda like that. He's not British - I mean, no shit - but he's kinda like that.

ALISON: Okay.

LAUREN: You want the rest of my souvlaki? I'm kinda done.

ALISON: No thanks. I'm thinking of maybe becoming vegetarian.

LAUREN: Seriously? What's happening to --

ALISON: There's a thing in the magazine about chicken farms and --

LAUREN: Oh come on. Seriously?

ALISON: Do you know what's going on in Darfur?

LAUREN: That's in Africa?
ALISON: Yes, Africa. There's a thing in the magazine about it. And then I went online last night and I read more stuff. Testimonials. I mean I'd heard about it on the news, but... There are soldiers going into towns and just killing people cuz of their race, and families are split up, and girls are raped, and little kids are hiding and hoping the soldiers don't hear them breathing... That doesn't remind you of something? Stories you've heard from your grandparents?

LAUREN: 'Kay, yeah, Ali, it's terrible. But, I mean, what are you, the prime minister?

ALISON: Lauren! What if this was sixty years ago and we were talking about Jews?

LAUREN: The Holocaust didn't happen because of girls in high school. And you're not gonna fix all the bad shit in the world, well, by doing anything, but definitely not by sneaking off to the slum apartment of some creepy old guy downtown.

ALISON: He's not even thirty.

LAUREN: We're seventeen. And I really don't get why any of this means you can't eat souvlaki. Vegetarian's, like, almost as weird as going kosher. Hey, how 'bout this? Josh has a cousin who's like a seven and a half who just broke up with his girlfriend. He goes to a public school, but he's pretty normal. I should set you up.

ALISON: No thanks.

LAUREN: Yeah, I don't get this at all.

SCENE SEVEN

Leykeh and Marwa at the restaurant table. There are now several untouched plates of food in front of Marwa. Leykeh eats as they talk.

LEYKEH: What you got it, a problem in the head? What kind of power you think she have it, one little girl? Go be a ghost in the dreams of other people, important men. Go tell your stories to your Nazis, maybe you make them stop.
MARWA: I come here, and from first moment, all you talk about, your beautiful granddaughter. So smart, so good, popular.

LEYKEH: Yes.


LEYKEH: This is not what I meant.

MARWA: No? Alison is special. You know that. A good heart. She wants to help.

LEYKEH: Vey iz mir. You crazy. You want it all the special should be in dangerous places? They should be protected.

MARWA: Yes. Someone must come to protect my special, special boy. Of course I don't stop with Alison, but if I cannot get her, I cannot get no one.

SCENE EIGHT

Alison and Dennis in his apartment. They are each reading a magazine. A plate of fresh vegetables is between them, but only Alison eats from it.

ALISON: MNC?

DENNIS: Multinational corporation. Companies that operate in lots of countries and force governments to --

ALISON: Thanks. I'm figuring it out.

DENNIS: Yeah, the important thing to know is that they force governments to lower taxes and environmental standards and labour standards, cuz they'll go set up wherever they can exploit people the most. So they're more important than governments when it comes to setting major policies. They're behind free trade, they're behind most wars, and they're behind the extinction of the subsistence farm--

ALISON: You're not having the veggies I brought.

DENNIS: Yeah.

ALISON: They're organic.
DENNIS: Yeah, product of Mexico.

ALISON: You won't eat Mexican carrots?

DENNIS: Think about what you just said. How far away is Mexico?

ALISON: Uh... pretty far.

DENNIS: Over four thousand kilometres from Montreal to Mexico City. Where's the closest carrot farm?

ALISON: Uh... oh.

DENNIS: They have shitty environmental standards in Mexico, first of all. We have shitty ones here too, but they're even worse. And when you're growing something to be shipped that far, you have to fill it with chemicals so it doesn't rot along the way. Plus, a truck with a diesel engine has to travel those four thousand kilometres to bring you your carrots. That's free trade, god bless NAFTA.

ALISON: Oh. Thanks. Sorry. I didn't know that. (beat) Um, I'm thinking of becoming a vegetarian.

DENNIS: Yeah. Anyone who's not vegan is either ignorant or heartless.

SCENE NINE

Leykeh and Marwa at their table.

LEYKEH: You think I don't know what you feeling? You think I don't know what is it war? You was in Poland? When I was ten years old, the soldiers come to the town. They line everybody up to go in trucks, and my mother whispers that I should count to three and run to the forest. One, two, three, and my mother starts singing like a lunatic and dancing a polka, and I run like she said. I turn around when I get to the trees. Everybody is watching my mother, and the soldiers are clapping and laughing, and when she finish, she make a curtsy, and they shoot her in the head.
SCENE TEN

Dennis alone in his apartment working on his laptop. There's a knock at the door.

ALISON: (offstage) I'm here.

DENNIS: Open.

Alison enters holding a plastic bag.

ALISON: Sorry. I couldn't leave until my parents left. They were supposed to go pick up my grandfather and take him to look at a seniors' home, but then he just showed up at our door. He said he thought they had arranged for him to come over to us, but they obviously didn't, it's, like, a forty-five minute walk, so everybody started shouting about who said --

DENNIS: You went on the website?

ALISON: Yeah. It's shocking. I mean, you think of the United States as a basically decent country, but then, Panama, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Chile, Grenada -- which I didn't know was even a country -- and then weapons to Saddam Hussein, weapons to Saudi Arabia, weapons to...

DENNIS: Yeah.

ALISON: ... to the guy in Egypt.

DENNIS: Any questions?

ALISON: Well yeah. How the fuck do they get away with it?

DENNIS: Hmm. You got enough money and a big enough military you can get away with whatever you want.

ALISON: But that's... that's not good enough. People accomplish things. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and... Nixon...

DENNIS: Nixon?

ALISON: Nelson.

DENNIS: Mandela?

ALISON: Yeah. You don't need money and an army. You just need... convictions and determination.
DENNIS: All right. You're quite the Spice Girl.

ALISON: What? Oh, here. (hands him the bag) I brought organic strawberries from a farm near my country house. They're small and mushy and I think there's half a beetle in there, so I challenge you to find a reason not to eat these.

DENNIS: Thanks.

ALISON: You're welcome.

DENNIS: You should use reusable bags.

ALISON: Oh, so close.

DENNIS: Why couldn't you leave until your parents left?

ALISON: Why couldn't... Well, they'd have asked where I was going. And I can come up with a good lie when I need it, but they were supposed to be out all aftern--

DENNIS: Why can't you tell them?

ALISON: Well... they for sure don't want me coming here. I mean, you know that.

DENNIS: Yeah. The thing is, Mahatma, if you want to stand up to MNCs, you gotta be able to stand up to mom and dad.

SCENE ELEVEN

Marwa and Leykeh at their table.

LEYKEH: I keep running, day and night, and I join with a group of fighters in the forest, Partisans, and I stay with them. And the Germans find out we are there, and they light the trees on fire.

MARWA: (to herself) Fire.

LEYKEH: Fire all around.

MARWA: Fire and smoke.

LEYKEH: Yes. (Now she is talking to herself too.) So much smoke, I can't breathe.
MARWA: Fire and smoke. Flames falling from the roof, and Wahid is coughing and screaming.

LEYKEH: Everybody is coughing and screaming.

MARWA: The door is tied shut from the outside. When I reach through to find the rope, machete into my fingers.

LEYKEH: We are running through the trees, but we know machine guns are waiting.

MARWA: We push on the door, but we know machetes are waiting. So much smoke, I can hardly breathe to push.

LEYKEH: I can hardly breathe to run.

LEYKEH: Like choking on a hot plum pit in the throat.

MARWA: Like choking on a hot mango pit in the throat.

LEYKEH: Fire.

MARWA: Fire and smoke.

LEYKEH: Fire and smoke.

SCENE TWELVE

Alison and Dennis are in his apartment. He lies on the futon with a magazine and soy nuts.

ALISON: In six weeks?

DENNIS: Yeah.

ALISON: Well, what are you gonna do there?

DENNIS: There are always NGOs that need volunteers.

ALISON: Isn't it dangerous?

DENNIS: Sure. It's much safer to stay here and read about it.

ALISON: Yeah. Good point. Okay, I'm coming with.

DENNIS: No, you're not.

ALISON: Sure I am.
DENNIS: You're a teenage girl.

ALISON: What the fuck does that mean? I'm going to Africa.

DENNIS: Yeah, okay.

ALISON: I am.

DENNIS: You have no idea what's involved. You have no concept whatsoever of --

ALISON: I'm going.

DENNIS: You're not.

ALISON: I'm so much more mature than you think.

DENNIS: If you were, you'd realize --

ALISON: I'm going, I'm going, I'm going!

Dennis sighs.

SCENE THIRTEEN

Marwa and Leykeh at their table, eyes closed as before.

MARWA: Good girl, Alison.

LEYKEH: You stay home where you safe.

MARWA: There is a boy who needs you.

LEYKEH: You have a beautiful life.

MARWA: Beauty is to be shared.

LEYKEH: I suffered so you can live beautiful.

SCENE FOURTEEN

At the door of his apartment, Dennis stands and takes in Alison, who has just arrived with a suitcase.

DENNIS: What is that?

ALISON: I'm packed and ready to go.

DENNIS: I'm not leaving for thirty-eight days.
ALISON: I know.

DENNIS: So what is that?

ALISON: I'm showing you I'm serious.

DENNIS: Oh. Well, job well done.

ALISON: So I'm coming with you.

DENNIS: Alison --

ALISON: Come on.

DENNIS: What do you think we'd be doing there? Hanging out at the mall in Khartoum?

ALISON: Fuck you. You know I'm not like that.

DENNIS: I know you think you're not.

ALISON: Fuck you. Do you have any idea how hard it is to... My dad is a very successful tax accountant, and his definition of a humanitarian crisis is... when the Canadiens' starting goalie is injured. And my mom is vice-president of a PR firm and she's thinking of running for town council because she's pissed that our suburban utopia has too many one-way streets. And all of my friends and their parents are exactly the same, and I'm well on my way to med school at McGill and a career at the Jewish General that'll make all of them very happy, and instead I'm standing here with my bag packed ready to go to Darfur and help poor black Muslims I've never met. So... Call me a spoiled brat again, I'm gonna... I'm... I'm gonna throw something hard at your face.

