

The First Breath

By Nico Juber

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SYNOPSIS

The First Breath is a one-act comedy that explores the question – what is art? Ben and Aaron are co-owners of an up-and-coming Los Angeles art gallery catering to clients with expensive tastes for the latest and greatest. When they believe a sculpture called “The First Breath” has been stolen before their event later that day, they come up with a plan to sell the empty space as the artwork. They come to find out that the sculpture was being repaired by the artist - after the empty space was already sold! Things quickly spiral out of control when two women of the art collecting elite think they both bought the same piece of art from the same artist. With the future of the gallery at stake, Ben and Aaron must convince everyone, including a reporter from People Magazine and the artist herself, to accept their version of what constitutes art.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

BEN (cisgender or gender nonconforming male, queer), 20s-30s – detail oriented, motivated co-owner of an art gallery. The art gallery has always been his dream, as well as a desire to fit in with the Los Angeles elite. Ben has had feelings for Aaron since they met in college.

AARON (cisgender or gender nonconforming male), 20s-30s – co-owner of an art gallery. Fast thinking and optimistic, Aaron aspired to be an artist but settled for running an art gallery with his best friend. He still longs for artistic validation.

RACHEL HARRIS (cisgender female), 40s-50s – a member of the Los Angeles art collector's elite. Known for flashing her wealth and her competitiveness with Karen.

KAREN CONNOLLY (cisgender female), 40s-50s – a member of the Los Angeles art collector's elite. Known frenemy of Rachel.

JEN ASHER (cisgender or gender nonconforming female), 30s-40s – established local artist/sculptor with a dry personality.

MARLEY STYLES (cisgender or gender nonconforming female), 30s-40s – observant reporter from People Magazine.

JEN ASHER/MARLEY STYLES can be doubled. Make the best effort for entire cast to be a good, thoughtful representation of diversity in America. Ages are just suggestions. Any character that is not explicitly cisgender can be played by a transgender or nonbinary actor.

PLACE & TIME

Los Angeles Art Gallery – the floating present

SCENE 1

(BEN sits at the front desk of his Art Gallery. He is meticulously arranging materials in preparation for a showcase that late afternoon, drinking a cup of coffee. Suddenly, AARON runs into the room.)

AARON

Where is it?



BEN

What?

(Aaron motions towards an empty space on the gallery floor.)

AARON

The new Asher sculpture.

BEN

I thought it was getting delivered at 1.

AARON

No, it came early, I came in last night for the load in.

BEN

Then where is it?



AARON

That's what I'm asking!

BEN

It's a hundred-pound mixed media metal sculpture. It couldn't have just walked away-

AARON

Someone must have stolen it.

BEN

How?

(Aaron is silent for a moment.)

AARON

I, uh, left the back door open to let the new paint dry last night. I didn't want it to smell for the event today.

BEN

Shit! What are we going to do?

AARON

I don't know.

BEN

I can't believe you-

AARON

I'm sorry.

BEN

I mean, will our even insurance cover this?

AARON

Our deductible is \$5,000.

BEN

We were expecting to sell it for \$20,000 tonight-

(Ben states at Aaron.)

BEN (CONT.)

Should we call the police?

AARON

What are the police going to do?

(Silence. Aaron walks over to the empty space.)

AARON (CONT.)

The first breath.



BEN

What?

AARON

The name of the sculpture. Look.

(Aaron points to a sign next to the empty space.)

BEN

Okay?

AARON

Stay with me on this. What if this *is* the sculpture?

BEN

I'm sorry?

AARON

The empty space. The potential for creation.



BEN

You're telling me we're going to try to showcase, and sell, an empty space?

AARON

Just think about it. It's up to the viewer of the piece to assign meaning. To breathe life into the space... with their imagination!



BEN

People *know* Jen Asher. They'll know this isn't hers. God, what am I even saying? It isn't anything-

AARON

No, no, it is something. It says something. Negative space has meaning.



BEN

Aaron-

AARON

Kazimir Malevich, Agnes Martin, Jo Baer, any Minimalist painters-

BEN

Right, the all-white paintings, but there was at least *a painting*. Something physical to sell.

AARON

This is, like... the ultimate Minimalist statement.



BEN

Our job isn't to make this statement.



