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Barbed Wire
by Ross Peter Nelson

CHARACTERS

MACHINA: Female; dressed in gray
AVIA: Female; dressed in blue
FEMME: Female; dressed in red.

SETTING

A dream

TIME

Unknown

MASKS

The play requires three masks that are worn by the first two characters. MACHINA wears a mask that is clearly made from barbed wire. It is threatening and dangerous. AVIA wears two masks. The first is a finch mask worn in the prelude; it is brightly colored, even playful. The second, worn in the scene, is a hawk mask, edgy and militaristic.
PRELUDE

(On rise, the stage is empty but for MACHINA and AVIA, who is wearing the finch mask. MACHINA holds AVIA tightly, but at arm’s length. AVIA struggles unsuccessfully to free herself. FEMME enters, sees the action and watches for a time without intervening, then exits. Lights down.)

SCENE

(Lights up on a bare room which contains a back wall, a bed, and a desk with chairs. The wall is blank but for a small window high above the bed. FEMME is in the bed, sleeping. After a time, AVIA enters, now wearing the hawk mask and carrying a leather bag.)

AVIA

Awake and report to the Citadel.

FEMME

Who are you? What do you want?

AVIA

If you do not report of your own volition, you will be detained.

FEMME

Get away from me.

(AVIA sets down the bag and removes an orange prison jumpsuit. She forces FEMME out of bed and into the jumpsuit. She takes a pair of handcuffs from the bag, and cuffs FEMME, and seats her at one of the chairs. FEMME acquiesces to this treatment as if hypnotized.

AVIA exits, then returns following MACHINA. MACHINA has in her arms, a black cloth with a heraldic symbol, which she lays on the bed like an altar covering, and sits behind the bed. AVIA seats herself at the desk.)

AVIA

Case four, victor, three, three, foxtrot, echo, one.
MACHINA
The criminal will state her name for the record.

FEMME
Wait! Don’t I get a hearing?

MACHINA
The hearing has begun.

FEMME
You called me a criminal.

AVIA
You are clad in prison clothing and wear handcuffs, it’s obvious you are a criminal.

FEMME
That makes me a prisoner, not—

MACHINA
This is irrelevant, let the proceedings begin.

FEMME
I beg your pardon, Administrator, but I disagree. The language is prejudicial.

MACHINA
You claim you’ve never committed a crime?

FEMME
Yes.

AVIA
I have your files. You were detained for shoplifting at age twelve, you have three traffic violations, and last New Year’s, closed-circuit cameras captured you in a state of public intoxication. Shall I go on?

FEMME
Is that the subject of this hearing?

MACHINA
You are charged with domestic terrorism. How do you plead?

FEMME
There must be a mistake. Do I look like the type to plant bombs and take hostages? Search my house, you will find no weapons, no chemicals.

MACHINA
How do you plead?
FEMME
I’m innocent.

AVIA
The defendant pleads not guilty. I request permission to proceed to trial.

MACHINA
Proceed.

FEMME
When will my trial be? Will I be provided with a lawyer?

MACHINA
The trial has begun.

FEMME
Where is my defense? Where is the jury?

AVIA
As an enemy of the state, you are not entitled to a jury. This tribunal will determine the facts of the case.

FEMME
Not entitled…how can this be?

MACHINA
You are charged with terrorism. Under protocols established by the Act to Safeguard the Motherland, you are no longer considered a citizen but an enemy of the state.

FEMME
What is the charge against me?

MACHINA
You will stop interrupting this court or there will be further penalties. … Proceed.

AVIA
You consider yourself an artist?

FEMME
I do.

AVIA
Did you, on or about the third day of the preceding month, hold an art exhibit in the Village?

FEMME
Yes.
AVIA
And did you include in that exhibition, a painting entitled “Barbed Wire”?

FEMME
I did.

AVIA
And did you paint that picture yourself?

FEMME
All the paintings in the show were mine.

AVIA
Administrator, the prisoner has admitted guilt in the matter. There is no need for further questioning.

FEMME
What?

MACHINA
You have been found guilty of acts of terrorism and will be confined prior to sentencing. If corporate penal facilities in this district are full, you will be transferred to a holding cell until space becomes available.

FEMME
Are you mad? All we’ve spoken of are paintings.

AVIA
Do you deny that that painting was intended to incite revolution?

FEMME
I have no idea what you are talking about. I was walking through a meadow one day, and came across a bird with its foot caught in a barbed wire fence. I tried to free it, but it was so frantic that it pecked at me. I ran home to get a wire cutter but I hadn’t paid attention to where I had been, and I got lost trying to find the place I’d seen the bird. The image haunted me, and so I painted it. That’s all.

AVIA
You claim that this was an actual event.

FEMME
Yes.

AVIA
But in the story you just told the bird was alive. In your painting, the bird was dead.

FEMME
That’s what was haunting me. I knew that if I didn’t find and free the bird, it would starve. I felt responsible.
Why did you choose to make the bird a finch?

The bird I saw was a finch.

Purely a coincidence, then.

What are you talking about?

Our Chancellor.

What about him? … You can’t be serious.

Many who attended your show saw the piece as allegorical, and believe that you sympathize with the factions who oppose the Castle. Your painting would imply that you want Chancellor Finch dead.

Are you telling me that if I had painted a sparrow I would be free? This is ridiculous. Insane.

Is it? There is a long history of propaganda in your art form.

I’m not political.

This has gone on, long enough. I have a full docket. The evidence has been presented, you’ve been found guilty.

I want to appeal.

This is a tribunal for treason. For that crime there can be no appeal.

This can’t be right. There are supposed to be processes and procedures. I have rights.

They are forfeit.
FEMME
What about the right to question those who accuse me?

MACHINA
The people accuse you.

FEMME
Bring me one.

AVIA
The people make up the state, I represent the state. I accuse you.

FEMME
And have you seen the painting?

**This is Not the End of the Play**
**Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes**