

*KEN smiles.*

*He has completed working on the canvases.*

KEN: Take a look.

*ROTHKO moves to the canvases, stands over it, carefully studying it, walking around it. He is looking for flaws in the canvases, as:*

ROTHKO: You would have loved Jackson. He was a downtown guy, a real Bohemian. No banker's hours for him, believe you me. Every night the drinking and the talking and the fighting and the dancing and the staying up late; like everyone's romantic idea of what an artist ought to be: the anti-Rothko... At his worst you still loved him though; you loved him because he loved art so much... He thought it *mattered*. He thought painting mattered... Does not the poignancy stop your heart?... How could this story not end in tragedy?

*Beat.*

ROTHKO: Goya said, 'We have Art that we may not perish from Truth.'... Pollock saw some truth. Then he didn't have art to protect him any more... Who could survive that?

*Beat.*

*ROTHKO emerges from his thoughts.*

*He nods to KEN.*

*They lift the canvases from the floor, lean it up against a sawhorse, easel or wall.*

*ROTHKO studies it minutely.*

*He delicately picks lint from the canvases. He gently blows remnants of dust away.*

*He continues to study the canvases as:*

ROTHKO: I was walking up to my house last week and this couple was passing. Lady looks in the window, says: 'I

wonder who owns all the Rothkos?... Just like that I'm a noun. A Rothko.

KEN: A commodity.

ROTHKO: An overmanle.

KEN: A what?

*ROTHKO continues to study the blank canvases for flaws, for discoloration, for imperfection. He moves closer, he backs all the way up, he moves closer again, tilting his head back and forth, adjudicating, as:*

ROTHKO: The overmanles. Those paintings doomed to become *decoration*. You know, over the fireplace in the penthouse. They say to you, 'I need something to work with the sofa, you understand. Or something bright and cheery for the breakfast nook, which is orange, do you have anything in orange? Or burnt-umber? Or sea-foam green? Here's a paint chip from the Sherwin-Williams. And could you cut it down to fit the sideboard?... Or even worse, 'Darling, I simply *must* have one because my neighbour has one, that social-climbing bitch, in fact if she has one, I need *three!*'... Or even worse, 'I must have one because the New York Times tells me I should have one - or someone told me the New York Times tells me I should have one because who has time to read any more?... 'Oh, don't make me look at it! I never look at it! It's so depressing!'... 'All those fuzzy rectangles, my kid could do that in kindergarten, it's nothing but a scam, this guy's a fraud'... Still, they buy it... It's an investment... It's screwing the neighbours... It's buying class... It's buying taste... It goes with the lamp... It's cheaper than a Pollock... It's interior decoration... It's anything but what it is.

*Beat.*

*ROTHKO seems to have accepted the canvases.*

ROTHKO: Okey-dokey. Let's prime the canvases.

*They work together now.*

*They have done this many times, it is a well-practised ritual.*

*They pour the paint/glue mixture from the stone – the base layer for the canvas – into two large buckets. The mixture is a thin liquid, almost a glaze, of dark plum.*

*They bring the buckets to either side of the six-foot square canvas. They make sure the canvas is secure.*

*They prepare house painting brushes. ROTHKO rubs his rhythmically across his hand, warming and limbering the bristles.*

*KEN waits. Ready.*

*ROTHKO stares intently at the blank canvas.*

*A long beat as he rubs his brush back and forth across his hand, thinking.*

*KEN watches him, poised.*

*Then ROTHKO goes to the phonograph, flips through the stack of records, finds the one he wants, and puts it onto the phonograph.*

*He lowers the needle. He listens. He lifts the needle again. Finally finds the exact place in the record he is looking for. He lowers the needle.*

*Spirited classical music plays.*

*He returns to the canvas.*

*He nods to KEN.*

*Ready? Ready.*

*They dip their brushes.*

*They are on opposite sides of the canvas.*

*KEN crouches; he will do the lower half of the canvas.*

*ROTHKO stands tall; he will do the upper half of the canvas.*

*KEN waits for ROTHKO to begin.*

*ROTHKO waits for the music.*

*With theatrical panache, ROTHKO waits for the exact moment the music thunders most dramatically and then –*