AARON

This is our gallery. It's art if we say it's art.

BEN

We're not the artists! We're just the curators.

AARON

Being stolen was part of this sculpture's story.



(Silence.)

BEN

Okay.



AARON

Okay?

BEN

Okay.

AARON

Someone was willing to pay \$120,000 for Maurizio Cattelan's banana duct taped to a wall. People pay for an idea! Not for the banana itself.



(Suddenly, RACHEL pokes her head in the front door of the gallery. Aaron waves her in. She leaves on her expensive sunglasses as she waltzes inside.)

RACHEL

Hello?

AARON

Rachel, hi-

BEN

We were just setting up.

RACHEL

I don't mean to interrupt. I just had to have a first look before your other buyers.

AARON

Absolutely. Please. Let us show you what's new.

(Rachel finally takes her sunglasses off. She gives Aaron and Ben kisses on both cheeks.)

RACHEL

I was so terribly disappointed when the original Tom Rigby sold at your last event before I could even lay my eyes on it.

BEN

We're still trying to get a hold of Tom for a commission.

AARON

Coffee?

RACHEL

Oh, no thank you. I just came from getting my teeth whitened in Beverly Hills.

(She tries to smile to show her teeth but can barely move her face.)

RACHEL (CONT.)

A little too much botox this time.

BEN

You're looking as lovely as ever.

RACHEL

I heard you'd be getting a new Asher in.

(Aaron and Ben's eyes dart to the empty space.)

BEN

Why don't we start over here with the ~~with the~~ paintings?

(Aaron tries to lead Rachel across the room, but she notices the empty sign with the space. She reads.)

RACHEL

The first breath.



AARON

Ah, you found it.

(Rachel stares at the sign and the empty space for a few long moments, taking it in. She inhales deeply.)

BEN

It is-

RACHEL

It is positively remarkable.

BEN

It is?

AARON

I knew this piece would speak to you.

RACHEL

Honestly, it's a giant departure from her usual work, but it's so... so... fresh.



AARON

There! That pause you just took in speaking. The silence spoke more to me than filling that empty space with sound.

RACHEL

Allowing the viewer to use their own imagination to fill the void? Why, it's positively interactive.

AARON

We've been exploring these types of new experiential works in our collection.

RACHEL

I need this in my sitting room. How much?



BEN

It's- it's not for sale.

RACHEL

You're joking.

AARON

Of course, he's joking.

RACHEL

Has someone bought this one already, too?

BEN

No, I mean, of course not, we were still landing on pricing-


RACHEL

Here I was thinking I was your favorite customer.

AARON

You are!

RACHEL

People  is doing a spread on my home next week. One of those lifestyles of the rich and famous things. I was originally going to focus on my collection of vintage Chanel leather goods, but I could talk about your gallery, of course, and highlight this piece-

AARON

We would be sure to have it delivered in time.

BEN

Aaron, can I chat with you for a quick sec? Logistics.

RACHEL

I realize I've barged in.

AARON

Just a moment, Rachel. Spend more time with the work. Additional layers will reveal themselves.



(Rachel nods, staring into the empty space, considering. Ben pulls Aaron to the side.)

BEN

Featuring... *this* in People magazine? Are you insane? We haven't even spoken with Jen Asher yet-

AARON

What difference does it make? If she's willing to buy it-

BEN

Artistic integrity, for one thing. Our reputation.

AARON

I thought we were on the same page about this.

(Silence.)

BEN

What do you want me to say?

(Rachel suddenly breaks her silence.)

RACHEL

Eighty thousand?



BEN

Sorry?

RACHEL

More?

AARON

Your appraisal instinct is impressive. Ninety-five thousand I'm afraid, but I could speak with Jen-

RACHEL

I won't lose this over fifteen grand.

(Ben is silent, in shock. Rachel takes out a Black AMEX card and casually hands it to Aaron, eyes still locked on the empty space.)

AARON

Thank you. Delivery to Hollywood Hills, I assume?



RACHEL

Mmm. If Karen Connolly comes by later, make sure she knows this one is already mine. I can't wait to talk to Jen tonight.



(Aaron runs the card, then places a little sold sticker on the sign next to the empty space. Rachel takes her card back, blows air kisses and leaves. Ben is still in shock.)

BEN


What the fuck just happened?

