

# **The Goldberg Variations**

*Ten Minutes on Love, Jews, and Jews in Love*

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*For my family.*

*The Aria from Bach's Goldberg Variations (GV) begins playing as the lights slowly come up. The only set visible at the time is a wall upstage with framed photos of various shapes and sizes. These are photos of the Goldbergs, an affluent Jewish family living in a suburb of Boston.*

*At an appropriate part in the music, Jason and Lisa – the parents – appear upstage right and upstage left, respectively, facing each other. They are in their fifties, though Lisa appears younger. They walk towards each other in time with the music in a wedding-like manner. When they reach center-stage, they circle each other with their gazes locked, smiling (again, wedding-like).*

*When they reach their spots again, Dana and Nathan – their children – appear a little farther downstage right and left, respectively. They are in their twenties – Dana a few years older than Nathan. They repeat their parents' cross towards center stage in time with the music, but do not circle each other. When they reach center stage, all four turn downstage, Nathan in front of Lisa, Dana in front of Jason. The Music stops wherever it is in the Aria (hopefully at some sort of cadence – this action will not take up the entire aria). A beat, a tableau.*

*Variation 1 from GV begins to play and on the downbeat the Goldbergs scatter to the four corners of the stage. Jason and Lisa busy themselves pantomiming their usual daily activities: Jason reads papers from his office in a chair, making corrections with a pen, Lisa types on a computer and makes phone calls. All this is done with some sort of regard to the music – the actions should flow in and out of each other like the phrases of the music. Dana and Nathan meet their future scene partners: Dana's best friend Sarah, Nathan's boyfriend Chris. They pantomime the course of their scenes again, in some form of choreographed time. Their specific movements, courses, and/or choreography are completely at the discretion of the director. Ditto the amount of "danciness" in the movement, which is also dependent on the abilities of the actors. All six actors should interact with each other at some point during the pantomime, whether it be merely in passing or a completely different conversation – perhaps one that would have taken place as a result of one of the conversations contained here.*

*As Variation 1 ends (it is only about a minute long<sup>1</sup>) and moves into Variation 2 (there is a distinct change in the music here as well), the frenetic pantomime slows down and Sarah and Chris leave the stage. The family spends the duration of the music returning to their original four corners of the stage and making their way back into the center, recreating the opening tableau. Ideally they should reach the tableau as the music cadences. Blackout.*

*Variation 5 plays for scene chance music. Dana and Sarah are discovered downstage right at a small table. They are at Starbucks, as they usually are.*

Sarah: He called you what!?

Dana: I know!

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<sup>1</sup> This and all subsequent timings were taken from the Glen Gould recording of GV.

S: To your face?

D: Yes!

S: Wow. That's harsh.

D: Yeah, well, it's so over. Finally. Asshole.

S: How long as it been?

D: About six months. Almost to the day. Weird.

S: So how did this all happen?

D: You know, we were arguing again, about...nothing really...oh, it was about what he was going to wear to my cousin's wedding next weekend – because he wanted to wear that awful shirt, you know, that I hate...that one that he is convinced is actually a nice shirt but is so not. Anyway, he's telling me that's it's a perfectly fine shirt and I'm just trying to convince him to put on a fucking suit - like it would kill him or something – and then it just explodes into “You're controlling my life and I'm feeling so manipulated and I can't take this anymore.” So I'm trying to calm him down and then he's just like “You know what your problem is, Dana, you're a jap. Just a big cliché jap. You're a walking stereotype, and it drives me crazy.” (A beat.)

*A note: Dana is not a caricature - she is absolutely genuine and real. She is smart enough to be aware of her behavior and tries very hard to keep from appearing to be exactly what she has been accused of being, which is why it is such a blow to her. The actor playing Dana should not mock or make fun of her or her way of speaking in any way. She is a real person with real insecurities and emotions behind a done up façade. Everyone knows someone like Dana.*

S: What did you say?