DENNIS: Fair enough. Sorry.

ALISON: I'm going with you.

DENNIS: You're not Gandhi, Alison. You're not gonna change the world.

ALISON: I might.

DENNIS: You're not. So why go?

Leykeh and Marwa begin to interfere.

LEYKEH: What you gonna change it?
MARWA: One person can do so much.
LEYKEH: What can you do?
MARWA: You can do your best.
DENNIS: Why, Alison?
ALISON: Why not?
DENNIS: What kind of ten year-old's answer is --
ALISON: Why do you go? What are you gonna accomplish that I can't?
DENNIS: I can... I've got skills. I've been trained. I've got years of experience.
ALISON: And a giant fucking ego.
DENNIS: The thing is, I can't be happy doing anything else. But I'm pretty sure that, for all your good intentions -- and I mean this in the nicest possible way -- you're gonna get off the plane, see one noseless leper, take one dump in an outhouse with a cockroach inches from your bare ass, and you're gonna escape back home at the speed of wireless internet.
ALISON: Then you don't know me very well. I can't stay here and just hope that I eventually stop giving a shit. So... Mom, Dad, everybody, fuck you all. I'm going to Africa.
LEYKEH: Oy. Oy, mamenyu.
MARWA: That's right.
DENNIS: Really?
ALISON: Yeah.
DENNIS: At your own expense.
ALISON: Yeah.
DENNIS: At your own risk.
ALISON: Uh-huh.
MARWA: Good girl. You take care to the children.
LEYKEH: (to Marwa) Look what you did. (to Alison) You take it back. You change you mind.


During Dennis' speech, Irene, Brian, Zaida, and Lauren appear in the Rosenthals' kitchen. Alison goes to them, but Dennis continues to address her as though she is still with him.

DENNIS: Okay. Well, let's give you the benefit of the doubt, then. It's too short notice to get a visa into the Sudan, and anyway no NGO would accept you. You'll just have to show up and lie about your age. You'll probably be able to pay a little extra and get a quick visa to Egypt, and after that, there's always a way to cross a land border. That's how I got into Venezuela. I'm assuming you've got a passport, of course. You won't be able to take all this stuff, it's gotta be just whatever you can carry with you. I know a guy who sells secondhand hiking knapsacks, if you need, I can get you one of those. Some people see a doctor; I don't cuz I don't like the feeling of being immune to diseases that everyone around me is too poor to avoid, but if you decide to get vaccinated, that's your call.

ALISON: Mom, Dad...

DENNIS: You might want to try to pick up some Arabic. It's not actually the language where we're going, in Darfur. Really, there, everybody speaks their own tribal language. But Arabic's the lingua franca. I'm assuming you know what that means.

ALISON: Mom, Dad...

DENNIS: Now, I'm pretty expert in first aid, but we won't necessarily be together there. The YMCA has reasonably priced courses, so that's something you might want to think about cuz you never know what the medical facilities are going to be like wherever you end up, usually not very good. The ability to put together a makeshift tourniquet was a lifesaver for me in Colombia. You want me to write this stuff down?

ALISON: Mom, Dad, everybody... I'm going... I'm going to... I'm... Hey, be proud of me, cuz... I'm going... Mom, Dad... I am going to --
Blackout.

End of Act One.
ACT II

SCENE ONE

Spoken in darkness:

ALISON: Mom, Dad, everybody... I'm going... I'm going to... I'm... Hey, be proud of me, cuz... I'm going... Mom, Dad... I am going to...

IRENE: You're going to what, sweetheart?

ALISON: I'm going to... be a doctor, one day.

Lights up on Zaida's kitchen. It's small and simple, with black-and-white photos on the walls, kitschy magnets on the fridge, and a couple of cardboard boxes with kitchenware protruding. Zaida sits at a small table and becomes increasingly frustrated as he clicks a remote control at a tiny TV, to no avail. He wears an undershirt and slacks. A bag of chips is open beside him.

There is a knock at the door, but Zaida doesn't hear it. The knocking gets louder, and he has a moment of not understanding the noise before he figures out where it's coming from. He rushes to the door.

ALISON: (offstage) Zaida?

ZAIDA: Who is it?

ALISON: (offstage) It's Alison.

ZAIDA: Oy!

He opens the door.

ZAIDA: Alison!

He hugs her and kisses her cheeks as he speaks.


He exits to another room. She closes the door and steps into the kitchen.
ZAIDA: (offstage) Tell me, you hungry, mamenyu? I buy fresh apples, the best, one-ninety-nine a pound.

ALISON: No, it's okay.

He re-enters in the process of putting on a golf shirt.

ZAIDA: What's mean no? Fresh! Kosher!

ALISON: Yeah. I just had breakfast.

ZAIDA: It's one o'clock.

ALISON: It's Sunday.

ZAIDA: Oh. (realizes she's still standing) Sit down!

She does.

ZAIDA: You like it the apart-a-ment?

ALISON: It's very nice.

ZAIDA: Yeah. You daddy say it's too small, but I'm small. What I need it big? And good neighbours. Mine age. And a nurse downstairs all night, just in case. It's good, no?

ALISON: Very good.

ZAIDA: Oy. I have it fresh herring. You have to taste it this.

ALISON: I'll have the apple.

ZAIDA: Yeah? Oy! It's so good, you never believe it.

Thrilled, Zaida goes about preparing apple slices for his granddaughter as they talk.

ZAIDA: Yeah. An apple. A green one, like you like it.

ALISON: Zaida.

ZAIDA: Granny Smith.

ALISON: Zaida, can I --

ZAIDA: You know what's mean Granny Smith? The best! From California.
ALISON: Yeah. Zaida, do you know --

ZAIDA: Oy, I'm so happy you come. Tell me, maybe you can fix it mine television?

ALISON: What's wrong with your --

ZAIDA: (abandoning the apple for the remote control) Look, mamenyu. I push it, but nothing's happen. I don't understand it.

ALISON: I'll have a look.

ZAIDA: Good. Oy, you deserve it a million apples.

ALISON: Thank you.

He returns to the apple. As they talk, she takes the batteries out of the remote, turns them around, and puts them back in.

ALISON: Zaida?

ZAIDA: Yeah.

ALISON: I want to... Okay. Do you know what the Sudan is?

ZAIDA: Yeah. The what?

ALISON: The Sudan.

ZAIDA: What's mean?

ALISON: It's a country in Africa.

ZAIDA: Yeah? With the Arabs or the schwartzes?

ALISON: With the... (giggles) With both. But there's a war there.

ZAIDA: (suddenly devastated) Oy. Mamenyu. I don't have it any Coke. What you gonna drink?

ALISON: I don't need anything to drink.

ZAIDA: You want it prune juice?

ALISON: No. Thank you. Just the apple is fine.

ZAIDA: No.
ALISON: Yeah.

ZAIDA: Yeah? Okay. (presents her with it) Enjoy, mamenyu.

ALISON: Thank you, Zaida.

He sits with her at the table and watches expectantly as she takes a bite.

ALISON: It's very good.

ZAIDA: Yeah? Terrific. I buy it at the Super C. I tell the man, only if it's fresh. If not, I don't want it.

ALISON: Zaida --

ZAIDA: If it's no good, I take it back.

ALISON: It's very --

ZAIDA: You know why?

ALISON: Zaida.

ZAIDA: Because it's for my granddaughter.

ALISON: Zaida --

ZAIDA: Oy, Alison, you come for a visit, ziese mamenyu tay-

ALISON: Zaida. Zaida. I want to ask you something.

ZAIDA: Yeah. What is, mamenyu?

ALISON: Okay. Um... There's a war in Africa. In that country. In the Sudan. It's... There are lots of innocent people, children, who are getting hurt and getting killed.

ZAIDA: Oy. So many problems.

ALISON: Yeah. So... I want to help them.

ZAIDA: Yeah? How you gonna help? You raise it money?

ALISON: No.

ZAIDA: I get my wallet.
ALISON: No. I'm... Zaida. You know how you talk about the Polish people in your town?

ZAIDA: The Polish? I hate it.

ALISON: I know.

ZAIDA: The Germans, they come and they kill it all the Jewish. And the Polish, what they do it? Nothing!

ALISON: Yeah. So, I never want to be like that.


ALISON: When there are people getting hurt, it's important to help them.

ZAIDA: Sure.

ALISON: So... I should go to Africa, right?

ZAIDA: To Africa?

ALISON: To the Sudan.

ZAIDA: To the war?

ALISON: Yeah.

ZAIDA: Why?

ALISON: Well --

ZAIDA: You want to go to the war?

ALISON: I'm asking. What do you think?

ZAIDA: No!

ALISON: But --

ZAIDA: What's mean? You want to get killed?

ALISON: I want to help people.

ZAIDA: You have a gun? You gonna fight?

ALISON: No.

ZAIDA: What you gonna do?
ALISON: I... I don't know yet.

ZAIDA: You know what is it, war? Suffering! I lose it the mother, the father, and the sisters. Everybody killed. I tell you the stories?

ALISON: Yeah, you've told me --

ZAIDA: Three years I don't take it off the boots. Because always you have to be ready to run. I hide it in the forest. I live like a animal. And I fight. I get caught by the Germans. I run away. One time I get shot.

ALISON: I know.

ZAIDA: And this was only in Europe the war. Imagine it a war in Africa.

ALISON: Zaida.

ZAIDA: You want I should tell you again the stories?

ALISON: I know the stories.

ZAIDA: Then why you want to go to this place?

ALISON: Because I know the stories! It's the same thing, Zaida, happening all over again. There are mothers and fathers and sisters there... Somebody has to go help them.

ZAIDA: Somebody else.

ALISON: How can you say that?

ZAIDA: Not you.

ALISON: Zaida.

ZAIDA: Mine family already have it a war.

Lights up on Leykeh at her table, listening intently.

ZAIDA: And I survive it. And I come here with you Baba, and I raise it a family, with all the good things. I get out of the suffering. I hate it if you go back.

