

THE GRAVE AFFAIR AND OTHER GOTHIC ROMANCES

by

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A REPORT

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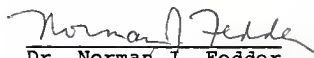
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I. Introduction

For approximately the past fifteen years, in one way or another I have concentrated on the forms of tragedy and Gothic horror -- first as an actor, later as a writer. I was fourteen years old when I began acting, with either serious dramas or tragedies being my forte ever since. In 1980, I began writing in these forms, my primary emphasis being in tragedy. As for Gothic horror, I have been enamored of it in all its forms -- fiction, film, however it is presented -- for my whole life. This is a natural combination with tragedy, in that each is integrally connected with the other.

This report, titled The Grave Affair And Other Gothic Romances, contains a description of my past seven years' experimentation in the writing of these forms.

The tragic acting performances I have given are written on the wind, as are all acting performances except those done for film presentation. Drama and fiction are written, and so can be left behind and studied, or merely read for enjoyment, or even picked up and performed.

The works considered here are not my total corpus, but are representative of what I believe to be the best in this genre. Space considerations precluded writing about my two

novels in depth, but the screenplay forms I took them from -- Last Rites and The Prize Exhibit -- are considered here. So is Boniface, my first screenplay, and the three plays I wrote between September, 1986 and September, 1987, all of which have seen production: The Late, Great Doctor Death, Cutthroat, and The Grave Affair, the last of which won the first annual Jerome D. Johanning Playwriting Award. The texts of these three plays are included in this report following the descriptive material contained herein. Also referred to are the best of my short stories: "Remembering Maggie," "Here's Looking At You," "The Midnight Masque," "The Temple of Topactli," and "Looking Back." Explicatory material on the background and creative process in their writing is provided, and critical apparatuses of production, where applicable.

The place to begin before reading a writer's work is in knowing the background of the writer. I was born July 23, 1958 at an Air Force base on Long Island, New York, which no longer exists. (To this day, I swear I remember actually being born.) My father was an Air Force Lt. Colonel who retired when I was two, at which time we moved to Aurora, Colorado (which has been my home ever since), where he became a teacher of juvenile delinquents at Lookout Mountain School for Boys until the time of his death in 1971. An eclectic and voracious reader, his special loves in life were photography, developmental psychology and education.

He was a self-made man, the oldest son of a first-generation American German minister of few means in Greeley, Colorado. He enlisted in the service out of high school, attaining his later officer's rank from the bottom up, as a career man.

My mother was a Colorado farm girl from a family of eight sisters (my father is one of three brothers), who married him about the time of his enlistment, when she had just finished a year of secretarial school. In the fashion of the day, she became a career housewife, delivering three kids, vast years apart: Victoria Anne, seventeen years my senior, and George Verlon, ten years older than me, with myself being the latecomer who slipped through the defenses. Now seventy, my mother still retains the vigor of her healthy German-Scotch-English stock.

Vickie was the intellectual whiz of the family, parlaying a series of straight A's from school to school into a Ph.D. in child psychology, with which she secured a teaching position at Yale, where she still is. George followed my father's footsteps, becoming an Army Captain before leaving the military to enter the corporate world, where he and his wife pull down a yearly salary well beyond the hundred-thousand dollar mark.

The youngest, the position of "artist of the family" naturally fell on me. I had an early talent for drawing, a vestige of which still remains, reached my peak as a violinist as sixth-grade all-city orchestra concertmaster

(after which I slacked off), and discovered my true niche as an actor about two years after my father's death, when I entered high school.

To say I was a success would be an understatement. I was more a phenomenon. Always precocious, I matured early into a six-foot, broad-shouldered bass, which made me invaluable in a profession that yearly seems to lose more males. I had a natural ability for quickly developing roles, and my responsive instincts were excellent. From the time I began to the present, I have been famous for my presence and intensity as an actor. It took me very little time to overcome an initial stiffness and increase my emotional range, and from the time I first auditioned, I was in a host of non-stop leads and major supporting roles for maybe eight years, year-round.

