

# NIGHTLANDS

Sylvan Oswald

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Post-production Draft

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Commissioned by New Georges,  
administered by New Dramatists  
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Characters:

NETTA KLEIN, a student

IVY SILVER, a teacher

RUSS KLEIN, a husband / MARLA SCHWARTZBAUM

MASON SILVER, a young man / HENNY MYERS

EILEEN KOCH, from the neighborhood

Setting:

A memory of NORTH PHILADELPHIA

Music:

Appendix follows play text.

A myth is not a story read from left to right, from beginning to end,  
but a thing held full in-view the whole time.

— Thornton Wilder

To tell this story... is inevitably and richly to become involved with the force of life and legend,  
how each perpetually assumes the guise of the other, creating that dense, many-sided  
and shifting reality which is the world we live in and the world we make.

— James Baldwin

## PART ONE

A community-access radio station in Philadelphia circa mid-1960s rendered in a few strokes: enormous bluepurple sky; a constellation of warm hanging lamps; frames of the walls; a mid-century modern table or two and a few chairs all possibly on wheels; radio microphones on tall stands, flexible arms, or table stands as needed. There are no doors, no scene changes, almost no props, and no blackouts—I'd even work against the desire to set recurring locations in the same space onstage.

### **May-June 1964**

#### I. Apparent Backward Motion

[The stage kind of glows. It's the magic hour. NETTA, in her auburn beehive, alone. This is supposed to be the beginning. This is supposed to be: sweeping film score, Italian movie star, America's sweetheart (both at once), windswept liberation on the deck of a sailing ship, romantic impossibility on the tarmac. But instead. A whole lot of other things happened. NETTA speaks into a mic, out of time.]

NETTA

These are the nightlands.  
Enormous bluepurple sky.  
And I'm  
in it.

[She tries again to imagine herself at the center of a sweeping narrative. Enter RUSS.]

RUSS

I'm home.

[NETTA, a beat.]

NETTA  
I was just thinking.

RUSS  
Yes.

NETTA  
I wonder what it's like in New York.

RUSS  
Why.

NETTA  
I don't know. I just wonder.

RUSS  
We went there on furlough once. It wasn't that great.

NETTA  
You were only there a weekend. You probably didn't see a show or walk in Central Park or do anything elegant —

RUSS  
Is that what you want — elegant?

NETTA  
Why not!

RUSS  
Elegant. I bet. Fancy dinners at a hotel. Is that it? Hob-knobbing with the rich and famous. Then one of them — in a top hat — asks you to dance — and you spend all night twirling in circles.

NETTA  
Exactly —

RUSS  
And the bright lights of Broadway!

NETTA  
Why not?

RUSS  
What do you need that for?

NETTA  
For fun.

RUSS  
You need fun?

NETTA  
I guess I don't need it.

RUSS  
Then why talk about it?

NETTA  
I'm just imagining—

RUSS  
Imagining what.

NETTA  
A fantasy. A good time. Another kind of life.

RUSS  
What's wrong with this life? *[pause]* You need a job.

NETTA  
I have a job!

RUSS  
*[A snort.]*

NETTA  
I have. A job.

RUSS  
Well you don't need New York, Netta. There's plenty of fancy – uh – postal workers *[himself]* – elegant postal *employees* who know how to have a good time here in dazzling Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

NETTA  
I know—

RUSS  
And these guys don't slouch. We got high-ranking postal officials who make important decisions all day long. About pencils.

NETTA  
Pencils are a serious business.

RUSS  
Don't make fun.

NETTA

What about the real estate thing with Morty?

RUSS

It was a crock. Didn't wanna tell you.

NETTA

When is your review.

RUSS

Fitzgerald's out of town. It'll be next week.

NETTA

He promised you. Something better. This stockroom assignment was supposed to be temporary. It's been, what, six months? How can they waste all your experience?

RUSS

Don't bug me.

NETTA

I'm not.

RUSS

When's dinner?

NETTA

Dinner's—

RUSS

Got bowling tonight.

[RUSS starts to leave.]

NETTA

— . Okay.

RUSS

And Babe.

NETTA

Yes?

RUSS

Would you take that thing off?

NETTA  
What?

RUSS  
You know what I mean.

NETTA  
—.  
Oh.  
—.  
Sure.

[RUSS exits to upstage where he lingers a moment. NETTA puts her hand to her head. Her auburn beehive is a wig. She reluctantly takes it off and sets it down. Her real hair is pressed against her head. She's beautiful.  
A moment.]

NETTA  
Dinner's ready.