(Beat.)

AARON

Do you remember when I applied to the Stanford MFA program?

BEN

I mean, yeah. We were both waiting tables at Lonny's- 

AARON

God, I wanted in so badly. I even wrote 'Stanford' in giant letters on the bathroom mirror in purple dry erase marker because someone told me it helped to manifest things into being or something like that and purple was the color of royalty.

BEN

I remember that. Your roommate kept erasing it.

AARON

I thought: this program is *it*. This is going to be the thing that gives me permission to be an artist.

BEN

I've always loved your wood block prints.



AARON

I remember getting the letter from them. I knew it had been mailed out earlier that week, so I was stalking the mailman at the complex. My heart was beating out of my chest when I opened the box and saw the Stanford logo in the upper left-hand corner. I took it out, held it up to the light to see if I could at least prepare myself for what might be inside. Then I really noticed the size of the envelope when I held it in my hands. It was small. It only fit a single sheet of paper. There were no enrollment forms. Good news never comes in small envelopes.

BEN

What does this have to do with-

AARON

I opened it. I immediately read the 'We regret to inform you' in the first sentence. I read it again. And again. It felt like my heart stopped and I was punched in the gut at the exact same moment.



BEN

That moment didn't define you. We run this gallery together, we've had a ton of success-

AARON

What I'm trying to say... is that what just happened with Rachel reignited something in me. She just gave me the validation I was desperate for twelve years ago.



BEN

No one needs validation to create.

AARON

Don't you understand? She paid us almost a hundred grand for *my idea*. Not someone else's idea. Mine.



BEN

No, no, we have to figure out a way to undo this. Tell Rachel we made a mistake. That the piece had already sold, that-

AARON

Can't you just let me have this?

(JEN walks in the door, rolling a giant metal sculpture behind her.)

BEN

And what about Jen Asher?

JEN

What about me?

(Ben and Aaron see Jen, see the sculpture, and look at each other.)

AARON

Just wondering when we'd see you today.

JEN

Aaron, thanks for leaving the back door open for me after I sent that desperate e-mail in the middle of the night.

AARON

Right. Your, uh, e-mail.



(Ben glares at Aaron. Ben and Aaron help the position the sculpture into the empty space.)

JEN

I came at the crack of dawn for that final polish on the copper components. Can one of you help me close the truck?

(Aaron jumps up.)

AARON

Sure.

(Ben is left alone with his thoughts, trying to calm himself down.)

BEN

I've worked too hard for this.

(Ben stares at the sculpture.)

BEN (CONT.)

I'm smart. There's a reason I've made it this far. I can solve problems. I can reason my way through this. Everything happens for a reason.

(Ben picks up steam.)

BEN (CONT.)

I won't let Aaron dictate my future. I'm in control of my destiny! I deserve money and happiness! I deserve-



(Aaron runs back inside.)

AARON

Okay, I've got a plan.

BEN

Of course, you do.

AARON

Let's sell *this one*, too.




BEN

What? No!

AARON

Let's talk to Jen about changing the name, something about how there's a similarly named piece, we don't want there to be any confusion in the art community-

BEN

Rachel is coming back tonight *to talk to Jen* about 'the piece' 

(Jen walks back inside, she walks over to admire her work and notices the sold sticker on the sign.)

JEN

Curious... did you pre-sell the work?

AARON

That's just- sorry. Must've been a mistake.

(Aaron takes the sticker off.)



JEN

I see.

(Aaron's phone rings. He jumps up.)

AARON

Will you excuse me for a moment?

(Jen looks around the rest of the gallery. Ben isn't quite sure what to do.)

BEN

It's lovely work, as always.

JEN

I'm looking forward to seeing the reaction.

BEN

I'm... thrilled that you'll be joining us.

JEN

See you later.

(Jen leaves. Ben is alone again for a few moments. KAREN hurries in the door. Ben freezes.)

KAREN

Did Aaron get my e-mail about coming by a bit early?

BEN

Karen Connolly-

KAREN

Please don't tell me that Rachel got here before I did.

(Karen walks towards the actual sculpture, taking it in.)

KAREN

This is the new Jen Asher.

BEN

Yes.

KAREN

The first breath.



BEN

Yes.

(Karen looks at Ben, finally.)

