

ASYLUM?

A Play

CHARACTERS: (2) LEONA, female, dressed professionally, 30-65
HAMID, male, scruffy, dressed in layers, 25-50

SETTING: Interview Room of an Immigration Office, with a desk and some chairs

TIME: The Present

LIGHTS UP on LEONA, who is completing some forms. She peruses one and then puts it aside, unable to make up her mind what to do with it. He waves her hand at the form as if to say, "I'll get back to you."

(There is a knock at the office door.)

LEONA: Yes?

HAMID: (outside) I have appointment.

LEONA: (gets up, goes to the door, opens it) Come in, won't you?

HAMID: Thank you, thank you.

(HAMID enters the room. He is very humble, ingratiating, smiling too much, nervous. He knows that this woman holds his fate in her hands.)

LEONA: Have a seat, won't you?

HAMID: Yes, yes, thank you so much. (Takes the seat farthest from her.)

LEONA: No, sit closer, please.

HAMID: Are you sure? They usually don't want us to . . .

LEONA: It's fine.

HAMID: Okey dokey then! (Takes a chair closer to her.)

LEONA: Do you have your immigration form?

HAMID: Oh, yes, yes. (Searches himself to find it, finds it.) I'm sorry it is wrinkled. I got –

LEONA: Not a problem. I've seen worse.

(HAMID hands over the immigration form. LEONA looks it over.)

LEONA: You filled it out yourself?

HAMID: Yes, yes!

LEONA: Your English is quite good.

HAMID: Oh, no, terrible, terrible English. I apologize.

LEONA: No need to apologize. Believe me, I've seen terrible English.

HAMID: I try! I try very hard! The English is not easy.

LEONA: You're right. My parents were immigrants. They never quite learned the language of the country they were living in.

HAMID: No?

LEONA: No. But I did. I'm grateful they didn't home-school me.

HAMID: Home-school you? What mean?

LEONA: It means brainwashing your children in your own home, rather than sending them to a school, for brainwashing there. (She waits.)

HAMID: (unsure) You made joke?

LEONA: It's not important. Let's continue with your form.

HAMID: You have children? Yes?

LEONA: (after pausing) We're talking about you, Hamid. Is that okay?

HAMID: Oh, you don't have children. I am very sorry.

LEONA: Actually I have two children.

HAMID: Two! Maybe more one day?!

LEONA: I doubt it. Two are enough.

HAMID: I have three! One day three more! Everybody need many children!

LEONA: Somehow I question that.

HAMID: My youngest child, also Hamid, is sick. Very sick. He coughs. (Coughs to demonstrate.)

LEONA: I'm sorry to hear that.

HAMID: Also my wife – she cough. (He coughs again to demonstrate.)

LEONA: Perhaps the coughs will pass. They usually do.

HAMID: Or maybe they die – my wife, my child, unless they come here? They very sick.

LEONA: I'm not sure that's the best argument for letting immigrants in, Hamid.

HAMID: No? You no like sick babies?

LEONA: I've had my own, and if I want more I can always fly on an airplane somewhere.

HAMID: I do not follow.

LEONA: Back to the form! I see that you are seeking asylum from the turmoil in your home country.

HAMID: Oh, yes! Bad turmoil!

LEONA: And what is your home country? You left the space blank.

HAMID: My country is – how you say? – “in transition.”

LEONA: I see. Well, we can clear that up later. There are quotas for different regions.

HAMID: Quotas?

LEONA: Only a certain number of immigrants are permitted from different areas, given that there are so many who want to migrate. But then you probably know that.

HAMID: Which areas get most quotas?

LEONA: It fluctuates.

HAMID: Fluctuates?

LEONA: It changes, depending on various wars, crises, natural disasters, and so on.

HAMID: Which is it best to be from now?

LEONA: I don't know, and I can't tell that you that anyway. It might influence how you fill out the form. Anyone, not just you.

HAMID: Oh, no, I always tell truth! On my heart! (Touches his heart.) On my baby's head! On my baby's cough! (He laughs a bit.)

LEONA: I'm sure you'd do anything for your baby, Hamid. Anything.

HAMID: (suddenly) I'm hungry.

LEONA: I beg your pardon?

HAMID: I have no eating in long, long time.

LEONA: Didn't you get something to eat in the Services Department?

HAMID: All gone! Hungry people steal bread. Even muffins. All gone when I get there.