[Maybe later, with the sweeping narrative.  
She speaks into a mic, out of time. These sequences have a heightened intimacy.]

NETTA  
If I turn the volume up, way up.  
I can sound like rock and roll.  
I can sound like hard bop  
— is that what it's called —  
when the music  
comes out of exhaustion,  
out of a great and gut-wrenching sorrow  
that most people think  
I don't know anything about.

EILEEN  
Lippincott Ladies Area Meeting!  
Your Regional President, Eileen Koch, presiding.

NETTA  
The air thick like twilight,  
the lights the crossfade of day to night,  
when it's both at once,  
everything orange and blue.

[NETTA's house.]

EILEEN

Ivy Silver from the radio! Ivy Silver. You know, Star Talk where the stars talk and we listen!

MARLA

[*Unimpressed*] I don't know her.

EILEEN

Well it's one of the black stations so I wouldn't expect you to know.

HENNY

You listen to the black stations?

EILEEN

Once in a while, what do you want, when I'm bored. As I was saying. She has some little place in North Philadelphia.

MARLA

But where? [*To Henny*] It matters where.

EILEEN

A little parlor off Columbia Avenue.

MARLA

Wonder why there.

HENNY

That's okay I guess.

EILEEN

Well, it's in a house. Her house. And it's near all the stores.

MARLA

You had to go to her house?

HENNY

What was that like?

EILEEN

It felt like- having tea. Formal.

MARLA

She couldn't come to your house?

EILEEN

All those books, I guess.



MARLA  
And the telescope.

EILEEN  
No, there's books and books with charts and tables and numbers.

HENNY  
What radio station did you say?

EILEEN  
I mean it's not just a black station. It's the uh the community-access what's-it-called. Oh Morty's involved in all that stuff. That's how I heard of it. He listens to these guys telling war stories. And I found this little show... feels secret.

MARLA  
Morty's involved with a black station?

EILEEN  
It's mixed, okay. Mixed or something. It's for whoever.

HENNY  
Must be new.

MARLA  
Well did she tell your future?

EILEEN  
It wasn't like that.

MARLA  
Then what.

EILEEN  
It was like, telling me what kind of person I am. All my good traits and all my bad traits. What the planets were like in the sky when I was born and what that means about what my "propensities" are towards this n' that. What I'm likely to do.

MARLA  
Did she read your palm?

EILEEN  
No.

MARLA  
What about cards?

EILEEN  
Tarot? No.

MARLA  
What about – did she read your mind?

HENNY  
Let her tell it.

EILEEN  
Well – not exactly. But she didn't exactly not do that. It was a combination.

MARLA  
Huh.

NETTA  
What do you mean?

EILEEN  
Oh you're listening!

NETTA  
Yes – of course I'm listening. I'm here, aren't I.

EILEEN  
I don't know Netta – you just fly away to your little planet sometimes.

NETTA  
Sorry. I'm very much here.

HENNY  
Eileen, so it wasn't just looking at the astrology?

EILEEN  
No. There was – something more – she said she was having some – intuition – intuitions about me.

MARLA  
About what.

NETTA  
What did you learn?

EILEEN  
Think I'm going to tell you that?

HENNY  
Was it like she gave you advice? Or was she – predicting the future!

EILEEN

I said she wasn't telling the future. Do you girls think I'm superstitious?  
Because I'm not.

ALL

Oh no, no, of course not.

EILEEN

Do you think this is some kind of hocus-pocus?

MARLA

Well—

NETTA

No.

HENNY

Yes but the good kind.

EILEEN

Because Marla, as hard as it might be for you to comprehend,  
I had a meaningful experience.

MARLA

I understand.

EILEEN

Listen to her show yourself if you don't believe me. It's really something.

HENNY

What station Eileen?

MARLA

Henny!

EILEEN

WJKO sweetheart. I can't recall the numbers. Fiddle around at the end of the  
dial. You'll find it. Where's the coffee.

NETTA

Oh, I'm sorry. I'll get it.

[She heads to the side.]

HENNY

This was just an area meeting, she didn't need to prepare snacks.

EILEEN

We always show hospitality. Don't we?

MARLA

Heavens yes.

HENNY (*to MARLA*)

I don't see why you have to push it.

MARLA

Could everyone get off my back today?

EILEEN

I'm thirsty.

MARLA

I am too.

HENNY

So, Eileen, how are your sales?

EILEEN

I think I've made a personal record in April. Yours?

HENNY

It's a good spring.

EILEEN

Marla?

MARLA

[*Dismal, but not about to reveal.*] Okay.

[NETTA enters with a coffee pot and four mugs on a tray,  
nerve bubbling.]