As Alison takes this in, Leykeh stands up, closes her eyes, and whispers inaudibly.
ZAIDA: You just a little girl.

Lights up on Marwa beside Leykeh, doing the same thing. For a moment, Alison is deep in thought. Then:

ALISON: No. I'm a big girl.

Lights down on Marwa and Leykeh. Alison turns the TV on with the remote.

ZAIDA: How you do it?

She turns it off.

ALISON: The batteries were in wrong.

ZAIDA: The batteries?

ALISON: Yeah. I turned them around. You have to put the plus with the plus...

ZAIDA: How you know to do this?

She smiles.

ZAIDA: You so smart.

ALISON: It works now.

ZAIDA: Oy. Thank you. (kisses her) I have it a football today.

ALISON: I had a feeling.

ZAIDA: You a genius. You not going to Africa.

ALISON: Well... It was just a question.

ZAIDA: Just a question.

ALISON: Yeah. I was just asking. I wanted to see what you'd... I was just hoping... Don't tell Mommy and Daddy that I asked you, okay? They'd get mad.

ZAIDA: Don't tell you Mommy and Daddy?

ALISON: It's our special secret. Okay?

ZAIDA: A secret.

ALISON: Yeah.
ZAIDA: You not going.

Alison shakes her head.

ZAIDA: Oy. Alison. Mamenyu tayyes. You have such a good heart. You take it a piece sponge cake. I buy yesterday a fresh one. From the kosher bakery, on Bourret. I have it a friend there, a religious man. I tell him I only want it the best. Oy! Maybe you fix it mine television?

ALISON: I just did.


ALISON: Did I see beer in your fridge?

ZAIDA: A beer? Sure! I got it Molson, the best. We make it a l'chaim.

SCENE TWO

Marwa and Leykeh at their table. Marwa's uneaten food is beginning to pile up.

MARWA: Why do you interfere?

LEYKEH: You interfering. She needs her Baba should help to keep her safe.

MARWA: She is of the safest people in the world.

LEYKEH: Because of me. But you want she should go to your hell in the desert, god forbid.

MARWA: I lived by the river.

LEYKEH: Mazel tov.

MARWA: By a big river. Wild orange trees. Mango, guava, fresh sugar cane for a snack. Collect water, firewood, grow millet in the day; play drums, drink tea, tell stories in the night. I still smell wild oranges. I can taste it.

LEYKEH: Ask a waiter. He bring you thousand oranges.

MARWA: If Alison will go there, she will know this smell.
LEYKEH: Or if she will go to the supermarket.

MARWA: I taste wild oranges. And blood.

SCENE THREE

Dennis's apartment. He lounges on the futon. Lauren sits cautiously on the edge of it, holding a small vase with gold-coloured liquid and little wooden sticks.

LAUREN: Every couple weeks or so. That's how long it takes for the sticks to... to soak up the perfume. Then you turn them upside-down, and for a few weeks, you let the scent, you know, from the top half... evaporate... into the... air. And then... vice-versa, you know. It can last, like, six months.

DENNIS: Uh-huh.

LAUREN: It's a top seller where I work.

DENNIS: Where's that?

LAUREN: Uh, a little place at the Fairview Mall. You know, home furnishings... decor... It comes in, like, six different... scents. And you can get it refilled.

DENNIS: Well, thank-you.

LAUREN: Yeah, you're welcome.

She scans the walls for possible topics of conversation while he scans her.

LAUREN: This one's Tropic Breeze.

DENNIS: You ever smell a tropic breeze?

LAUREN: Well, yeah. I was on a cruise a few times.

He studies her like Jane Goodall with a chimpanzee. She squirms under his gaze, twirls some hair around her finger, brings the hair to her mouth, and chews on it nervously.

DENNIS: You always do that?

LAUREN: What?

DENNIS: Eat your hair.
LAUREN: Hmm? Oh. Uh, when I'm nervous, I guess.

DENNIS: You're nervous?

She tries to come up with a response but can't.

LAUREN: (calls to the next room) Ali?

ALISON: (offstage) What's up?

LAUREN: You need help in there?

ALISON: (offstage) No. I'll be in in a second. You relax.

LAUREN: (to herself) Okay. (pause) Uh, Dennis?

DENNIS: Yeah?

LAUREN: What made you want to be, you know, what you are?

DENNIS: What I am?

LAUREN: Well, an international... helper... guy.

DENNIS: That's a really good question.

Alison enters with a big bowl.

ALISON: Six-bean salad with herbs and shredded beets.

DENNIS: Lauren was just asking why I chose to become an international helper guy.

ALISON: I'm glad you two are getting along. You see, this was a good idea. I'll be right back with bowls and forks.

DENNIS: I only have two forks.

ALISON: I'll use a spoon.

Alison leaves the bowl on the futon and exits.

LAUREN: I mean, it's obviously, you know, it's a really good thing to be doing. More people should do it.

DENNIS: You want to?

LAUREN: Yeah, maybe, one day.
DENNIS: Alison and I are going to the Sudan in two weeks. You can come with.

LAUREN: Alison and you?

Alison sticks her head out from the next room. She holds a plastic utensil.

ALISON: Is this thing what you're calling your second fork?

DENNIS: What would you call it?

ALISON: I think it's a kiwi knife.

DENNIS: Well, it serves the purpose.

ALISON: (laughs) You and your vow of poverty. (re-exits) I'm buying you a twenty-four piece set of quality silverware.

DENNIS: And bone china? I'd feel silly using quality silverware if I didn't also have bone china.

Alison enters with three small heavily used bowls that don't match, a fork, a spoon, and the kiwi knife.

ALISON: You feel silly flushing your toilet if all it's got is piss in it, so I'm not sure that's a useful barometer of anything.

LAUREN: Ali?

ALISON: You're gonna suck it up and try it, Laur. You eat healthy, and there are salads in the world without Thai grilled chicken breast, and this is one of them. I went to two different produce markets to --

LAUREN: Why does he think you're going to the Sudan?

Alison stops in the middle of serving her salad.

ALISON: (to Dennis) You knew I hadn't told anyone yet.

DENNIS: Yeah, and it was pissing me off.

LAUREN: You think you're running away to Africa? With this guy?

ALISON: I'm not running away.

LAUREN: For how long?
ALISON: We'll see.

LAUREN: My god.

ALISON: I'm not running away.

LAUREN: Your parents don't know. Your parents think you're going to camp this summer to be a lifeguard.

ALISON: My parents don't know much of anything, okay?

DENNIS: (eating salad) This is good.

LAUREN: Neither do I, apparently.

ALISON: Yeah, you can be a lot like my parents sometimes.

DENNIS: Fresh parsley, right? And the shredded beets are --

ALISON & LAUREN: Shut up!

LAUREN: I would know a lot more if you'd talk to me.

ALISON: I try, Lauren. But I can't get out a sentence about anything serious before you roll your eyes and change the subject to shoes.

LAUREN: I'm a teenager, Ali. That's what I'm supposed to care about. And what do you think maturity is? This guy? With a dirty futon and no cutlery?

ALISON: Yes! He's the first person I've met who isn't a child. My parents, your parents, everyone we know, they're all infants with expensive home furnishings. Growing up is sticking your face out the front door and seeing what's really going on out there.

LAUREN: No. Growing up is sticking your face in the mirror.

Lauren heads for the front door. Alison follows her.

ALISON: Wait. Lauren. You're not gonna tell my parents, right?

LAUREN: If I do, it'll only be because I haven't completely stopped giving a shit about you. Don't you realize how stupid... You have to go to camp and go to med school.

ALISON: No. I have to do this.
They stare at each other for a moment.

LAUREN: I really hope you change your mind.

Lauren exits.

ALISON: I was going to tell her.

DENNIS: When?

ALISON: I brought her here to meet you, so that when I told her, she wouldn't think I was crazy. But now she met you, and now she really thinks I'm crazy.

DENNIS: You're crazy? You see injustice in the world, and you set out to correct it. She's the one who just spent ten minutes selling me on the benefits of scented sticks.

Alison smiles.

ALISON: You know, Lauren actually volunteers at a school for disabled kids, like, every Tuesday, so --

DENNIS: Okay. Your salad is wonderful and you haven't had any yet. Come. Take that kiwi knife and dig in.

ZAIDA: Come, mamenyu. Take it a big bowl of soup.

And we head right into...

SCENE FOUR

... where Zaida ushers Alison to one of two kitchen chairs and two folding chairs at his small kitchen table. Irene and Brian are already seated, and quarters are cramped. The table is set as elegantly as Zaida could muster, although the four place settings overlap. The boxes are gone.

BRIAN: (to Irene) I told you we should have done this at our place.

IRENE: He wanted to have us over.

BRIAN: So? I want a lot of things.

ALISON: Sorry, Dad, could you squeeze a bit that way?

BRIAN: I really don't think I can.
As they struggle to arrange themselves around the table, Zaida brings over a pot from the counter and starts ladling it into the bowls of his guests.

ZAIDA: I put it carrots and meat, so much you never believe it.

BRIAN: (to Irene) Don't you have more room on your side?

IRENE: Yes, but your father's going to have to sit.

ZAIDA: Alison, mamenyu, you take it extra.

ALISON: No, it's okay, just a little bit.

ZAIDA: What's mean? It's delicious!

ALISON: Yeah, no, it's --

BRIAN: She's becoming vegetarian.

ALISON: No, it's fine. I'm just not gonna have too much, I'm not that hungry.

ZAIDA: Take it a little more.

BRIAN: She doesn't want. Irene, I'm practically sitting sideways. Isn't there --

Brian shifts his seat, bumping into Zaida as he tries to sneak a bit more soup into Alison's bowl, and some of it gets ladled onto Irene.

IRENE: Ah!

BRIAN: Watch it!

ZAIDA: (to Irene) Oy, I'm sorry. Brian move it the chair.

BRIAN: I moved. It's my fault.

ALISON: Dad.

BRIAN: What?

ZAIDA: Don't worry. I get you a shirt. A nice one.

Zaida exits with the pot.

IRENE: No, I don't... He's getting me one of his shirts.
BRIAN: Are you okay?