LEONA: We're not equipped to feed people from this office.

HAMID: Are hearing my stomach barking?

LEONA: Barking?

HAMID: You know – (growling) Grrr!

LEONA: You mean growling? Your stomach is growling.

HAMID: Yes? You hear?

LEONA: I don't. But I'm sure we can get you a snack box if necessary. Do you want a snack box? I can call for one. (Reaches for her phone.)

HAMID: What is snack box?

LEONA: We keep food in small boxes, for staff. And emergencies.

HAMID: I'm an emergency!

LEONA: Then I'll call. (Starts to dial.)

HAMID: What is inside this snack box?

LEONA: Just general food: a small sandwich, cheese, a candy bar.

HAMID: No pork!

LEONA: I can get you a vegetarian snack box.

HAMID: Not vegetarian. Just no pork!

LEONA: I don't believe they put pork in any of the snack boxes, for various reasons.

HAMID: You eat pork?

LEONA: I'm a vegan.

HAMID: So no pork. . . . Are you Jewish?

LEONA: I don't see what that has to do with the form. (Holds it up.)

HAMID: Jews don't eat pork too.

LEONA: You really shouldn't ask people what religion they are. We don't do that here.

HAMID: No? Sorry! You not proud of your religion?

LEONA: We don't think it good to over-emphasize it. People might feel pressured. Besides, I don't practice it.

HAMID: No pressure! No pressure! No snack box!

LEONA: So back to your application for asylum. Shall we?

HAMID: Yes!

LEONA: This isn't your first time applying, true?

HAMID: I try three times before. Fourth time the charm, yes?!

LEONA: There are so many, many applicants.

HAMID: Let everybody come! Ha! Big party!

LEONA: Some people seem more interested in their personal advantage than in the general good.

HAMID: You mean you?

LEONA: No, I mean people on't think the "population explosion" applies to them.

HAMID: What is "population splosion"?

LEONA: I'm not here to lecture you. But it's clear some religions, some belief systems, whatever, over-encourage their members to have large families when --

HAMID: Yes! Your children take care of you when you old. Don't you want your children to take care of you when you are old?

LEONA: I'll settle for a visit or two in the home. (Smiles.)

HAMID: The home?

LEONA: Never mind. My children are very independent, the way we raised them.

HAMID: You and your husband?

LEONA: (hesitates) Yes, me and my . . . husband.

HAMID: You married, yes? Two children!

LEONA: Again we seem to be getting off topic, Hamid.

HAMID: Did I tell you I was attacking by mob?

LEONA: What mob was that?

HAMID: Protesters somewhere near the border. They did not want us to come to that country.

LEONA: But your country was waiting with open arms for all comers, right?

HAMID: (Laughs.) You right! Nobody want to come to my country!

LEONA: I don't mean to denigrate your country's suffering. It's just that . . . Well, I think I've heard enough for now. There are still numerous other migrants I must speak with. It is now mandated that each one is to receive a personal interview before --

HAMID: Please not go yet! I not tell you of time I ate dog!

LEONA: You ate a dog? Is that what you said?

HAMID: I did not want to eat dog. Dogs are dirty! But I was so hungry. My family ate with me. It was an old dog.

LEONA: I'm sure the dog appreciated that you didn't eat it when it was young.

HAMID: What?

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LEONA: I'm sorry you were forced to eat a dog.

HAMID: And other disgusting things.

LEONA: We needn't list them all. I believe you.

HAMID: Even cats!

LEONA: I believe you!

HAMID: We find in garbage. With worms!

LEONA: (folds arms) Anything else you had to eat?

HAMID: If you cook them, worms taste good.

LEONA: I'm sure. Maybe you'll give me your recipe.

HAMID: You not care I eat worms? My family eat worms?

LEONA: I care, Hamid. That's why I have this job. I just can't aborb all the horrors that
come my way each day.

HAMID: I miss my family!

LEONA: I'm sure you do. Where are they now?

HAMID: In camp. It is called the Jungle. Very crowded -- my wife, our four children, her
sister, my father . . .

LEONA: I thought you said you have three children.

HAMID: We just have new baby!

LEONA: Really?

HAMID: No congratulations?

LEONA: . . . Congratulations.

HAMID: You don't like me!

LEONA: Personal favortiism plays no part in my decision. There are --

HAMID: I think it does. Yes! Yes!

LEONA: Are you so sure it will be better in the country you are trying to get into?