NETTA

Eileen, would you give me that astrologer's number?

[The tray wobbles.]

HENNY

Honey, you can put the tray down.

EILEEN

Sure Netta.

MARLA  
Netta put the tray down.

NETTA  
Oh.

[NETTA puts the tray down on the table. Everyone breathes.  
Hold.]

NETTA  
Coffee?

[THE WIG LADIES coordinate and exit.  
NETTA stays, a little adrift but still with us.]  
[IVY speaks into a mic, out of time.]

IVY  
When something is true astrologically  
it is repeated many times.  
so if I repeat myself.  
it's because what I am saying  
is true.

I'll tell you what I see.  
But it's no prediction.  
Possibility.  
Current  
in the wires.

[Sound of radio. NETTA is tuning a portable radio to IVY's show.]  
IVY's light blinks on – she's just started a broadcast.]

IVY  
Before we begin, I'd like to thank the technicians here at WJKO Philadelphia,  
Community-Access Radio: "letting the city speak."

Thanks to our sponsor Schwartzbaum's department store: Everything you need  
for summertime fun. "Everybody knows, everybody goes to Schwartzbaum's!"  
Open 9am to 6pm on Columbia Avenue at 22<sup>nd</sup> Street in North Philadelphia."

If you're just tuning in, this is Star Talk, where the stars talk and we listen. I'm  
your host, Ivy Silver, certified by the board of American Astrologers.

Let's return to the sky.

[NETTA, at home, is ready, receptive.]

IVY

Tonight I have something special for you, Philadelphia. A horoscope for the city. Yes, even cities have horoscopes. And this year the planets will make it back around to where they were when our city was born. It's founding. Our hometown's Saturn Return.

We humans experience this about every thirty years — the end of one cycle and the beginning of another. A time to evaluate and make changes. But what will it mean for the city?

If we look ahead to Philadelphia's chart for the Saturn return this fall we see notable patterns. Three pairs of planets making three strong angles. When we see repetition like that it's our job to listen.

First, and most powerful, we'll see the angle of [*"Your-un-us"*] Uranus, a force of breaking free. And Pluto, a force of breaking away.

[NETTA concerned. And hooked.]

IVY

Uranus reigns over revolutions in history. Overturning the old ways. Pluto is the digger outer. He is not satisfied by the truth. Not until every stone is turned, every secret unearthed, all hypocrisy revealed. No matter whose it is.

[NETTA, inspired and a little bit scared.]

IVY

Second: We'll have Neptune at an angle with the Sun. Neptune stands for the powerless in society, for illusion and disillusion. The sun acts like a trigger. The sun sets things in motion.

Third, Saturn and Mercury will line up.  
Saturn: the big heavy: power, order, police.  
With Mercury: messages, transit.

[NETTA absorbing IVY's words into all her cells.]

IVY

What will happen with the underlings? What will break free or break away? How will the power structures, how will cars and transit come into play? Saturn is telling us, a pressure will be brought to bear.

[NETTA reeling from the questions.]

IVY

I know most of you want to know about tomorrow, next week, and is he the man for me. But as we enter this return cycle, the city's stars may affect you too.

[At home:]

NETTA

A pressure will be brought to bear.

IVY

Next up, your weekly horoscope.

[A beat. IVY looks up at an unseen station producer.]

IVY

[*Off mic a moment, throwaway:*] Tell me that wasn't "broad appeal."

[Hold. NETTA is gone. Scene pivots around IVY.  
MASON at the mic and out of time.]

MASON

These are the nightlands.  
And all the daylands in between.  
You think you already know  
what's gonna happen to me.

First time we meet.  
Think you already know.  
Well I'm not going to end up  
"like that."

[MASON is home.]

IVY

I'm not gonna ask you where you been.

MASON

I'm not gonna tell you to mind your temper.

IVY

I'm not gonna remind you I don't have a temper.

MASON

I'm not gonna ask you to recall the last time I came home in the morning in  
which you grabbed my scruff like a bad dog and—

IVY

That's fine. I'm not gonna ask you where you been.

MASON

And I'm definitely not gonna tell you how I spent the night in jail for defending my natural rights.

IVY

What?! I'm not even gonna ask about that.

MASON

Then you won't ever know Momma.

IVY

Know how you're the savior of the neighborhood.

MASON

You think the right thing to do is just sit and watch at the window?  
Sit and watch the universe go by?

IVY

I go out and do my show.

MASON

Oh yeah, your show. Well I can't just sit up in your house all day. I'm nineteen years old! I was walking down the street. Just walking down a tree-lined street. And I stopped to tie my shoe – tie my shoe is all! Cops stopped me. They said it looked like I had a weapon. Like I was pulling a knife out of my sock to walk down an empty street in the middle of the day?