D: What could I say? I said “Fine, if that's how you feel, then I guess it's over.” And he said “Fine,” and I left, and it's done.

S: Well, you seem to be taking it rather well. Usually you'd be sobbing hysterically and trying to figure out what you did wrong and telling me how you're going to end up fat and old and alone like your great aunt that everyone secretly thinks is a lesbian.

D: I swear she is one, you should see her closet. I've never seen so many pairs of boots and khakis. (A beat.) No, I'm not sad, I'm just angry. I've been angry all night. How could I have wasted so much time with someone who thinks I'm a cliché? (Asking for it.) You don't think I'm a cliché, do you?

S: Of course not...but...

D: What?

S: Well, you are Jewish.

D: So are you!

S: Yeah, but you're, like, *Jewish*, Jewish. I mean, people can see you coming from a mile away.

D: So what, I'm supposed to be ashamed of my religion or something now? I can't believe this!

S: Oh come on, don't talk to me about religion, when's the last time you set foot in temple?

D: Then what are you talking about?

S: I'm talking about a persona, a culture, an air of Jewishness, and you are it.

D: Ok, but so are *a lot* of other people.

S: Well, it's a bit more than that....(*Half a beat*) Let's play name that brand. Your bag?

D: Prada.

S: Sunglasses?

D: Gucci.

S: Jeans?

D: Sevens.

S: Car?

D: BMW. Ok I get it! Jesus.

S: Order coffee.

D: What?

S: Order your coffee.

D: Non-fat, half-calf, vanilla-caramel latte with no foam and an Equal.

S: How many products do you use in your hair every morning?

D: (*It takes her a minute*) Five.

S: And is that before or after blow-drying?

D: OK! My god! I get it!

S: See where I'm going with this?

D: Well obviously.

S: You have expensive tastes, you're very picky, and you're very high maintenance.

D: You think I'm high maintenance?

S: Dana! Not the point. I'm saying you can see how someone might peg you as a bit of cliché. Not that you are, I mean, I know you too well, but you can see what you're putting out there, right?

D: I can't believe I'm hearing this from you!

S: I'm not saying it's a bad thing.

D: Well then, what is it?

S: It's like...It's like Starbucks. When you walk into one of the gazillion Starbucks in this world, you basically know what you're getting. And there it is, packaged into a nice little white cup with a green circle that you've seen a million times. Your very own non-fat, half-calf, vanilla-caramel latte with no foam and an Equal. And probably, wherever you go, your non-fat, half-calf, vanilla-caramel latte with no foam and an Equal is going to taste pretty much the same – that's why you go to Starbucks in the first place: because you know what you're getting. But the fact is, inside that little, white, prepackaged cup is something made by an individual. And maybe she forgot the non-fat milk, or maybe he only used half the amount of Equal in the little blue package, or didn't get quite all the foam off. Each one is somewhat different, even though they may have similar packaging or come from the same place. It all comes down to the depths of humanity, I guess.

D: Sara, that was actually really insightful.

S: (*Shrugs*) I do what I can. Did it help?

D: I think so. Maybe I just need more coffee.

*Blackout.*

*Variation 8 plays for scene change music, then fades into Variation 25 which continues very low under the following scene. Nathan and Chris are in bed, both should be shirtless. Nathan wears pajama bottoms, Chris only a pair of boxers. Nathan is sitting*

*up in bed, biting his nails and examining them. He looks somewhat perturbed in spite of himself. Chris lies on his back under the covers attempting to sleep but he can't.*

Chris: *(a little annoyed)* What's wrong. *(He takes Nathan's hand out of his mouth)*

Nathan: Nothing.

Chris: Then why are you doing that?

Nathan: Doing what?

Chris: Biting your nails.

Nathan: You're one to talk.

Chris: I thought we were going to help each other stop. If you don't want me to stop you anymore, then just tell me.

N: Fine, don't do it anymore.