KAREN

Are you okay?

BEN

I think so.

(Karen looks back at the sculpture.)

KAREN

The play of the color of the mixed metals. It's breathtaking.

(Karen reaches out to touch the piece.)



BEN

Don't-

(A piece of copper on the top falls off to the ground.)

KAREN

Oh my God-

(Ben jumps up, attempting to position the copper back on the top. It won't stay put.)

KAREN (CONT.)

I am so sorry-

BEN

Jesus-

KAREN

I'm buying it. Of course, I was going to buy it *anyway*.

(Karen takes out her Black AMEX card and throws it at Ben. Ben is numb at this point.)

BEN

Twenty thousand.

KAREN

That's it?



(Ben runs the card and hands it back.)

BEN

Delivery to Bel Air?

(Karen nods.)

KAREN

Mmm. I'll give my apologies to Jen tonight. Again, I am terribly sorry. But I am pleased that I got here before Rachel Harris. If you see her, tell her the piece is already mine.

(Karen leaves, and out of habit, Ben puts a sold sticker on the sign. Ben puts his head in his hands after a few beats, walks out the door to clear his head and look for Aaron. Aaron walks back in from the back door and sees that the sculpture is now broken. He attempts to fix the copper on the top but fails.)

AARON

Shit.

(Jen walks back in.)



JEN

I forgot my cart.

(She sees the broken sculpture.)

JEN (CONT.)

Oh no.

AARON

I'm not sure what happened-

JEN

I worried that the polish may have destabilized the top. I need to take this back again. It may not ready to show tonight.

(She sees another sold sticker.)

JEN (CONT.)

Curious.



(Aaron takes the sold sticker off again.)

AARON

Certainly disappointing, but we understand the nature of this work.

(Aaron helps Jen put the sculpture back on the rolling cart and she takes it out the door. Aaron paces. Ben walks back in and sees that there is now an empty space again.)

BEN

Wait, did Karen take it home?

AARON

What are you talking about?

BEN

Karen Connolly just bought the sculpture after she broke it!

AARON

Jen came back for her cart. She thought it broke from the polish. She just took it back home again.

BEN

Where were you?

AARON

Rachel called. She asked if she could invite the reporter from People magazine tonight.



BEN

You said no, right?

AARON

She just spent nearly a hundred grand with us. How was I supposed to say no?

(Aaron sits at the front desk. Ben leans against the doorway.)

BEN

Fraud. Jail time. Bankruptcy. Failure. Art excommunication! This is our future.



AARON

I don't think you can be excommunicated from the art world. It's not a religion.

BEN

How are you okay right now?

AARON

I'm just... I'm thinking.

(Ben starts to pace.)

BEN

Rachel and Karen are both going to come in, expecting to talk to Jen Asher about the pieces that they both *think* they bought-

AARON

Technically, they both did buy their own separate and distinct piece.

(Beat.)

AARON (CONT.)

I'm starving. Do you want a burrito?



BEN

There's no time.

AARON

There's that place down the street-

BEN

People are getting here within the hour.

AARON

Maybe chicken, cheese and bean, the cheese gets all melty-

BEN

Aaron, I didn't want to have to tell you.

AARON

What, you're off burritos now?

BEN

I thought we'd have a good night tonight...

AARON

Oh! Their special sour cream-

BEN

Be serious.

AARON

I am serious. Have you had the burritos there? They're massive.

BEN

We've been in the red for the past few months.

AARON

They *do* have that spicy red sauce-

BEN

I thought we'd make up enough to cover rent and our expenses in sales.

AARON

We just made \$115,000, minus commission.



BEN

We can't keep it.

AARON

Why not?

BEN

I had goals. Buy my own condo in the next five years. Save for retirement. Own some nice things. Shop somewhere other than Target for clothes.

AARON

What you can afford is a massive burrito right now, and I promise it's going to help-

BEN

Just... help me figure this out and I'll buy you the stupid burrito, okay?

(Beat.)

AARON

Why didn't you tell me we were in the red?



BEN

You panic every time I bring up money.

(Aaron is quiet, thinking.)

BEN (CONT.)

There's that wild look in your eyes again.


AARON

I knew a guy back in undergrad when we were in Boston. He was a painter. Pretty successful now. He did this crazy thing where he painted under multiple names.