IRENE: Yeah, just a little wet. And stained and slightly burned.

BRIAN: We'll have to go home.

ALISON: It's a couple drops.

BRIAN: Alison.

IRENE: Alison... Is there a towel around here?

BRIAN: (going to the counter) I'll get one.

ALISON: He's trying the best he can.

BRIAN: Did I not say we could do this at our place?

ALISON: He wanted a housewarming party.

Brian hands Irene a towel.

BRIAN: With hot soup.

IRENE: It's actually quite good.

BRIAN: Raining down on the dinner guests.

IRENE: I'll be fine.

BRIAN: You're not fine. Don't say you're fine.

IRENE: (standing up) You just enjoy your soup. It's getting cold. I'll take care of everything else.

BRIAN: You're not fine. And there's nothing vegetarian. Actually, I'm sure there are chips, Alison, and a pickle jar, and we can stop for pizza on the --

ALISON: I'm eating this.

Zaida returns with a Hawaiian shirt, but without the pot of soup. Irene intercepts him before Brian has a chance to react.

ZAIDA: A clean sh--

IRENE: Zaida, it's okay, I'm going to wear my own shirt.

ZAIDA: It's dirty. I have it a clean one.
IRENE: I wiped it with a towel. It's all better. Please sit down.

ZAIDA: I have to serve it --

IRENE: I'll serve. You sit down. There isn't room for me at the table anyway.

ZAIDA: What's mean, no room?

IRENE: Just have a s--

ZAIDA: There's plenty room.

BRIAN: Dad, sit.

ZAIDA: (acquiescing) I wanted a housewarming.

IRENE: And it's very nice. But you've done enough, now. You sit down.

ZAIDA: Oy. I prepare it everything.

ALISON: Zaida.

ZAIDA: What is it, mamenyu?

ALISON: The soup is amazing.

ZAIDA: (suddenly overjoyed) Yeah? Where it is?

BRIAN: Oh, god, he left it in the bedroom.

ZAIDA: Oy vey.

ALISON: I got it.

Alison heads for the bedroom.

ZAIDA: Sit down. I get it, mamenyu.

DENNIS: Sit down.

And Alison joins Dennis in...

SCENE FIVE

... in Dennis's apartment. He holds a newspaper clipping and snacks on soy nuts.
ALISON: No, I'm trying to tell you --

DENNIS: Relax, please.

ALISON: I won't relax. I won't relax. This is crazy.

DENNIS: Alison --

ALISON: We have to talk about this.

DENNIS: So let's talk about it. But I don't react well to hysteria.

ALISON: I don't react well to getting raped!

DENNIS: Well, that's a rational response.

ALISON: How can I --

DENNIS: Sit down and let's discuss this like adults.

ALISON: Four guys show up on horses. They've got knives. One of them... Read that. One of them... She was just preparing sacks of grain. She was from Vancouver!

DENNIS: Your friend Lauren shows you one newspaper article from a year ago --

ALISON: Don't minimize this.

DENNIS: I want you to view it in context. How many NGOs operate in Darfur?

ALISON: I don't... About a hundred and fifty.

DENNIS: About a hundred and sixty, yeah. How long has the war been going on?


DENNIS: Right. So how many aid workers do you think have been there, more or less, since the conflict started?

ALISON: I see what you're doing.

DENNIS: How many?

ALISON: It's probably in the thousands. Look --

DENNIS: I would say so. So what are the odds --
ALISON: I don't care. One of these guys took his knife, sliced into her breast, and told her to take off her pants or he was gonna shove it in all the way. That's what this says.

DENNIS: I know.

ALISON: So... Yeah. Dennis... Well?

DENNIS: Why did you say she was from Vancouver?

ALISON: She is.

DENNIS: Yeah. We talked about this at the beginning. You said, "Isn't it dangerous?" and I said, "Yeah, it is."

ALISON: Yeah, but... I mean... I was... I knew there was a small chance that I'd get kidnapped for ransom, maybe, or even hit by a stray bullet, but --

DENNIS: You didn't know there were women being raped? There have been thousands.

Lights up on Marwa at her table, listening in.

DENNIS: But almost all Darfuri. Now this one's from here.

ALISON: No.

DENNIS: This one's real.

ALISON: No! Why do you... I'm just scared. Don't I have a right to be scared?

DENNIS: Sure. So don't go.

ALISON: Well, don't you think --

DENNIS: Always stay away from situations that scare you. Good way to live a useless life.

Alison struggles to figure out what to say. Marwa stands up, closes her eyes, and whispers. Finally:

ALISON: I didn't say I wasn't going.

Lights down on Marwa.

DENNIS: Then what?
ALISON: I don't know. You're not scared? At all?

DENNIS: What scares me is that billions of people know this is going on and don't do anything about it.

ALISON: Well, yeah, but... Me too, but... You could get kidnapped and tortured. By Janjaweed militiamen.

DENNIS: I could get hit by an eighteen-wheeler. The WHO predicts that road traffic accidents will be the third-leading cause of death in the world by 2020. Ten percent of people in hospital beds in this country get put there by car accidents. So, tell me --

ALISON: You know that's what pisses people off about you.

DENNIS: Which people?

ALISON: Me. You can't possibly be a real person if the thought of getting forced into the back of a truck by six guys with AK-47s doesn't make you piss your pants. I mean... Do you ever shut your head off? It's good to eat locally grown organic shit, but sometimes you just say fuck it, I'm having a mango from Guatemala because it's delicious. And I try to read the magazines and keep up with everything I'm supposed to boycott, but sometimes I'm not going all the way across the city for fair-trade ankle socks. And Holocaust remembrance can involve everything you said, hypocrisy, and willful blindness, and embracing victimhood, but sometimes, people's family members got killed so just let them have their grief. And... And... And soy nuts have no fucking taste!

She swats the soy nuts onto the floor. After a moment:

DENNIS: And you're still coming?

ALISON: Yeah.

DENNIS: Huh.

ALISON: (re: the soy nuts) Shit. (starts cleaning up) Sorry. I didn't mean to... make a mess. I'm just --

DENNIS: I got you something.

ALISON: What?

DENNIS: I got you something. A while ago. Sit down.
She does. He rummages under the futon.

DENNIS: I mean, when I got it, I didn't know it was for you. I didn't know you. But... Well... I guess, I mean... Look, when I went into that ceremony a few months ago and... ranted...

ALISON: I wouldn't call it --

DENNIS: To be honest, that was mostly to get things off my chest. And also, sometimes, when I'm frustrated, it feels good to get roughed up by security guards, if that makes sense. But, I mean, I didn't really expect to change anyone's mind... But you were actually listening. It's really nice, you know, to know that that... is possible. Cuz I guess I didn't think it was. I once tried to convince a girlfriend to stop wearing leather shoes, and she broke up with me. And my dad works with these companies... I've called him some pretty ugly things, and we don't really talk anymore. I spend so much time persuading people who already agree with me. (He finds what he was looking for, gets up, and looks Alison in the eye.) I get that this is hard for you. I know that, and... I recognize that, and... well... I guess... (nervous laugh, and these next words take some effort) I'm proud of you.

ALISON: Oh my god.

DENNIS: Here.

He hands her a clump of folded burlap. She doesn't know what to make of it.

ALISON: Thank you.

DENNIS: It's a hammock.

ALISON: Oh.

DENNIS: Homemade. When I was living in Panama, I spent a few weeks with a family there. They had this hammock, I used to relax in it all the time, and they gave it to me as a going-away present when I left.

ALISON: Oh. Thank you, then. That's really sweet. It really is. It's... My god, I'm gonna...

DENNIS: It's hard to use here, I know, but you could take it with you --
ALISON: To the Sudan, yeah.

DENNIS: And it travels well. It fits in a knapsack.

ALISON: Yeah. I mean, I... Yeah. Thank you. (beat) You know, if you'd act like this more often, I could introduce you to people.

DENNIS: It's the only hammock I've got.

ALISON: You know what I mean.

DENNIS: Not usually. Anyway, I know your people more or less. I'm not especially interested in being introduced.

ALISON: Wow. That wasn't nice. I was this close to giving you a hug.

DENNIS: Have you told your parents?

ALISON: No.

DENNIS: You should.

SCENE SIX

Marwa and Leykeh at their table. Marwa's collection of uneaten food has once again grown. Marwa is lost in thought. Leykeh chews, sips her drink. Finally:

LEYKEH: Listen to me. (pause) Of course, I realize... I understand what you... But do you understand... Do you... (sighs) Oy. Tell me, so much good food, you don't eat nothing? I don't know if here it is possible, but maybe you gonna get sick.

MARWA: I get sick to look at it.

LEYKEH: Vey iz mir. When I was in the camp, sick, so skinny... In the barracks, at night, we fight over dead moths to eat. I prayed to god that if I survive, I don't ask for a lot. Just a family. A happy one. And -- a miracle -- I got it. Now you want to take it away. I prayed that my family should never... should never...

MARWA: I prayed too. Didn't work.

LEYKEH: Okay, but --
MARWA: I think sometimes I hear Wahid pray to me: Mother, help me. I can ignore that?

LEYKEH: Help him another way. Get somebody else.

MARWA: Who? You know somebody never had a grandmother? Anyway, I only give suggestion. I don't force her. She wants to do this.

LEYKEH: I don't want!

MARWA: So what?

LEYKEH: You have problems, so everybody have to have it problems? What kind of heaven is this?

MARWA: This is a beautiful place.

LEYKEH: So enjoy it.

MARWA: Yes. Dead moth fighting is in the past.

LEYKEH: I prayed that my family should never again... that they should never again...

MARWA: (offering Leykeh one of her plates) Here. You enjoy for both of us.

SCENE SEVEN

Alison, Zaida, Brian and Irene are assembled in Zaida's apartment. There are opened presents on the floor, and a mostly eaten cake on the table.

ZAIDA: I want to say it something.

BRIAN: (to Irene) We should probably get going.

ZAIDA: A small speech. (taps his knife against a glass and knocks it over) Oy. (stands it back up) Okay. (clears his throat) Listen. One thing I learn it in my life. You think it's money the most important?