HAMID: Not better?

LEONA: Unemployment is very high in my country right now.

HAMID: I take any job!

LEONA: I'm sure you will. Some people believe you will take *their* job.

HAMID: I was professional in my country.

LEONA: Oh? What kind?

HAMID: I was legal assistant.

LEONA: Were you a lawyer?

HAMID: No lawyer. But work for lawyer. Hard work for lawyer! I work for lawyer in your country! I very good! Very good English!

LEONA: I'm sure. I can appreciate your argumentative skills.

HAMID: Yes? My skills?

LEONA: You are motivated. I can see that.

HAMID: I work like dog! Like dirty dog! Just don't eat me! (Laughs.) (Suddenly) But forget about me. What about you?

LEONA: What about *me*? No, never mind.

HAMID: You seem sad. Why you sad?

LEONA: I'm not sad. I am trying to be professional.

HAMID: What mean "professional"? Not care about migrants?

LEONA: Sometimes it may mean that, yes. I like to think one can be an empathetic -- empathic? -- individual. Still, there's a limit to everything.

HAMID: What about your two children? Boys?

LEONA: No, one is a girl.

HAMID: Very nice. Girls very nice.

LEONA: Yes, I'm sure they make perfect wives, don't they?

HAMID: Most of them want to be wife.

LEONA: I'm sure the polling in your home country has been extensive on the subject.

HAMID: Polling?

LEONA: Forget that I said that.

HAMID: You say something you shouldn't?

LEONA: I'll be sure to tell when I do.

HAMID: What about your other child, boy, girl?

LEONA: Please, Hamid! Let's not --

HAMID: No, no, I want to know. I'm interest!

LEONA: Well, as a matter of fact, I'm very proud of my son.

HAMID: Ah, a boy! Very nice.

LEONA: Ian is . . . transgender. We're very proud of him for choosing his own path.

HAMID: He's what?

LEONA: Transgender.

HAMID: Pardon me, what mean "transgender"?

LEONA: I knew we shouldn't have veered from the topic.

HAMID: This Ian is. . . ? (Moves hand to indicate the child is funny.)

LEONA: That's not quite how I would put it. But we're not in any way ashamed. Ian is a lovely person.

HAMID: Yes, he sounds "lovely." (Tries to hide his amusement.) Very lovely boy, I'm sure.

LEONA: You're not doing yourself any favors here. Do you realize that?

HAMID: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It must be lovely to have a transgender.

LEONA: Do they kill the transgender in your country?

HAMID: No! No! . . . We do not have transgender.

LEONA: I'm sure you do. You just don't realize it.

HAMID: I make you mad. I'm sorry! I'm sorry!

LEONA: You haven't made me mad. In fact, I see this as a very teachable moment. Ha! (Laughs at her own pretentiousness.) Excuse me, Hamid. I have to check on something. (Gets up and leaves the room.)

(HAMID waits. He is tempted to get up from his chair and look around. But he forces himself to stay put. Then he jumps up and looks at his application form, which LEONA left on the desk. Then he hurriedly puts it back.)

(LEONA re-enters with a snack box, catches him at her desk.)

LEONA: Yes? Can I help you?

HAMID: Just checking, to be sure I signed it.

LEONA: And whether I did?

HAMID: No! . . . No!

LEONA: Rest assured I won't be making a decision while you're in the room, Hamid. We find that does not make for the most objective decision. (Gesturing) Here's a snack box if you want it.

HAMID: Thank you, no.

(He does not take the snack box. LEONA puts it on the desk.)

HAMID: (suddenly) You like Heavy Metal?

LEONA: Heavy Metal?

HAMID: I fit right in. See! Also I like pizza. No anchovies! And Bing Crosby! You like Bing Crosby?

LEONA: I can take him or leave him.

HAMID: (with insinuation) K.D. Lang? You like? With little letters.

LEONA: What is that supposed to mean?

HAMID: She is – how you say? -- “butch”? Is it “butch”? “Transgender”? She singer!

LEONA: Hamid, you're trying too hard!

HAMID: Cannot try too hard.

LEONA: I suppose not, when you're desperate.

HAMID: So I die in a ditch? What matter? Many more live.

LEONA: Well, Hamid, I believe I have enough information from you. Thank you for coming in.

HAMID: Oh, please, not yet over! I think you still not like me. Please, please, like me!