IVY

Oh baby, is this true?

MASON

And they'd do the same to you.

IVY

Is this gonna be on your record? Will it keep you from working?

MASON

You could let me run the business. I can get your ratings up *and* that would bring you more individual clients. That's where it's at, right, the individuals?

IVY

Don't sell me that get-rich-quick.

MASON

But you don't make any money. I never see you collecting from your ladies.

IVY

You don't know how much I make. All you need to know is there's enough.



There's enough for us. And they're not "my ladies."

MASON

You don't even advertise.

IVY

It's not that kind of business!

MASON

I could help more than you think. Learned things in school. And from the Action Committee.

IVY

The what committee?

MASON

Just a club I go to. Learned about organizing. Getting the word out. People are planning protests. About employment discrimination. It's not just kids. It's students. And regular people with jobs.

IVY

What do they got to protest?

MASON

Do you like how things are? *[Pause]* We protest unequal treatment. Like your new management. This thing they're on about how they "don't understand your audience." You know they're not saying that to the Appalachian Music Hour people. Probably understand that audience just fine.

IVY

Okay.

MASON

You should come! We're non-violent.

IVY

I don't like groups. I don't like idle chatter.

MASON

Don't like the world is what you don't like.

IVY

Boy, please. Don't be so dramatic.

MASON

Well I got a job anyway.

IVY

You did.

MASON

Yeah. Get ready for me to be the man of the house.

IVY

You can be man of the house when you've got your own house.

MASON

Then I'll keep my money to myself!

IVY

Except when you start paying me some rent and some utilities!

MASON

What!

IVY

What is your job, son? Just a second ago you demand to run my business and now you got a job?

MASON

I'll tell you later.

IVY

I was in a good mood.

MASON

You're annoying me, Ma!

[MASON, exiting, throwaway:]

MASON

Why's it already so hot out!

IVY

I was thinking my own thoughts.  
About why I feel a whip of cold  
at the beginning of summer.

[RUSS, into a mic, out of time.]

RUSS

I had a bad dream.  
Though. I was awake.  
So maybe it was.  
A mirage.

## II. The Digger-Outer

[RUSS sees NETTA sitting, wearing a wig.  
She sees him seeing it, touches it lightly.  
He lets it go this time. She's relieved.  
She reads. Then,]

NETTA  
I'm seeing the girls for lunch.

RUSS  
Take the expressway.

NETTA  
I know how to go.

RUSS  
Don't want you getting stuck somewhere.

NETTA  
Why would I get stuck?

RUSS  
Car's old. You know. I keep it tuned. But. Try to avoid the potholes.

NETTA  
I've been doing some interesting reading—

RUSS  
Okay.

NETTA  
About the religions before Judaism.

RUSS  
Like what.

NETTA  
Like the Babylonians. They invented a system of forecasting events before they would happen. They used specific alignments of the planets and they also predicted the future by killing animals and reading their livers.

RUSS  
Where do you get this stuff.

NETTA  
The library.

RUSS

How can you find the time to read when you're always working so hard, Netta?  
My wife, the busybody.

NETTA

Russ.

RUSS

She sells wigs and reads history books! You still sell wigs, don't you?

NETTA

What happened in your dream?

RUSS

— —. Do you read the news? Are you aware that our country could get torched by communist nuclear weapons at any time? Huh? And riots are breaking out in other cities and that could happen here. It's not "if" it's "when." Even if we do give all those people our post office jobs. I've been to battle, Netta. I'm like a piece of it. And we live here in our little house with nothing to protect. No sons or daughters to shield from this history that's happening.

NETTA

But you don't want daughters.

RUSS

I dreamt about war. And wigs. And soldiers wearing them. And the enemy. And the land. And shrapnel. And. I'm not sure why the wigs were there, Netta.

NETTA

I feel like myself when I wear it.

RUSS

If we had kids I'd feel like—

NETTA

what

RUSS

—myself.

NETTA

— —.

RUSS

— —.

[NETTA turns away.]  
RUSS can't tie his tie.]

RUSS

Why does that wig make you feel like yourself.

Are you an actress?

Just be careful.

When you go out.

To lunch.

Are you going to.

Make dinner.

NETTA

Yes.

[RUSS leaves for work.]

[Beat. NETTA stands with a tissue in her hands. She is at IVY's door. They see each other for the first time. A spark.]

[NETTA accidentally drops the tissue. IVY notices.]

IVY

Are you breathing?