BEN

Like various pen names?

AARON

Yeah, exactly. Each persona was wildly different. One painted landscapes. The other painted nude forms. The third painted still life. He had different galleries for all three 'artists'. If you didn't know... you'd er know it was the same person.

BEN

Huh.

AARON

What if we tell Rachel that her piece was done under a new persona for Jen Asher? That way, each of them keep the piece they bought and everyone's happy. That we screwed up and put the wrong name on the sign.

BEN

Half of the reason Rachel wanted the piece in the first place was to be able to throw in Karen's face that she was the one to get it.

AARON

What do we have to lose at this point?



(MARLEY STYLES walks in the door with Rachel. She's wearing a camera around her neck.)

RACHEL

-you wouldn't believe the charming tone they made-

MARLEY

You hand fused them?

RACHEL

Well, the whole thing was my daughter's idea. She thought it could be some sort of mother-daughter bonding experience. I mean, I didn't fuse the pieces of the wind chime *myself*. I sort of laid out the colors I liked, and the instructor did the difficult part of putting it all together.

MARLEY

Where did you put them?

RACHEL

Hm?

MARLEY

The wind chimes.

RACHEL

Oh, in the closet for now.

(Rachel turns to Aaron and Ben.)

RACHEL (CONT.)

I wanted to bring my dear friend Marley in as quickly as possible.

MARLEY

Marley Styles, reporter with People magazine. Do you mind if I-

(Marley picks up the camera and looks at Aaron and Ben.)



BEN

Okay.

(Marley starts snapping pictures around gallery. She arrives at the empty space. Aaron and Ben look at her, nervously.)

MARLEY

I wonder. Who gets to decide what art is worthwhile?

AARON

The buyer.



BEN

The viewer.



RACHEL

Isn't it just thrilling?

(Marley snaps a picture of the empty space and looks at Ben and Aaron.)

MARLEY

I've certainly never *seen* anything like it.

(Rachel beams.)

AARON

Rachel. We, ah, forgot to mention a tiny detail about this piece.

RACHEL

Oh?

AARON

Of course, this *is* a new style of work for Jen Asher. She's decided to start creating these new experiential pieces under a new artistic persona. Terry... Terry. Just 'Terry'.



MARLEY

Is that so?

(Marley starts taking notes. Ben is panicking.)

BEN

Aaron.

RACHEL

Well, I wish I would have known-

AARON

It doesn't change anything about the work itself.

RACHEL

Yes, but-

AARON

The piece... this piece is obviously still the piece you fell in love with.

MARLEY

I'm certainly looking forward to chatting with Jen about this new direction.

BEN

I'm not sure Jen will be able to stop by tonight.

(Rachel looks gutted.)

RACHEL

Oh.

(Karen walks in the door.)

KAREN

Rachel Harris.

RACHEL

Karen Connolly. How lovely to see you.

(Aaron pops up and runs over to Karen.)

AARON

Karen, a word for a moment.

(Karen looks at the empty space.)

KAREN

Where is it?

(Rachel whispers to Marley, smiling smugly.)

RACHEL

This one may be a little over her head.



(Aaron whispers to Karen.)



AARON

Jen's brought it back to her studio to fix the top.

KAREN

Did Rachel see it before it was gone?

AARON

Yes.

KAREN

Oh, well then.

(Aaron runs over to Rachel and whispers to her.)

AARON

I was making sure Karen knows you've already bought it.

RACHEL

I hope she wasn't too upset.

(Marley eyes everyone, trying to piece things together. She continues to snap photos.)

MARLEY

Hm.

RACHEL

The first breath.

KAREN

Yes. The first breath.

(Ben looks helpless.)

BEN

Why don't I pop open the champagne I have in the fridge?



(Ben runs to the fridge.)

AARON

Wonderful idea.

RACHEL

Tell me, Karen, what do you see before you?

(Rachel gestures towards the space.)

KAREN

I don't know.

(She looks right at Rachel.)

KAREN (CONT.)

Jealousy?



RACHEL

Okay. That's one perspective.

(Beat. Her eyes gaze at the space.)

RACHEL (CONT.)

I see patience. I see endless possibility. But mostly, I see renewal.



(Marley snaps a picture of the two women. Karen is confused.)