C: *OK, I won't. (He lies down and closes his eyes after a beat or so, he starts to bit his nails, still with his eyes closed. Nathan takes his hand away. Chris opens his eyes and gives Nathan a little glare followed by a little smile.)* Really, what's wrong?

N: I don't know, I'm just...thinking...

C: About?

N: Stupid things, go to sleep.

C: You sure?

N: No. *(A Beat)*

C: What is it?

N: I was just thinking about why I bite my nails. I read somewhere that it's a way to punish yourself unconsciously, that's why we bite and bite until it hurts.

C: Hmm. Interesting theory. Do you think you're punishing yourself?

N: I'm sure I am. You know how hard I am on myself.

C: I'm just as hard on myself – that's probably why we do it. Is that it?

N: No, it's more than that, I guess. I think it's not just the biting, like, as an aggressive act against myself, I think it's also like...all these open wounds.

C: What?

N: It's my worst fear in life, and yet it's like I want it to come true. There's a part of me that's so hurtful to myself that I make myself more susceptible to my worst fear.

C: What are you talking about?

N: You know, disease, AIDS.

C: (*Has heard this way too many times*) You're crazy.

N: I know. I'm sorry.

C: Why is it you can't ever believe that we're safe? How many tests is it going to take? Jesus, we still use condoms anyway! What's wrong with you?

N: (*Upset*) I don't know. I'm sorry.

C: It's just so irrational!

N: So, I have an irrational fear. Like you've never done anything irrational in your life or had an irrational thought, or have gone completely crazy for no reason!

C: I'm not saying that. I'm just saying I'm sick of dealing with it. It's insane. What is it that makes you so fucking neurotic about it! God!

N: (*A beat and a half*) You know...(*maybe a small chuckle*) it's probably because I'm Jewish.

C: What has that got to do with anything?

N: The worrying, the fear of failure, the ambition, the perfectionism, the self-doubt, the guilt. All very Jewish.

C: You want to tell me about guilt? I'm Catholic!.

N: Yeah, but you handle it differently. You're Catholic so you keep it inside, that's why you explode. The Jews, we let it out, but it's slow and steady, so there's, like, constant neuroticism instead of big outbreaks.

C: So what does this have to do with you and your irrational fears?

N: Well, sex, like any other pleasurable activity, has to have something wrong with it. For some reason, Jews feel like they can't enjoy themselves completely, nothing's ever good enough. In some sort of Freudian way, it's like we think don't deserve happiness or pleasure. The weird thing is, though, that there's none of this *mea culpa* Catholic shit. It's all externalized. It's clearly someone else's fault why the food's too salty, or the hotel room isn't clean enough, or it's too hot in this room, or the sex wasn't good. With you, the sex is good. Believe



me. But there's got to be something in my little Jewish brain to be neurotic about. So instead of enjoying the post-coital bliss, I get to sit here obsessing about an awful disease for no reason, and I get a little weird, OK?

C: OK. (*He thinks for a beat or so*) But shouldn't the fact that you're aware of it, and have clearly over-analyzed it, make it more manageable?

N: You'd think so. But sometimes my brain gets away from me, I guess. It happens to the best of us.

C: Right. You really are crazy, you know.

N: Absolutely. Good night. I love you.

C: I love you too.

*They kiss. Blackout. Blackout should time with Variation 16 beginning to play during the scene change. A couch upstage center. Jason sits on it editing a legal brief with a red pen. When he is not writing, the pen should be in his mouth. He works for a few seconds before Lisa enters.*

*Jason and Lisa have been married for 34 years, since they were in college. Their relationship is basically perfect. They're completely dependent on each other but also both fiercely individual. Both are very successful lawyers, each in different fields. They are affluent enough to be more than comfortable, but are by no means obscenely rich. They are liberal, modern, and intelligent, but they also act their age. They love their children very much.*

Lisa: That was Nathan. (*that is, on the phone*).