NETTA

Yes, yes.

IVY

Doesn't look like it.

NETTA

I'm here for a reading. Are you the astrologer? Are you Mrs. Silver?

IVY

You dropped something.

NETTA

I don't know my way around this area.

IVY

I said, looks like you dropped something, Mrs. Klein.

NETTA

What? Oh. Sorry. A tissue.

[NETTA picks the tissue up.]

IVY

You'll notice the houses on this block are impeccable. Compared to the rest nearby. There is no litter on this street. The cars in the driveways nearly sparkle. We take pride.

NETTA

Of course.

IVY

And did your husband drive you, Mrs. Klein?

NETTA

No. He doesn't know I'm here.

IVY

Alright.

NETTA

Is that a problem – that he doesn't know I'm here?

IVY

Not for me.

NETTA

Not for me either.

IVY

So, you came through a recommendation?

NETTA

One of my co-workers. Friends. Eileen. She said you had – intuition about her.

IVY

My sessions are all confidential.

NETTA

Do you have intuitions about me?

IVY

Not yet. Why don't we begin.

NETTA

Alright.

IVY

I charge fifteen dollars for the first session and ten dollars after that. For my time.

NETTA

Oh. Well, of course.

IVY

In the first session I gather information for your birth chart, the alignment of stars in the sky when you were born. That's why it's longer than the others.

NETTA

I've never understood – does astrology mean looking through a telescope, and – knowing which star is which?

IVY

It means the telling of the stars. We look at them in translation. On paper. Like this.

[IVY shows NETTA a piece of paper.]

IVY

That's an astrological chart. It's a picture of the sky. A still frame. It's like a map for where a life might go.

NETTA

Whose life?

IVY

Well this is just an example. It's mine. But I'm going to make one for you.

[Beat.]

NETTA

It's really you, from the radio?

IVY

Yes, I'm on the community-access station. Have you listened to my show?

NETTA

Yes!

IVY

You didn't mention that earlier. You said a friend—

NETTA

Recommended. Yes. But then listening to your show. Some of the things you said. I had to meet you.

IVY

Do you remember, what, specifically?

NETTA

[Backtrack] I mean, the host of your own show.

IVY

My clients tell me that the show speaks to them in a different way than our sessions.

NETTA

It must be your voice.

IVY

Yes, the voice alone can be more intimate.

NETTA

That's surprising. Is that surprising?

IVY

You know, Mrs. Klein, your voice is not unsuited to radio work.

NETTA

Really?

IVY

With the right training.

NETTA

Wow, that would be – I mean – I'm looking for some different work.

IVY

Ah. Well let's see what the stars have to say.

NETTA

Okay.

IVY

I'm going to ask you a few questions. To gather information for the birth chart. Do you have any questions for me before I begin?

NETTA

Not really. Not about astrology per se. I'm just really happy to be here.

IVY

That's good.

NETTA

Mostly everyone seems nice.



IVY  
Mostly everyone?

NETTA  
Oh not exactly. That's not exactly what I meant. On my way here – not on your street but – on my way – I felt – I don't know –

IVY  
You felt something.

NETTA  
I wasn't nervous. But – may I ask. Is there something going on? In the neighborhood?

IVY  
What do you mean?

NETTA  
There was some tension—

IVY  
What kind?

NETTA  
Some men on the corners with their arms crossed.

IVY  
People going about their business—

NETTA  
Surprised to see me, maybe.

IVY  
Just regular people. Black people.

NETTA  
I didn't mean that—

IVY  
Things seemed tense?

NETTA  
Well I was reading in *The Bulletin* about the high rate of unemployment among the Negroes.

IVY  
And then, walking by some, you felt responsible in some way?

NETTA

The tension.

IVY

There's a lot going on in this community that you may not find in the pages of *The Bulletin*. And I cannot imagine that a single one of those men expects employment from you.

NETTA

I should hope not! I'm in sales!

IVY

Don't people congregate on the corner in your neighborhood?

NETTA

How do they know I don't own Schwartzbaum's department store?

IVY

I understand your concern. My neighbors know that I run my business from here. They know I have my clients.

NETTA

Maybe I should be friendlier.

IVY

You could just be respectful. That would be fine.

NETTA

I was. I was respectful.

IVY

Then we're on the right track.

NETTA

Did I offend you?

[Beat.]

IVY

No honey, you don't know any better.

[A room with no windows in a municipal building. Eric Dolphy's "Tenderly." There's a long worktable with a pile of pencils and empty boxes stamped "U.S. Government".

RUSS counts ten pencils and puts them in a box. Repeat.