IRENE: I'm not gonna keep a straight face.

ZAIDA: No. Family.

Lights up on Leykeh at her table, paying close attention.
ZAIDA: And I never believe it I gonna have such a beautiful one. The Germans, they want to kill it all of us. But Hitler, right now, where he is? And me, I have it a beautiful apart-a-ment, and my son, and my daughter-in-law, and my granddaughter, they make it for me a birthday party. How it's happen? I thank you everybody for the presents, but I only want it one thing. I want mine family should stay close to me always. I love mine family, and I want you should always be safe and be healthy and, when I'm in mine old age, you should never go away.

BRIAN: All right. It's a deal. Thanks, Dad.

IRENE: Happy birthday, Zaida.

Leykeh stands up and whispers as before. Brian and Irene head for the door. Alison stays to give her grandfather a hug that lasts a long time.

BRIAN: Alison?

IRENE: Sweetie, we have to go. Alison?

Alison turns to face her parents. Lights down on Leykeh.

ALISON: Mom. Dad.

IRENE: Yeah?

ALISON: I want to ask you something. I've been thinking about something, and I want to ask you... What would you think if I told you that something that interests me is maybe doing some volunteer work, like overseas, like maybe in Africa or somewhere?

IRENE: Oh, sweetie... That sounds wonderful.

ALISON: Yeah?

BRIAN: Well, hold on. You gotta be careful about that. That stuff's dangerous.

IRENE: You don't think it'd be nice? I mean she's gonna be a doctor. I think that'd be really nice, Alison, once you're done your residency, you go join the Red Cross for a few months. Maybe in Israel. (to Brian) Actually, I think...

ALISON: Well, but --
IRENE: (to Brian) You know my friend Joanne? Eisenberg? I think her son did that.

BRIAN: In Israel?

IRENE: Yeah.

BRIAN: Well, that's different.

IRENE: (to Alison) I think that'd be really special. I would be very proud.

BRIAN: Anyway, we've got lots of time to think about it, obviously. (to Zaida) Okay, bye.

ALISON: Wait, Dad. I'm trying to --

BRIAN: What?

ALISON: I mean... well... cuz, um...

She searches for words until:

ZAIDA: What's mean, Africa?

BRIAN: (to Alison) Oh, now you've got him nervous. (to Zaida) She's not going anywhere.

ZAIDA: Alison?

BRIAN: All right, let's go. You can tell us in the car.

ZAIDA: Mamenyu?

ALISON: I'm not... going anywhere.

IRENE: Bye, Zaida.

ZAIDA: Bye-bye everybody.

As Brian, Irene, and Alison leave:

ALISON: Well... But, Mom... But, look... What if too much stuff starts happening in the next few years? I mean, I might end up never getting around to it?

IRENE: Oh, well, sweetie, no big deal. I'd be proud of you no matter what. You know that.

ALISON: Yeah.
We hear Dennis quietly singing "Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner."

BRIAN: Let's go.

IRENE: We're coming, we're coming.

Dennis' voice gets louder as Irene's fades out.

IRENE: Your dad's in a big hurry today. Someone needs their taxes done tout-de-suite, I guess. Either that or there's a hockey game starting soon and he has to get home right away. You know what would get us home faster: if you could turn left off of Somerset. Did I tell you I tried to get some of the neighbours to come with me to a city council meeting? They all complain about it, but when it comes to actually doing something, this one's kid has a soccer game, this one has a hair appointment. Some things are so easy to fix if people would just...

SCENE EIGHT

Dennis is in his apartment, singing and packing his hiking knapsack. He comes across a stray soy nut on the floor, blows on it, and pops it in his mouth.

There's a knock at the door.

DENNIS: Yeah?

ALISON: (offstage) It's me.

He goes to the door and opens it. Alison enters, carrying the hammock.

DENNIS: Hi.

ALISON: Hi.

DENNIS: Everything okay?

ALISON: Yeah. Yeah. You know, my grandfather turned ninety yesterday.

DENNIS: Okay. Congratulations.

ALISON: Yeah.

Pause.
DENNIS: You need something?

She shakes her head.

DENNIS: Okay. (beat) Hey, you must have started the malaria pills by now, eh?

ALISON: Yeah.

DENNIS: Any side effects?

ALISON: Doctor said stomach pains and crazy dreams, but none so far.

DENNIS: Good. (re: the knapsack) Hey, isn't it amazing how much you can fit in one of these things? It doesn't look that big, but it's so well made, well thought-out. Better quality than anything you could find new. The material stretches, and yet it's tough. You'll see, when you're wearing yours, that --

ALISON: Dennis.

DENNIS: Yeah?

ALISON: Yes. It is a good knapsack.

DENNIS: It is.

ALISON: Yeah. He's in pretty good shape now, for ninety.

DENNIS: Your grandfather.

ALISON: Yeah. You know I told him, a few weeks ago, that I wanted to do this?

DENNIS: To go to Darfur.

ALISON: Uh-huh.

DENNIS: I thought you said you didn't tell anyone.

ALISON: Well, I told him. But he got upset, and I think, by the end, I left the impression that I wasn't gonna go. I mean, I guess I told him I wasn't gonna go.

DENNIS: Alison --

ALISON: And again yesterday.

DENNIS: It's a bad idea to just sneak off --
ALISON: I know that.

DENNIS: What about Lauren?

ALISON: She thinks it's next week.

DENNIS: Huh.

ALISON: What I mean is, he's in good shape now, my grandfather, but he's gonna need someone to take care of him soon. And what scares me is that I don't think anyone loves him as much as I do. And he really doesn't want me to go.

Dennis takes this in.

DENNIS: Alison?

ALISON: So I don't think I can --

DENNIS: Woah, wait. Wait. You're feeling some nerves.

ALISON: Yes.

DENNIS: That's natural. That's fine. But this is happening now. And you want to do it. I know you want to do it. So it's time. You've got a plane ticket, you've got a visa, you've got anti-malaria antibodies swimming around in your bloodstream --

ALISON: My grandfather --

DENNIS: That's bullshit. I don't... Don't say that. Don't use him to... You're not gonna help victims of a genocide cuz your grandfather's old?

ALISON: Well, it's --

DENNIS: If rich people all stay home to take care of their own damn grandfathers, poor people are gonna keep swirling around the toilet.

ALISON: It's not just that. I came here... two months ago, almost... I came here to get you to... to help me be able to speak my mind to my parents, to my community... And I still can't do that.

DENNIS: It's my fault?
ALISON: No, I'm saying... I'm just saying... I really am scared of what could happen to me there. And I'm scared of what... of what people will think of me here.

DENNIS: Oh, come on.

ALISON: I mean if I just sneak off.

DENNIS: So don't sneak off.

ALISON: But I can't just... I can't --

DENNIS: You really can.

ALISON: I'm a little girl. Okay? It turns out, yeah, I'm just a high school --

DENNIS: No you're not. If you don't go... You understand this situation as well as anyone. You're well-informed, you're intelligent... This is an adult decision you're making. You're making a statement now about who you are. You said, "Teach me how not to be one of them." But it's not something you learn. It's something you choose.

ALISON: Please. Don't... It's just... Look, I'm gonna keep eating local and vegan, mostly, and I'm gonna subscribe to a bunch of those magazines...

DENNIS: You want me to say it's okay, stay home, you're a good person anyway? I'm not gonna. I understand what you're telling me. It makes sense. It's all from a place of very rational self-interest.

ALISON: It's not --

DENNIS: You're used to a certain level of security. And luxury. And most of the world can't offer you that. So stay here. Me, I couldn't be happy living an indifferent life, knowing the kind of help that most people need. If you can, then okay.

ALISON: You couldn't be happy? Is that... Shit. That's really what it is for you, isn't it? It's not... It's not peace and goodwill towards everyone. It's just about your own happiness.

DENNIS: Oh, go to bed.
ALISON: Not that that's a bad thing. I mean, it's great that helping people makes you happy.

DENNIS: Shut up.

He goes back to packing.

ALISON: Okay. (pause) I want to thank you for --

DENNIS: I have to pack now.

ALISON: Look, I'm gonna keep thinking about it, okay? I really do want to go. I'm gonna try. Maybe tomorrow morning you'll get to the airport and I'll be there.

DENNIS: I'm holding my breath.

ALISON: (re: the hammock) Pack this for me, just in case.

She leaves the hammock with him and exits.

SCENE NINE

Leykeh and Marwa at their table. The pile of uneaten food in front of Marwa has become quite large.

MARWA: She will change her mind.

LEYKEH: It is enough. You lost.

MARWA: There is still time before tomorrow. You heard what she said.

LEYKEH: You going to visit her again?

MARWA: Of course.

LEYKEH: Well, me too. Doesn't matter what you do, she will stay home. I will make sure.

MARWA: You are wrong. She has a gentle heart. Like Wahid. She feels the other people's pain.

LEYKEH: And you would take advantage of this?

MARWA: I don't --
LEYKEH: I prayed that my family should never again... that they should never again feel pain. That they should never know what is it pain. I hear it so many screams, I see so much blood, I smell it so many dead people. Enough for generations.

MARWA: You prayed for your family.

LEYKEH: Yes.

MARWA: For your family. Well. Should have prayed bigger.

As Leykeh takes this in, Marwa stands, closes her eyes, and again whispers silently. Leykeh spends several moments distraught, thinking, until:

LEYKEH: No.

She stands and whispers too. Lights up on Alison in bed. As Marwa and Leykeh speak, they open their eyes and go to her.

MARWA: Alison? You sleeping? It is almost morning now.

Alison stirs and sits up.

MARWA: This is the hour of the Janjaweed.

LEYKEH: Go back to bed. Go back to bed. Dream of ice cream, and flowers, and handsome boys.

MARWA: Early in the morning they come. Still dark. Men with machetes, men with guns. Helicopters in the sky. Two Janjaweed on every horse, one turned to the back so they see everywhere.

LEYKEH: You have nice dreams now. All the nightmares I take for me.

MARWA: If a man is running, he get shot. They look for the girls to rape them --

LEYKEH: Shut up!