*He begins to paint –*

*He moves very quickly –*

*Using strong, broad strokes he sweeps across the top of the canvas as quickly as possible – big, horizontal gestures – moving fast to make sure the base layer is even and smooth –*

*KEN does the same for the bottom half of the painting –*

*Some of ROTHKO's paint drips and splashes down on KEN –*

*It is like choreography; they move in sync, they move toward each other and then cross, ROTHKO lurching back awkwardly as he continues to paint so KEN can dive in under him gracefully as he continues to paint –*

*The thin, watery paint splatters and splashes as they dip their brushes and assault the canvas –*

*It is hard, fast, thrilling work –*

*The music swells –*

*And then they are done.*

*The white canvas is now an even, flat plain of dark plum.*

*ROTHKO steps back, exhausted, panting for air.*

*KEN sits heavily on the floor, also exhausted.*

*Beat.*

*ROTHKO lights a cigarette.*

*Then he turns off the phonograph.*

*KEN rises and cleans himself with a towel. Then he changes his paint-stained shirt.*

*He begins to straighten up: hauling the buckets away; wiping up the floor; cleaning the brushes.*

*ROTHKO minutely studies the now-primed canvas.*

*Then he steps back and back, studies the canvas from across the studio.*

ROTHKO: (Musing) So...so...so...it'll do... Maybe it'll do... Possibly adequate... What do you think?

KEN: You mean me? You want me to answer?

ROTHKO: Who else?

KEN: It's a...a good ground, a good base layer. Nice and even.

ROTHKO: We'll see when it dries. Then I can start to paint.

KEN: You really care what I think?

ROTHKO: Not at all.

*KEN smiles, continues to clean up.*

*Then he stops abruptly.*

*Something about the freshly-primed canvas strikes him.*

*He stares at it.*

*Surprisingly, tears come to his eyes. The emotion is unexpected.*

ROTHKO: What?

KEN: Nothing...

ROTHKO: What is it?

KEN: It's strange... I'm remembering something... The, um, color...is...

ROTHKO: What?

KEN: Doesn't matter.

ROTHKO: What?

KEN: Dried blood... When the blood dried it got darker. On the carpet.

ROTHKO: Which carpet?

KEN: Where my parents died.

*KEN tries to shake off the thought. He moves away.*

*But then he stops again. He can't shake the emotion.*

*The canvas draws him back.*

KEN: It's exactly the color. When the blood dried it got darker, that surprised me. I remember being surprised by that...

*ROTHKO is intrigued.*

ROTHKO: What happened to your parents?

KEN: I don't want to talk about it.

ROTHKO: Yes you do.

KEN: They were murdered.

ROTHKO: Did you say murdered?

KEN: Mm.

ROTHKO: How old were you?

KEN: Seven. This was back in Iowa.

ROTHKO: What happened?

KEN: I honestly don't remember it too well.

ROTHKO: Sure you do.

*KEN stares forward, lost in thought.*

*Beat.*

ROTHKO: What do you see?

*KEN shakes his head.*

ROTHKO: What do you see?

*Beat.*

KEN: (*Raising it*) I woke up... and the first thing I saw was the snow outside my window. I was glad it snowed because it was Saturday and I could go sledding. My Dad would take me sledding, me and my sister. But...but...I didn't smell anything. That was weird. Normally my Mom would be up making breakfast. It was really quiet. I put on my slippers - they were those Neolite ones that look like moccasins. Go into the hall... Now it's really quiet... And it's *cold*. There's a window open somewhere... Then I see my sister, she's just standing in the hallway, staring into my parent's room. The door's open. My sister...she's standing in a puddle of pee. Just staring. Her eyes... I go to the door and look in and see the snow first. Outside the window, so much snow, maybe I'll still go sledding. And then the blood. The bed's stained with it. And the wall. They're on the bed... It was a knife... Apparently it was a knife, I found out later.

*Beat.*

KEN: Burglars, I found out. At least two of them... But right now I don't know what to do. I just see... I... Don't want my sister to see any more. My little sister... I turn around and push her out and shut the door. The door handle... With blood... Is red.

*Beat.*

KEN: That's all.