Jason: Oh, he didn't want to talk to me?

Lisa: No, he wants more money and he's afraid to ask you.

Jason: Well, that's because you're the big push-over.

L: Basically. What can I say?

J: You could say no.

L: I could. (*A beat*) Still working?

J: Yeah, I'm very close to being able to afford our children. Speaking of which, did Dana call today, too?

L: Does today end in a Y?

J: Well, I think we've done an excellent job raising our children: one who's too neurotic to go one day without calling us, and one who only calls us when he needs money.

L: Hey. You don't really think we screwed up, do you?

J: Undoubtedly. (*A beat*). You're not serious.

L: Well, I think our kids are pretty great.

J: And you think I don't?

L: I mean, they do stupid things every once in a while, but that's what they're supposed to do, right? They're not dealing cocaine or failing out of school, or selling themselves on the street. I think we did OK in the parenting department.

J: Why are you bringing this up?

L: I don't know, I was just thinking. When Dana was born, of course we had no idea what we were doing. And then I guess we thought we were experts or something by the time Nathan showed up, but they're so different, the two of them. Everything we thought we had figured out the first time just did not apply. We read the books, we tried. I always just wonder if we had anything to do with them other than donating half our genetic make-up.

J: Lisa, nobody knows the answer to that. Do you really want to discuss this?

L: I'm not trying to answer the nature/nurture question, but I can't help but wonder, you know, if we had done something differently...

J: Then maybe they would be dealing cocaine? Honey, you're not making any sense. What would you do differently? Do you think it was any one specific thing that made them the way they are?

L: Could be a million things, or nothing. I don't know. I guess I'm not making sense.

J: Look, they are who they are. I think we did everything we could to teach them how to be good people. What else do you want?

L: I want them to be happy.

J: Lisa, that's what every parent wants.

L: You don't think they're unhappy, do you? Do we make them unhappy?

J: And you wonder why Dana's so crazy.

L: Hey! Personally, I blame you for all their neurosis.

J: Oh, really, is that how it works?

L: Absolutely. *(A beat.)* You know what I was thinking about the other day? Our wedding.

J: It rained.

L: That's supposed to be good luck, right? Or is that one of those theater superstitions Nathan always tells me about, rain on opening night or something. Anyway, I just remember thinking how young I was. And how I thought, this is right, isn't it? This is the way its supposed to be. A nice Jewish Harvard boy, going to law school, whose mother hates me, you know, exactly like I pictured it.

J: That's still all I am to you after 34 years, a nice Jewish Harvard boy?

L: Yes. You're lucky I chose you, actually, there were many other nice Jewish Harvard boys who had their eyes on me if I recall.

J: Yeah, one of them was my roommate!

L: *(She gives a knowing look).* What I mean is, when we got married, I wanted to, it was the right thing to do, and I don't regret it, of course, but thinking back, I don't know if I would have done it again.

J: So, should I get the divorce papers, or what?

L: Oh stop, I mean, I just mean right then, at 21. Jesus, 21 years old! Dana's almost 24, and she can barely hold on to a boyfriend for more than a few months. But it's what you were supposed to do. It goes against everything I believe in, but it's exactly what little Jewish girls growing up in Newton were supposed to do: find a nice Jewish Harvard boy and marry him. And it's exactly what I did. Without even realizing the mindset I was buying into. And it's not like I didn't really love you, or didn't want to marry you, and it's not like marrying you kept me from doing anything I ever wanted to do, but still, 21 years old. Unbelievable.

J: Well, if it makes you feel any better, I think you made an excellent choice.

L: Thank you. You want some dinner?

J: Sure.

*The Aria begins to play again. The lights change but do not blackout, one by one the family members enter in time to the music from four corners of the stage. First Jason, then Lisa, then Dana, then Nathan. When they reach center they form a final tableau identical to the one which ended the prologue. The music and lights fade.*

*Curtain.*