MARWA: For the boys to cut off the head.

LEYKEH: (to Alison) You know where you come from? You know why you here? I was pregnant on the boat from Europe. Seasick, always throwing up. But so proud. In me was starting a new family, a happy life.
MARWA: Did you ever see a little boy's body, running, no head?

LEYKEH: (to Marwa) I saw it. Thousand times.

MARWA: I held Wahid so close. But nobody holds him now.

LEYKEH: You Zaida make boots in a factory for forty years. I cleaned it offices in the night. We had nothing, only you daddy and a dream of you. A granddaughter, a jewel, beautiful, a happy one.

MARWA: It is all still happening. Right now. Every night. Children crying to help them, but nobody come.

LEYKEH: Dream of kittens and sunshine and chocolate cake.

MARWA: Wahid needs you, needs you to go to him.

LEYKEH: No.

MARWA: Yes.

ALISON: No, he doesn't. No, they don't. Dennis is going. And there are thousands of aid workers there.

MARWA: Thousands. In a world of how many?

ALISON: And if the thousands aren't doing any good, then what the hell could I do? I'm just me. I wouldn't even be good at this. You've got Dennis. You're better off with him.

MARWA: We got every Dennis. Every vegetarian with a homemade hammock and no set of silverware. They are not enough.

LEYKEH: Dream of strawberries and snowflakes.

MARWA: When will change come? Change will come when we get you. People like you.

ALISON: But...

LEYKEH: Ziese mamenyu tayyes.

ALISON: I don't think I can do it. I wish I could but --

MARWA: You can.
ALISON: Well, look, I'm really too young to do this right now. Okay? Maybe in a couple years. I'll finish my residency, and then --

MARWA: Maybe the Janjaweed will wait for you. Or maybe, in a couple years, you will say, in a couple years more.

Leykeh starts to sing a rushed version of her lullaby.

ALISON: Look, god, it's killing me, okay, but what if... What if I'm just not able to do this? What if... Oh, god. What if I'm just not the kind of person who can do this? Shit. What kind of person does that make me?

MARWA: You know what kind.

Leykeh stops singing.

LEYKEH: (to Marwa) You know nothing. You prayed? You prayed when all these things was happening to you?

MARWA: Yes.

LEYKEH: For who you was praying? When the men was coming, when you house was burning, when you was keeping safe you son? You was praying for the whole world? For the whole village, even? No. I think just for him. And what kind of person does this make you? I tell you what kind. Same kind as everybody else. So... I hope you son is okay. But I hope for my granddaughter more.

Leykeh resumes the lullaby at the usual tempo and tucks Alison back into bed. Broken and teary-eyed, Marwa stumbles back toward the table. The lullaby continues under Marwa's lines.

MARWA: Wahid. Oh, Wahid. I am sorry. Oh. Nobody is coming to help you. So, Wahid, you listen to your mother. You must survive on your own. Now I see. This is how it always been. This is how it will forever be. Fight for yourself, Wahid. You be strong. You survive.

Leykeh starts back toward the table.

MARWA: And when you do, make a beautiful life with a beautiful family that will never again know pain. That will never again look on suffering. That will never again hear the sound of children cry.

Both women are seated. Marwa picks up her knife and fork, cuts into a piece of meat on the plate in front of her, and
eats. Leykeh stops singing and raises a glass. Marwa sees her and does the same.

LEYKEH: Never again.

MARWA: Never again.

They clink glasses, and immediately the stage goes black.

End.
Beyond "Never Again":

Modest Hope for a Hopeless Cause

Toward the end of many months spent working on this project, at a point when I was knee-deep in library books and journal articles about Darfur, the Holocaust, and assorted genocides and humanitarian crises, I bought a couple of magazines with the intention of taking a break. My issue of *Time* was supposed to be about why women are starting to make more money than their husbands and whether that is a good thing, and the *Maclean's* cover story had to do with weird Canadian weather. Yet, as though they had been lying in wait on the bookstore shelf, both magazines ambushed me with articles on the conflict in central Africa involving the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and a controversial online video called "Kony 2012" about the children caught in the middle of it. Before long, my leisure reading was added to the bibliography, and a brand new reason to feel guilty was added to my already considerable affluent, Western guilt.

"Kony 2012" was produced by a group called Invisible Children that has been trying to raise awareness about
recent violence in northern Uganda and neighbouring regions and to move the American government to intervene. The video focuses on LRA leader Joseph Kony, whose methods of trying to overthrow the Ugandan government include "rape, murder, mutilation and cannibalism [...] and abducting children to take as soldiers and wives" (Perry 39). Invisible Children has been acknowledged by U.S. politicians as the driving force behind the decision to send a small group of American special-operations forces to central Africa with the objective of hunting down Kony (Perry 40), and Luis Moreno-Ocampo, chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, credits the video with having "mobilized the world" (qtd. in Perry 38). However, the video has also elicited significant criticism.

Many of Invisible Children's fellow humanitarian organizations have condemned its call for military intervention and its "simplified and sensationalized" version of events (Perry 40). Ugandan journalist Rosebell Kagumire agrees that the video is simplistic and considers it to be just another case of "an outsider trying to be a hero rescuing African children," as though Africans are "totally unable to help themselves and [need] outside help
all the time." M.G. Vassanji shares her opinion that "depictions such as Kony 2012 are deeply humiliating" to Africans, but he also points out "the sad truth that much of Africa depends on foreign aid" (32). This mixed response has led the co-founder of Invisible Children, Jason Russell, to complain that his organization is "changing the world" and being demonized for its trouble (Perry 38).

So now I have to feel guilty not only because I am not helping poor African children, but because my sense that I should be helping them may well constitute condescension. Kagumire need not worry too much, however, since this debate about how people in prosperous and peaceful countries can best help those suffering elsewhere is interesting, but probably mostly moot. Ultimately, the mobilization that so pleases Moreno-Ocampo, and that Kagumire fears, will surely be negligible; we wealthy Westerners tend, after all, to be far less interested in saving African children from the ravages of poverty and war than we are in providing ourselves with minor quality-of-life improvements. I offer as evidence the fact that the "Kony 2012" story got billing on the cover of Time
equal to that of a story about a renaissance in Danish cuisine. It did not even make the cover of Maclean's, having lost out to a headline about the ethics of crating one's puppy. The problem, though, is not that Westerners are bad; it is that Westerners are human, and self-interest is an overriding human concern. From time to time, we will extend the group of people for whom we will significantly inconvenience ourselves to include those we consider to be like us, such as members of the same ethnic group or residents of the same area, but even then, unless it is for someone we know well, we rarely sacrifice to such an extent that our quality of life suffers any measurable decrease.

My original intent when I set out to write The Never-Again Club was to highlight this self-interest not as something bad or good, but as something inevitable. We cannot escape our humanity, so we will keep looking out for ourselves and genocides will continue to occur. The most I thought I could hope for was that people might come to this realization with me and so stop repeating the Holocaust remembrance slogan "never again" as though we are more altruistic than we are. It was a pessimistic
idea, but it seemed honest to me, especially in light of the fact that those who appear to go against the grain, such as Dennis or the real people I have known on whom his character is based, do not tend to be people I like very much. Perhaps their apparent willingness to make major sacrifices for the sake of strangers gives them a non-human quality that is difficult to warm up to. Alison makes just that observation when she tells Dennis that he "can't possibly be a real person" since he is comfortable putting himself at risk to do humanitarian work (45). The rest of the characters ultimately choose to prioritize their own selves and families over others, even when those others face problems far more serious than their own. As I wrote, however, I found that the play unfolding on my laptop screen allowed for at least a small measure of optimism in spite of itself. In the choices of the characters, in the choices I made as playwright, and in an audience's likely reaction, there are reasons to hold out a very little bit of hope that we might one day do a better job of coming to the aid of strangers.

In his analysis of teenagers' attitudes on the subject, Scott Seider suggests that hope may actually be a
precondition to humanitarian aid. Seider followed a class of high school seniors in an upper-middle-class suburb of Boston as they took a course designed, in part, to encourage them to take action on matters of global hunger and poverty. What he found is that, while students became more aware of the problems in other countries as they moved through the course, they also became less likely to support aid work. Students felt overwhelmed by the scope of the problems to the point that most of them ultimately decided that no solution exists. In the words of one student, "It's just the way life is, I guess. Like some people are just more fortunate than others. Sometimes there's something you can do; sometimes there isn't" (70). Seider concludes that, like other efforts to increase support for and involvement in humanitarian aid, the course was too focused on enumerating injustices with the goal of engendering anger, rather than on giving concrete examples of how to help and thereby fostering hope (73). In other words, people who believe that a difference can be made are more likely to make one.

Kenneth Campbell is one such optimist, and he finds reason to hold out hope in the attitude of the American
populace. In his 2001 study on global responses to genocide, Campbell describes how the U.S. government under Bill Clinton deliberately avoided using the term "genocide" when referring to the slaughter of Tutsis by Hutus precisely because the administration anticipated that, had Americans known the true nature of the violence in Rwanda, they would have wanted their government to intervene (53). This reluctance to be frank was not due simply to callousness, but to the expectation that Americans' altruism only lasts as long as none of their own get hurt, and so the very people who exhort action when confronted with "televised scenes of humanitarian suffering" are the same ones who issue "angry demands of 'Bring our troops home!' once the flag-draped coffins begin arriving to Dover Air Force Base" (Campbell 50). As evidence of the fallacy of the White House's assumption, Campbell cites polling data that indicates that, while most Americans oppose military intervention in foreign conflicts, they overwhelmingly support such intervention in cases of genocide (50-52). In fact, at the time of the war in Kosovo, one poll that used the term "genocide" revealed that only twenty-one percent of respondents
wanted U.S. forces to pull out should they begin suffering casualties (Campbell 52). Campbell argues, therefore, that the governments of powerful countries can go much further than they realize in intervening to stop foreign genocides without risking a domestic political backlash. To be sure, not all humanitarian crises are genocides, but at least in the most extreme cases of innocent people in need, Americans appear willing to offer help, and there is no reason to think that Canadian attitudes on the matter are significantly different.