ROTHKO: What happened then?

KEN: You mean after that? Um... Nothing really. We went to the neighbours. They called the police.

ROTHKO: What happened to you two?

KEN: State took us. Foster homes. People were nice, actually. They kept us together. But they shuffled us around a lot. We were *rootless*... She's married to a CPA now.

ROTHKO: Rootless?

KEN: Never belonged... Never had a *place*.

ROTHKO: Did they find the guys who did it?

KEN: No. I paint pictures of them sometimes.

*Beat.*

ROTHKO: You paint pictures of the men who killed your parents?

KEN: Mm. What I imagine them to look like.

ROTHKO: Which is what?

*Beat.*

KEN: Normal.

*Beat.*

*ROTHKO considers comforting KEN in some way, but doesn't.*

*He moves away, lights a cigarette.*

ROTHKO: When I was a kid in Russia, I saw the Cossacks cutting people up and tossing them into pits... At least I think I remember that, maybe someone told me about it, or I'm just being dramatic, hard to say sometimes.

*KEN is relieved that ROTHKO has changed the subject. He continues cleaning up.*

KEN: How old were you when you came here?

ROTHKO: Ten. We went to Portland, lived in the ghetto alongside all the other thinky, talky Jews. I was Marcus Rothkowitz then.

KEN: (*Surprised*) You changed your name?

ROTHKO: My first dealer said he had too many Jewish painters on the books. So Marcus Rothkowitz becomes Mark Rothko. Now nobody knows I'm a Jew!

*KEN smiles.*

*He continues to clean up.*

*Pause.*

KEN: Can I ask you something?

ROTHKO: Can I stop you?

KEN: Are you really scared of black?

ROTHKO: No, I'm really scared of the absence of light.

KEN: Like going blind?

ROTHKO: Like going dead.

KEN: And you equate the color black with death?

ROTHKO: Doesn't everyone?

KEN: I'm asking you.

*ROTHKO likes that KEN is pushing back.*

ROTHKO: Yes, I equate the color black with the diminution of the life force.

KEN: Black means decay and darkness?

ROTHKO: Doesn't it?

KEN: Because black is the lack of red, if you will.

ROTHKO: Because black is the opposite of red. Not on the spectrum, but in reality.

KEN: I'm talking about in painting.

ROTHKO: Then talk about painting.

KEN: In your pictures the bold colors are the Dionysian element, kept in check by the strict geometric shapes, the Apollonian element. The bright colors are your passion, your will to survive – your 'life force.' But if *black* swallows those bright colors then you lose that excess and extravagance, and what do you have left?

ROTHKO: Go on. I'm fascinated by me.

KEN: (*Undeterred.*) Lose those colors and you have order with no content. You have mathematics with no numbers... Nothing but empty, arid boxes.

ROTHKO: And trust me, as you get older those colors are harder to sustain. The palate fades and we race to catch it before it's gone.

KEN: But...

*He stops.*

ROTHKO: What?

KEN: Never mind.

ROTHKO: What?

KEN: You'll get mad.

ROTHKO: Me?

KEN: You will.

ROTHKO: And?

KEN: I just think... It's kind of sentimental to equate black with death. That seems an antiquated notion. Sort of *romantic*.

ROTHKO: Romantic?

KEN: I mean...not *honest*.

ROTHKO: Really?

KEN: In reality we both know black's a tool, just like ochre or magenta. It has no affect. Seeing it as malevolent is a weird sort of chromatic anthropomorphising.

ROTHKO: You think so? What about equating white with death; like snow?

KEN: That's different. That's just a personal reaction. I'm not building a whole artistic sensibility around it.

ROTHKO: Maybe you should.

*They are growing heated.*

KEN: I don't think —

ROTHKO: Use your own life, why not?

KEN: It's not that I —

ROTHKO: Unless you're scared of it.

KEN: I'm not scared.

ROTHKO: Go into all that white.

KEN: I'm not scared, it's just self-indulgent.

ROTHKO: If you say so.

KEN: Not all art has to be psychodrama.

ROTHKO: Doesn't it?

KEN: No.

ROTHKO: You paint pictures of the men who killed your parents.

