

# THE HALF-LIFE OF MARIE CURIE

## Scene 1

1911.

Hertha's ode to the electric arc.

HERTHA. There was a technical problem in the world and I fixed it and you're welcome. **-START**

You see human beings are very clever, aren't we, and we invented electric lamps, and by 1890 there were such lamps on every street in London, lighting stages, warming dining rooms, isn't *that* lovely. Except no, no it was not lovely *it was loud*. The damn things made this hissing, scratching, popping noise and it was miserable. It was...well it was this:

*We hear the clicking hiss of the electric lamps.*

Isn't that the most dreadful thing you've ever heard! Good god. I'd rather go back to candles and shouting "*Where are you?*" after dinner.

But the choice can't be: racket or *darkness*. So I ask myself, Why the hiss? Which was the right question to ask because it had an answer and I found it. The lamp is called an *arc* lamp because the electricity arced across a small divide in between two carbon rods. That's what makes the glow: the empty space between the rods, like fingertips, nearly touching. Isn't that a lovely metaphor for—I don't care. Now, I figure out that the empty space also allows for oxygen to pool at the tip of the rods which promotes rapid heating, which promotes... that hiss.

*That hiss again. Ugh.*

So I redesigned the damn things and now they behave.

END-

START-

END-

*The hissing vanishes.*

Listen to that.

*We listen.*

That's the sound of a good idea.

And as I said...you're welcome.

*Blackout.*

Marie's ode to the radium in her pocket.

MARIE. (*Holding, investigating the substance itself.*) Radium is a cold heat, a dark light, a force of nature. I have it with me now. *A vial in my pocket. I take it out. I hold it.* It glows. Turn down the light and one sees a watery, green...fire. No. It's more constant than a flame. *A gaze.* Like it can't take its eyes off you. Like the love of your life.

This is why I keep it with me. It reminds me of Pierre. Husband. Together we shoveled small mountains of pitchblende heaped in a sooty shed; dissolved it in acid, boiled it down, scraped the black bits to purify this element. Ten tons of the rock we shoveled distilled into just enough Radium to sprinkle on your fingertip. *That's* a certain kind of marriage, don't you think?

"Radioactive" is my word. I coined it. That was me. So...

Now it is *only* me. Pierre is dead, gone six years now, and I am alone and our girls are alone, and it is only me and the glow and the gaze of the element in my pocket.

You see radiation is the process by which an element changes itself entirely. As it radiates, Radium decays to Radon which decays to Polonium which decays to Lead, all of these metals shedding themselves to the point of abandonment. I empathize.

Half-life. The moment an element transforms so fully that it is more other than self. That's what we call it. Half...life.

*We hear a low ticking...*

Do you hear it? Radium and its half-life approaching.

Not everyone can hear it. But I can. I do.

*Tick...tick...tick...*

*This is shattered by...or grows to become...*

## Scene 2

*A mob outside of Marie Curie's door in Sceaux, France.*

*Shouting, banging on the door. Someone throws something at the wall, at the window.*

*The door opens and the racket outside floods in. None louder than the woman entering, who bellows back at the masses.*

HERTHA. You're nothing but a pack of wolves. Do you know whose house this is? Do you have any idea who *this great woman* is? Also there are children in this house and if you frighten them any more than you already have I swear to a god I don't believe in that I'll come to each one of your houses and SHAKE THEIR FOUNDATIONS.

*She slams the door.*

Marie? Marie are you alright? // I'm here! It's me.

MARIE. *Who's here? What's // going on?*

HERTHA. It's Hertha, my dear. // I'm here to help.

MARIE. What do you mean it's Hertha? Why?

HERTHA. Why what?

MARIE. Are you here?! *Why are you here?*

HERTHA. Because I thought I was going to very quietly make you tea and toast during your moderate troubles, but it looks like it'll be a bit more involved than that.

*(Yelling through the window.)* I SAID BACK OFF, YOU DOGS.

*(Back to Marie.)* How are you? May I come in? How are you?

MARIE. Oh I'm terrible, come in.

HERTHA. God, journalists are pigeons, you can't get rid of them before they shit on everything.

MARIE. I wish I'd known you were coming. We don't have much food or wine.

HERTHA. I told you I was coming. I wrote you five times.

MARIE. Five times?

HERTHA. When I didn't hear back I said, "Dammit now I'm nervous, I'll just get on a boat."