The problem with Campbell's argument is that, for most Americans, their own country's soldiers are only slightly more well-known to them than the people being slaughtered overseas. It would be, for example, no immense personal sacrifice to an accountant in Pennsylvania should the son of an Iowan corn farmer be shot in Darfur. So, as long as efforts to stop genocide remain distant from the daily lives of most people, Campbell may be right that governments can go further than they usually do. At a certain point, however, repeated and prolonged military engagements, such as those Campbell acknowledges will be necessary to truly put a halt to genocide (110), begin to
have more widespread effects. More relevant poll questions would ask whether Americans, or people in other powerful countries, are prepared to pay higher taxes for the sake of saving the lives of foreign innocents, or to pay more for commodities like gasoline should a genocide threaten to occur in an oil-producing region of the world. Until more people demonstrate a willingness to inconvenience themselves, rather than simply to forfeit the lives of strangers who fight in their name, Campbell's optimism is on shaky ground.

In fact, even those who appear to show above-average interest in humanitarian causes may do so primarily out of concern for themselves. In their analysis of the American Save Darfur movement, Jodi Eichler-Levine and Rosemary Hicks argue that much of the movement's discourse had more to do with the saviours than with those who were to be saved. They look in particular at Jewish involvement, which was disproportionately large (716). One of the movement's appeals to American Jews referred to their "particular moral responsibility to speak out and take action against genocide" (Eichler-Levine and Hicks 717). Likewise, Jewish speakers at Save Darfur rallies
frequently invoked the Holocaust, possibly because "identifying oneself as a victim of genocide necessitates activism" (Eichler-Levine and Hicks 718). However, some of the speakers' discourse suggests other, perhaps subconscious, motives. In his speech to the Washington Save Darfur rally in 2006, Rabbi David Saperstein referred to Jews as "the quintessential victims of ethnic cleansing and genocide" (qtd. in Eichler-Levine and Hicks 717). This seems a questionable way for Saperstein to describe the group he belongs to, especially given the context of a gathering meant to shine the spotlight on the suffering of others. The use of the descriptor "quintessential" does not express solidarity with Darfur's victims; rather, it sends the message that, try as they might, the poor people of Darfur will never match Jewish suffering. Is there a fear implied that the world no longer thinks of Jews as victims? Is Saperstein, wittingly or otherwise, seizing the opportunity of a new genocide to talk about the Holocaust and remind people that Jews are still to be pitied, as though Jews have "a collective identity of catastrophe" (Sicher xxi)? At least one Jewish attendee worried aloud that the event did not have the appropriate
focus. She expressed concern about "what kind of coalition had really been achieved, whose voices we were really hearing, and whether we had gathered together truly to help affect [sic] change in Darfur, or to let ourselves, as Jews, off the hook - as if to say, 'We stood up and shouted 'Never Again,' now we are absolved of our responsibility'" (qtd. in Eichler-Levine and Hicks 721). To be sure, the results of nearly seven decades of such shouting are unimpressive. The Holocaust was hardly the final genocide, a fact underscored by signs at the Washington rally that read, "Never Again, Again" (Eichler-Levine and Hicks 719).

It is, of course, difficult to be hard on Holocaust survivors and their descendants, especially given the considerable evidence that Holocaust trauma remains a central aspect of the identity of survivors and their families. As early as 1946, the psychological effects of the Holocaust on those who survived it were already being documented (Nieremberski), and suggestions that such effects might be passed on to future generations followed within a few decades (Phillips; Epstein). As might be expected, survivors have demonstrated a wide variety of
psychological responses to their trauma, including depression, anxiety, guilt, unresolved mourning, agitation, insomnia, nightmares, and somatization (Felsen 44), and those among their children to whom that trauma has been transmitted likewise experience it in many different ways (Felsen 45-48). The impact on survivors' children may not result in a diagnosable syndrome as much as something akin to a psychological profile, but the effects of Holocaust trauma on the second generation are nevertheless quite real (Felsen 49). More recent research has begun to examine the grandchildren of survivors – of whom I am one – and has found similarly varied but real effects (Fossion et al.; Rosenthal and Rosenthal; Scharf).

One aspect of the Holocaust's psychological impacts that comes up repeatedly across the generations, and that may partly account for the tendency to focus on the Holocaust even at moments when others' lives are at stake, is the strong impulse to create a family and keep it safe. It is as though surviving is not only something that grandparents did during a war many years ago, but a continuous process in which the whole family must participate. Some survivors, especially men, suffer from
"an added degradation [...] due to their 'failure' to protect loved ones" who were killed during the war (Felsen 47). This can lead to survivors being "overinvested" in their post-war families (Felsen 51), as though the creation of a new family is part of a "mission [...] to perpetuate life" (Fossion et al. 521). This, in turn, places tremendous pressure on their children, each one "a precious new leaf" (Sicher 136) on a family tree that has been all but destroyed. Some second-generation survivors have expressed the sense that they are also expected to carry out "missions" such as "serving as a bridge to life, replacing lost idealized love objects [...] proving the failure of the persecutors' intentions to destroy a whole people, and being a solace to their parents" (Felsen 50). They report that "any emotional connection outside the home is experienced as a desertion of their parents" (Fossion et al. 522), a feeling shared by some third-generation survivors for whom separation from family can mean "death in a literal, not symbolic sense" (Fossion et al. 523). In The Never-Again Club, these pressures contribute to the difficulty Alison has in making a choice that would involve separation from her family as well as
considerable risk to herself. Thus, some have argued that the grandchildren of survivors occasionally "[bear] the brunt of the 'shock wave'" of Holocaust trauma that may be compounded, rather than attenuated, by the passing of generations (Fossion et al. 523).

In my own experience, the effects have not been quite so dramatic. Still, many of the psychological aftershocks documented by researchers are familiar to me, albeit to a less debilitating degree. The need to create domestic moments that give proof of strong family life is a preoccupation that I recognized in my grandparents and included in the play. Meals at my grandparents' apartment were a regular and important part of my childhood, and I have strong memories of their joy at watching their grandchildren eat the food they had prepared, as well as their profound disappointment if one of us was not hungry. When my grandmother died, my grandfather, who had never cooked for us before, suddenly began developing a limited repertoire of dishes he could prepare so that he could continue inviting us over for meals. In their analysis of the cultural importance of food, Bob Ashley et al. argue that the "pleasing" and "proper" family meal is "an event
through which family life is created" (130), and I am convinced that the supreme importance for my Holocaust-survivor grandfather of creating family life explains the culinary renaissance he undertook in his eighties. In the play, Zaida is obsessed with feeding Alison when she drops by for a visit (28-30), and he prepares a meal for the family and invites them over for "a housewarming" (42). That the occasion does not go as planned – at least until Alison saves the evening with a compliment (42) – is tremendously upsetting for Zaida. Indeed, sociologists Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil find that "family breakdown" is often precipitated by problems with "food-related domestic arrangements" (85), so Zaida has reason to be concerned.

The speech that Zaida delivers at his birthday party near the end of the play, expressing the idea that being with his family constitutes a rebuke to Hitler and that all he wants is that "mine family should stay close to me always" (49), is another moment drawn from my own experience. In fact, the speech is very nearly copied and pasted from my grandfather's birthday lunch a few years ago. The unease of Brian and Irene is based in part on my
reaction, since I was not so much touched as embarrassed at the scene my grandfather was making in the middle of a restaurant. Of course, I immediately felt guilty about that embarrassment, and that coincides with the clinical observation that descendants of survivors tend to oscillate between feelings of protectiveness toward them and guilt-tinged resentment at the complications their past experiences have caused in the family's life (Fossion et al. 522).

At times, I have been as convinced as my grandfather that our family's success is necessary as a way of sticking it to the Nazis. I remember crowding into my grandmother's hospital room along with my parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins, and experiencing not just the grief or fear that one might expect from a teenager having his first brush with death, but satisfaction that my grandmother had been fruitful and multiplied and thus confirmed Hitler's failure. In fact, hardly a day goes by that I don't think about the Holocaust in some way, whether it is by feeling pride in my family's resilience, or by casually considering, as I watch TV, where I would hide should I hear German shouting
in the hall. In her study of the literature of second-generation survivors and second-generation perpetrators, Erin McGlothlin calls the Holocaust "an unknown experience that has indelibly marked" the descendants of those who lived it (10). In my case, a generation later, McGlothlin is still absolutely right. The difficulty today becomes what to do with this inescapable aspect of one's identity that has been discussed and remembered ad nauseum to the point that it has been rendered a cliché. What do you do when a crucial part of who you are is something that so many people are sick of hearing about? The answer brings me to the first reason to be optimistic that "never again" might one day have real meaning: the increasing use of the Holocaust as a bridge to other people and their histories.

Much early Holocaust literature is based on the idea that "the most significant way to pay homage to the dead is through an obligation to bear witness" (Plunka 14-15). Autobiographical works such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1958) and Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (1961) attempt to recreate the Holocaust experience and force readers to confront unadulterated atrocity. Much of the critical debate has therefore centred on whether art is adequate to
the task of representing the Holocaust as it really was (Plunka 12-13; Kertzer iii), and some, such as Wiesel himself, have concluded that it is not (Plunka 12).

Nevertheless, many writers have tried to do just that, in fiction as well as on the stage. Celeste Raspanti's play *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* presents the audience with a live-action version of the Theresienstadt ghetto, and Arthur Miller's *Playing for Time* does the same with Auschwitz/Birkenau. Miller seems particularly concerned with giving audience members a visceral sense of what a concentration camp was like, specifying in the stage directions, for instance, that there is "a constantly changing and totally confusing plasticity of light" (166) when the inmates first arrive, and that actors meant to be in a cattle car never "look out as though seeing through a fourth wall" (161) in order to create a sense of claustrophobia.