LEONA: Haven't I made it clear that it's not a matter of whether I “like” you or not.

HAMID: Oh, it does, it does. . . . It does.

LEONA: What else do you want to discuss?

HAMID: Do you want to know why my old country so full of war?

LEONA: I have some idea. Though the reasons appear to keep changing. Old grievances, new grievances. Irreconcilable differences.

HAMID: Bad, bad people in charge! Selfish!

LEONA: I'm sure.

HAMID: And the Jews!

LEONA: The Jews?!

HAMID: Bad people! . . . You're not Jewish, are you? Didn't you say?

LEONA: I thought we covered that already. I am Jewish.

HAMID: Oops. I didn't mean . . .

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LEONA: I'm sure you didn't.

HAMID: Not all Jews!

LEONA: Of course not.

HAMID: I'm sorry, but they are not always good!

LEONA: It's not a matter of anybody always being good or some always *bad*. Yes?

HAMID: If I come to your country, I will change.

LEONA: Nobody's asking you to change.

HAMID: I think so.

LEONA: Why is that?

HAMID: From your face – I can tell.

LEONA: Well, maybe a little change wouldn't be so bad.

HAMID: It is good for people to have different ideas, no?

LEONA: Theoretically.

HAMID: You believe in “diversity,” yes? (with enthusiasm) “Diversity”!

LEONA: The more relevant question might be: do *you* believe in “diversity”?

HAMID: You doubt me? I embrace “diversity” and “transgender” – I love!

LEONA: Hamid!

HAMID: And the gays! I vote for gay marriage. I promise.

LEONA: That isn't necessary.

HAMID: You not like the gays – the men?

LEONA: . . . Not always.

HAMID: I never hurt one! Never throw from roof!

LEONA: I could tell you were a liberal.

HAMID: You don't think I'm a liberal?

LEONA: No.

HAMID: I am! I love all people!

LEONA: My previous experience would lead me to believe you are not a liberal by the standards of my home country.

HAMID: I can't seem to win.

LEONA: It's not a matter of winning, Hamid.

HAMID: Oh, but it is! And you are winning. I will have to go back to the Jungle, and you will go home to your . . . husband.

LEONA: Stop this!

HAMID: Stop what?

LEONA: All this . . . all this manipulation.

HAMID: I not!

LEONA: You are too! That's all you're doing!

HAMID: What else am I expected to do?

LEONA: Every other word out of your mouth is a . . . How can you expect me to trust even one syllable you say about anything?!

HAMID: Easy to tell truth when you are comfortable, and not hungry. (He hits the snack box and knocks it on the floor.)

(Silence.)

(LEONA gets up, retrieves the snack box, then returns it to her desk, sits. Both say nothing.)

LEONA: I believe we have nothing more to say.

HAMID: (falling to his knees) Oh, help me! Help me, please, lady! No one will help me and my family. You have a family. Won't you be kind? You don't have to let all the migrants in. Just me! (Weeps.) Just me. Just me.

(He collapses, weeping hard.)

(LEONA does not move.)

(Slowly HAMID gets up from the floor, embarrassed.)

HAMID: Sorry. I make fool. So sorry.

LEONA: I understad. (awkwardly) Thank you for coming in. I mean . . .

HAMID: I understand. You have to do what you have to do. I will leave.

LEONA: That's probably best. I have more interviews.

HAMID: Of course. Thank you for talking to me. You are the first to spend so much time.

LEONA: We'll see what we can do, Hamid. I promise you that.

HAMID: Ha! I hear that before. (Smiles ruefully.) And that makes me not hopeful.

LEONA: I have your application here.

HAMID: May I know if it is a yes or a no?

LEONA: As I said, the decision will not be made immediately. Goodbye. (She stands.)

HAMID: Okay, goodbye. (Goes to the door, turns back.) I think I know “goodbye” when I hear it. (Opens the door and leaves.)

LEONA: (examining the application form, uncertain, then finally) Welcome, Hamid. (It should be clear that she stamps the application with an approval.) (She then turns to another application.)

(HAMID re-enters the office.)

HAMID: I know you don't want me. I know you hate me. So I go! Bye bye! How you say? -- “I'll be back!” And when we are many -- how you say? -- “I will interview *you!*”

(He leaves and slams the door.)

(LEONA waits a long time, then takes Hamid's approved application form and begins to tear it up.)

(The lights slowly dim as she does so.)

THE END