KEN: That's not *all* I paint.

ROTHKO: Maybe it should be. Then maybe you'd understand what black is.

KEN: Back to that.

ROTHKO: Always.

KEN: At least equating white with death isn't so predictable.

ROTHKO: I'm predictable now?

KEN: Kind of.

ROTHKO: Dishonest and predictable.

KEN: Come on, a painter gets older and the color black starts to infuse his work therefore, the cliché declension goes, he's depressed, he's fearing death, he's losing touch, he's losing relevance, he's saying goodbye.

ROTHKO: That's a cliché except for when it's not.

KEN: But it's not *true*.

ROTHKO: So now you know truth?

KEN: Look at Van Gogh; his last pictures are all color. He goes out and paints the most ecstatic yellows and blues known to man — then shoots himself... Or Matisse, his last works were nothing but great shocks of primary colors.

ROTHKO: You admire those colors.

KEN: Absolutely.

ROTHKO: Why?

KEN: Well, Matisse...he was dying; he knew he was dying, but still he was Matisse. When he got too ill to hold a paint brush he used scissors, cutting up paper and making collages. He never gave up. On his deathbed he was still organizing the color patterns on the ceiling. He had to be who he was.

ROTHKO: And you think *I'm* the romantic! Can't you do any better than that?

*He continues, angry and derisive:*

ROTHKO: Matisse the Dying Hero, struggling with his last puny gasp to create that final masterpiece... And Jackson Pollock the Beautiful Doomed Youth, dying like Chatterton in his classic Pieta-pose... And Van Gogh, of course Van Gogh, trotted out on all occasions, the ubiquitous symbol for everything, Van Gogh the Misunderstood Martyr — You *insult* these men by reducing them to your own adolescent stereotypes. Grapple with them, yes. Argue with them,

always. But don't think you understand them. Don't think you have captured them. They are beyond you.

*He moves away, then stops.*

ROTHKO: Spend a lifetime with them and you might get a moment of insight into their pain... Until then, allow them their grandeur in silence.

*ROTHKO returns to studying his central painting.*

ROTHKO: Silence is so accurate.

*Pause.*

*ROTHKO seems oblivious to KEN.*

*KEN continues to clean up for a moment.*

*Then he stops, looks at his own painting, wrapped in brown paper.*

*Then he looks at ROTHKO.*

*KEN unobtrusively picks up his painting and exits briefly. He returns without the painting.*

KEN: We need some coffee. Mind if I go out?

ROTHKO: Go on.

*KEN gets some money from the coffee can in which they keep petty cash.*

*He starts to go.*

*ROTHKO stops him:*

ROTHKO: Wait.

*ROTHKO looks at him.*

ROTHKO: In the National Gallery in London there's a picture by Rembrandt called 'Belshazzar's Feast' ... It's an Old Testament story from Daniel: Belshazzar, King of Babylon, is giving a feast and he blasphemers, so a divine hand

appears and writes some Hebrew words on the wall as a warning... In the painting these words pulsate from the dark canvases like something miraculous. Rembrandt's Hebrew was atrocious, as you can imagine, but he wrote 'Mene, Mene, Tekel, Uphasin' ... 'You have been weighed in the balance and have been found wanting.'

*Beat.*

ROTHKO: That's what black is to me... What is it to you?

*Beat.*

#### SCENE FOUR

*KEN is alone, building a wooden canvas stretcher/frame. He is a good carpenter.*

*A Chet Baker jazz record plays on the phonograph.*

*He works quietly.*

*Beat.*

*Then the sound of a slamming door from outside surprises him.*

*ROTHKO rages in, flinging off his overcoat and hat.*

ROTHKO: THEY'RE TRYING TO KILL ME! I swear to God they're trying to kill me! Those prosaic insects! Those presumptuous, cunning jumping, artistic SONS-OF-BITCHES! - These are same goddamn walls where I hang! You appreciate that? My gallery! My walls! Polluted now beyond sanitation, beyond hygiene, like the East River, choked with garbage, all that superficial, meaningless sewage right up there on the wall! The same sacred space of de Kooning and Motherwell and Smith and Newman and Pollock and...

*He stops.*