In some ways, however, the debate about the appropriateness of trying to represent the Holocaust through art is becoming less important as writers increasingly seek not to depict its events but to use those events to explore new themes. Jessica Lang has
examined Holocaust literature as the genre has evolved and has found that, the more time that separates the Holocaust from the present, the more at liberty writers feel to approach it in different ways (44). The genre's recent incarnations have broadened its range of themes and countered references to the Holocaust with "other narrative strategies and counterpoints" (45-46). According to Lang, novels such as Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000) and Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* (2005) have broken with the strategy of using an "explicit style" to shock readers with the horrors of Nazi genocide (46); rather, the Holocaust is "balanced by other, also important, histories" and imagined "in relation to other chosen historical events" (46). Chabon's novel, for example, is as much about the development of the comic book industry as it is about a Jew escaping Nazi-occupied Prague; the refugee's understanding of how it feels to be trapped and to be truly in need of a superhero is what enables him to create comics that resonate widely, tapping into emotions that are shown to be universal. In this way, a Holocaust
experience that could be an isolating burden functions as a link between survivors and others.

In his play *Rose*, Martin Sherman suggests a controversial link between a Jewish girl killed in the Warsaw ghetto and a Palestinian one killed in the West Bank. Rose is the mother of the first and the grandmother of the soldier who shoots the second, and the lines of religion and nationality are blurred as she mourns them both. In fact, the play includes many instances of the blurring of such divisions, from Rose's mother in the shtetl who sings "in an unknown tongue - a gypsy melody; no, it was Muslim; no, totally Hebraic; no, wait, I think Spanish, or maybe African" (264), to Rose's daughter-in-law, a non-Jewish woman from Kansas who converts and becomes a hard-line settler in the West Bank (285). Rose's actual experiences during the war are summed up rather quickly near the beginning of the play, and it is the impact of those experiences on her worldview that are the play's main focus. Again, the legacy of the Holocaust is presented as a way of reaching out and connecting one's own history with those of others.
In my case, the story that I had set out to tell was that of seventeen-year old Alison using her identity as the grandchild of Holocaust survivors to make — or try to make — just that type of connection. In one sense, her desire to establish links to people outside of her family and community is nothing new. Indeed, it is common to a number of coming-of-age tales about members of ethnic minorities, as Martin Japtok finds in his examination of Jewish-American and African-American Bildungsromans from the first half of the twentieth century. He argues that these "novels can be understood as a constant negotiation between individualism and communalism" (106), in which individualism is seen "as a betrayal of ethnicity" (107). While traditional Bildungsromans feature protagonists whose ultimate maturation is demonstrated by their ability to individuate themselves, those about ethnic minorities tend to depict the desire to individuate as a marker of immaturity that maturity eventually corrects into recognition of the community's value and values (Japtok 104). When, occasionally, authors contradict this perspective, and protagonists are not portrayed as "betrayers" (Japtok 107) for wanting to strike out on
their own, "the novels must justify this course that appears to lead away from ethnic solidarity. In so doing, aspects of the ethnic community are depicted as repressive, while characters in rebellion against the community appear as idealists" (Japtok 20).

In this respect, The Never-Again Club corresponds to Japtok's model. Alison's idealistic belief that she can simply take off to save Sudanese children armed with nothing more than "convictions and determination" (19) runs up against her community's expectation that she will go on "to med school at McGill and a career at the Jewish General that'll make all of them very happy" (23). However, Japtok finds that, even in these ethnic Bildungsromans that buck convention, the protagonists usually "come to a kind of truce with ethnicity, affirming the importance, or inevitability, of both their ethnic heritage and of individualism" (20). Alison's story deviates from this relatively comfortable compromise, and I find in this deviation another reason for hope.

At the end of the play, Alison gives up her quest to go to Africa and do humanitarian work, but this is not the "truce" to which Japtok refers. Rather, it is a surrender
with which Alison is profoundly uneasy. She pleads with Marwa, "Look, god, it's killing me, okay, but what if... What if I'm just not able to do this? What if... Oh, god. What if I'm just not the kind of person who can do this? Shit. What kind of person does that make me?" (58). Alison is so disappointed in herself that it seems quite possible that Leykeh, who spends the play trying to keep her granddaughter ensconced in familiar affluence, has not yet won a permanent victory. It is perhaps too late for Alison to have an impact in Darfur, but the next time genocide breaks out, her better angels may prevail.

Alison's attempt to use her family's Holocaust history as an impetus to act in solidarity with others is, in and of itself, reason to include The Never-Again Club in Lang's new category of third-generation Holocaust literature. However, Marwa's role in the play goes even further to underscore the way that writing something about the Holocaust can be a forward- and outward-looking enterprise. I initially had no plans to include a character like Marwa, but, when I sat down to write the script, the only words that I could come up with to get the project underway were those of this Darfuri woman. I
felt a need to include her that I initially explained to myself in dramatic terms: Alison's dilemma has higher stakes if a character who wants her help is right there onstage. I find now, though, that Marwa is even more important symbolically. If the play is actually to connect the legacy of the Holocaust with other people's similar histories, it is essential that those other people not merely be referred to, but that at least one of them be present in the flesh. Otherwise, the play would risk falling into Rabbi Saperstein's trap of using other people's suffering as an excuse to talk about one's own. Marwa is as real to Alison as her survivor grandmother, and she is as real to the audience as all the other characters. The similarity of Marwa and Leykeh is emphasized by moments such as their parallel discussions of their experiences with fire (20-21), and their equality is shown in that they both have the ability to influence Alison. When, in the final scene, they enter Alison's dream together, they are comparable to two boxers entering the ring: one will win and one will lose, but there is a kinship inherent in their mutual challenge. Marwa's inclusion in a play full of Western Jews is thus an effort
to broaden the group of people who are one of us—Westerners, Jews, or both—and therefore worthy of self-sacrifice.

One way in which I have tried to show Marwa and Leykeh's inescapable closeness involves the Never-Again Club restaurant. Mary Douglas argues in her 1972 essay "Deciphering a Meal" that a shared meal "expresses close friendship" and that eating with someone involves crossing "a threshold of intimacy" (236). This idea, that people who eat together accept each other and demonstrate closeness, runs throughout the play. There is, of course, Zaida's compulsion to share meals with Alison and her parents. As well, when Alison and Lauren are getting along, they have lunch together (14-16), but when they fight, Lauren storms out rather than eat with Alison and Dennis (37-39). That same scene is the culmination of a series of attempts by Alison to get Dennis to fully accept a gift of food and, symbolically, to fully accept her. He rejects her vegetable plate (17-18), and his acceptance of the strawberries she brings him is tempered by his criticism of the plastic bag in which they are brought (20). When he finally accepts Alison's salad without
reservation, it is at a moment when her friendship with Lauren has been ruptured, and Alison needs and gets Dennis as a new friend to make up for the loss of her old one (38-39). Consuming a given food "is seen as incorporating the eater into a culinary system and into the group which practises it" (Beardsworth and Keil, 54), and Alison's demonstration that she understands and is practising Dennis's culinary system is a way for her to earn his approval.

Marwa's ultimate decision to eat with Leykeh is of similar importance. This restaurant is a place where, as Marwa complains to Leykeh at the beginning, she is consigned to be served food for eternity alongside "bloody Bosnians, Cambodians, Armenians, and you" (9), and for most of the play she refuses to eat. Marwa and Leykeh thus spend nearly the entire play at the "threshold of intimacy" Douglas describes, but without crossing it. They consistently appear onstage together at a dinner table, a site of potential intimacy, but Marwa refuses to eat. It is only once Leykeh successfully argues to Marwa that she is the "same kind [of person] as everybody else" (58) that Marwa cements their sameness by finally relenting and
breaking bread with Leykeh. In fact, since there are millions of imagined victims of genocide eating all around them, the moment expresses kinship between them all.

But Marwa is, like Alison, deeply uncomfortable with her decision to capitulate. She accepts that there is no active solidarity between people across geography or across history, and she tells her son, "You must survive on your own. Now I see. This is how it always been. This is how it will forever be. Fight for yourself, Wahid" (58). However, the advice she gives Wahid to "never again look on suffering" and "never again hear the sound of children cry" (58) is precisely the opposite of what she has been advocating throughout the play. This suggests that, while Marwa may accept that this is how things are, she is not satisfied that this is how they should be. Her acquiescence to self-interestedness is reluctant, and she feels that there is something wrong with it.

Even more importantly, it is likely that some, if not most, audience members will feel the same thing, and in that gap between reality and the ideal is the play's most significant reason for hope. If people are troubled by the idea that genocide is inevitable and that most of us will
never care enough to stop it as long as any meaningful action we might take would risk diminishing our own quality of life, then there is cause for optimism, because being troubled, if the feeling is sufficiently intense and sustained, is a factor that can itself reduce quality of life. Perhaps we will eventually reach a point where so many people in developed countries will be bothered by our inaction in the face of the suffering of others that we will have to intervene, if only to return ourselves to an emotional state in which we can enjoy our luxurious lifestyle.

That is the affluent, Western guilt to which I referred at the beginning. At the moment, mine is considerable enough that I have written a play about it, but it has not yet reached a level where I have done much more than that. In fact, as part of the research for this project, I spent an hour and a half on the phone one Sunday afternoon interviewing El-Fadel Arbab, a Darfuri refugee, and, as interesting and devastating as his story was, I got hungry about three quarters of the way through and started trying to find ways of politely ending the conversation so I could have lunch. I felt hungrier than I
felt sympathetic, in other words, but the incident has led to repeated pangs of guilt ever since. I hope that these pangs will increase in frequency and intensity as I accumulate reasons to feel guilty, which I inevitably will, until I eventually have no choice but to take more concrete action. Despite the decision Alison makes at the end of the play, it is possible that she is on a similar path.

Some might argue that altruism for the sake of wanting to feel good about oneself is not genuine. The way I see it, though, we are human, we are self-centred, and the most we can expect of ourselves as a species is to put that narcissism to good use, as long as by "good use" we mean effective action rather than empty rhetoric. Alison suggests that Dennis's motive for doing humanitarian work is "not peace and goodwill towards everyone. It's just about [his] own happiness" (54). Dennis takes this as an affront, but, as Alison goes on to say, it is not necessarily "a bad thing" (55); it might, in fact, be our only hope.
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God Grew Tired of Us: The Story of Lost Boys of Sudan.


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