KAREN

That's quite poetic... *for you*.

(Ben runs back with two glasses of champagne and hands them to Karen and Rachel.)

BEN

A toast!

MARLEY

Alright, am I going to be the one to say it?

AARON

Say what?

MARLEY

This... this whole thing is a bit silly.

(Ben and Aaron lock eyes.)

BEN

Silly?

MARLEY

The piece.

AARON

You know, we've completely neglected to offer you champagne-

(Marley laughs.)

MARLEY

Oh, no, thank you.

(Aaron refills Karen and Rachel's glasses.)

MARLEY (CONT.)

This piece. It's... incredibly hard to photograph.



KAREN

Well, yes, *obviously*-

AARON

Marley Styles from People Magazine! Isn't she funny?

MARLEY

I think I'm done, Rachel. I'll come by your place next week.

RACHEL

Wonderful. I'll walk you out.

KAREN

Wait, Marley- I'd love to talk to you about *my* new vacation house-

(Rachel and Marley leave with Karen running after them.)

BEN

That was too close.

AARON

The other customers arrive soon-

BEN

We should just cancel.

AARON

Why? It's all working out-

BEN

I'm done.

AARON

What do you mean?

BEN

Us. This. Working together.



AARON

Ben, come on.

BEN

You're exhausting.

AARON

Today was-

BEN

No. Always.

AARON

Wow.

(Beat.)

BEN

I-

AARON

What?

BEN

I've put up with your nonsense since the first day we met, back in freshman orientation. Why? Because you've always made all my logic go out the window when we're together. I let you get away with everything, ridiculous ideas, schemes... things that no one else in my life would ever be able to do, because you're *you*. Because you're always charming. Convincing. I can't do this anymore. We're now on the brink of losing everything because I'm once again following you down a rabbit hole because you don't care about me the way I care about you. I'm done making excuses for you. Justifying your behavior. You're irresponsible. And you never check your damn e-mail.



(Jen Asher walks back in, rolling the fixed sculpture.)

JEN

Just in time!

(She notices the tension in the air.)

JEN (CONT.)

Everything okay here?

BEN

No. It's not okay. Jen-

AARON

We pre-sold your work.

JEN

Fabulous.



AARON

Twice.

JEN

I'm sorry?

AARON

I left the door open last night- but not because I got your e-mail. We thought the piece was stolen. Rachel Harris ended up buying the empty space because I led her to believe that was the intention of your work-

JEN

You sold an empty space. As my work. The first breath.

BEN

And that you were creating this new work under a persona, um... Terry.

JEN

Exactly how much did you sell this empty space for, made by... Terry?

AARON

95 thousand.

(Silence. She looks back at her metal sculpture.)

JEN

You sold this, too?

BEN

Yes.

AARON

20 thousand.

(Jen slowly bursts into laughter.)

JEN

This is ridiculous. You two-

(Rachel and Karen burst into the door, both much tipsier on champagne and continuing to drink.)



RACHEL

There she is! *Terry*.

KAREN

Huh?

(Karen notices the sculpture is back.)

KAREN (CONT.)

It's fixed! Look, Rachel-

(Jen turns to Rachel.)

JEN

You're Rachel.

RACHEL

I'm over the moon about your new direction.

(Karen wanders over to the sculpture.)

KAREN

Rachel! Rachel, just LOOK-

(Karen continues drinking while staring at the real sculpture. Rachel gestures towards the empty space.)

RACHEL

Can you tell me more about your inspiration?

JEN

They weren't kidding.

RACHEL

I'm sorry?

BEN

Oh, God.

(Jen looks at Ben and Aaron, then back at Rachel.)

JEN

As an artist, I'm always looking to explore new forms and function. I've always been fascinated by the way in which objects take up space, or in this case, how they don't.

RACHEL

Incredible.



(Ben and Aaron are in shock.)

AARON

Truly.

RACHEL

I'm not sure if the boys told you, but this work is going to be featured in People magazine-

JEN

How wonderful.

(Jen walks back over to Aaron and Ben, whispering.)

JEN (CONT.)

I want half of both sales.

BEN

Right. Okay.

JEN

I'd like some champagne, too, please.

BEN

Absolutely.



AARON

(to Ben)

And you owe me a burrito.



(The lights fade to black...

THE END)