I produced my first show at seventeen -- a glorified community production of Alberto Cassella's Death Takes A Holiday -- playing the title role and winning an award. I got two Best Actor Awards in high school, as Henry Higgins in My Fair Lady and King Arthur in Camelot, and very nearly got to play Hamlet -- but my director "couldn't find a cast to match me." (Camelot was sort of a "consolation prize" -- I was always being groomed into a new Richard Burton.) I played Bill Sikes in an all-school summer production of Oliver that got me a great deal of attention, and the following summer played the "second lead" of John Dickinson

in 1776, in a University of Northern Colorado state-funded production of the show. I performed in community theatre for both Aurora and Denver, playing Little Donny Dark in Butterflies Are Free and George Kittredge, the stuffy new fiancée, in The Philadelphia Story.

Having developed an appreciable reputation, I was farmed into Loretto Heights College in Denver by a pair of talent scouts who saw me in Camelot; at the time Loretto Heights was developing a national reputation as an acting school. My first year there, I won another award as octogenarian Bishop Cauchon in The Lark, increasing my renown as a dramatic character actor. That summer, 1977, Kent Leader -- who had acted with me in many shows -- recommended me for an audition for The Pine Cone Players Repertory Theatre Company, in Grand Lake, Colorado. He had found out about it from his brother, Charlie, who the year before had acted for the Pine Cone Players and had been hired to be a member of the company again. Charlie was the former "acting legend" of the high school where I had later assumed that same dubious mantle; moreover he had acted with my brother ten years before.

The Pine Cone Players were run out of Kansas State University, specifically by Joel and Zoe Climenhaga, who gave me my first summer semi-pro repertory acting job, after a brief interview. They utilized me well -- I was in five out of six shows -- as both a leading man and a character actor: they cast me as Marco in Carnival; Colonel Melkett (I've played a lot of Colonels) in Black Comedy; Francis Levison

(the villain) in East Lynne; Judge Lynch in A Live Woman In The Mines; and in a little sleeper-gem of a children's show, The Emperor's New Clothes, Charlie Leader reprised the comic-villain role he had originated, with me as his comic-villain straight-man.

[There's a reason for this list of shows. While I had a great deal of fun in The Emperor's New Clothes, I never listed it on my resume later because I had played dozens of other roles that I thought were more recognizable. The playwright of The Emperor's New Clothes was Wesley Van Tassel, who gave Charlie his first professional work, after they had worked together at Kansas State University. Furthermore, Wesley Van Tassel is the man who finally gave me my long-sought Actor's Equity card, last year, when I worked again with Charlie at the Mule Barn Summer Theatre in Tarkio, Missouri. My being associated with the Mule Barn Summer Theatre came about while I was at Kansas State University, where I was working with Joel and Zoe Climenhaga, again.]

At the time, none of these political wheels-within-wheels-to-be was known to me. After 1977, it was nine years before I met up with Joel and Zoe again. I turned them down for a second summer's work, to play Iago in a summer studio recording production of Othello, never having any conception of how important they were to be to me later, both as an actor and a writer.

The roles continued fast and furious through my

undergraduate career. I reprised Henry Higgins, did a few comedies and several more dramas. I played the pivotal character of Dale Harding in One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest, and another pivot as File in The Rainmaker. I was the first actor at Loretto cast in two simultaneous productions, as Prince Escalus in Romeo and Juliet and the romantic lead in The Children's Hour, and capped my Loretto career with Thomas More in A Man For All Seasons. .

I was immediately in graduate school, winning a full graduate scholarship in the prestigious Hilberry Classical Graduate Repertory Theatre at Wayne State University, in Detroit. Next to Yale, it was considered the most prestigious program in the country for actors, and only five positions were given that year. As an additional feather in my cap, I had a record seventeen other offers to choose from.

I was well on the way to becoming a career Shakespearean actor and had I finished out the second year of Wayne State's M.F.A. program I would be one today. (I was the front-runner for Brutus in Julius Caesar, which was slated for the next season.) Numerous factors were involved in my leaving. Wayne State's claim to being the best (or second-best) acting program in the country is well-founded, but it -- at least at that time -- suffered some serious drawbacks. The intensively grueling work situation was primarily exploitative, and conducive to a milieu of mental breakdowns. There was an

oppressive air of paranoia about it. Adding to that was the climate of Detroit in 1980-81, which can be likened to that of a demilitarized war-zone: no active shooting going on, but a lot of hidden land-mines of which to beware.

The summer-stock season of 1981 at the Hilberry was every bit as relaxed and enjoyable as the regular season's schedule was a living nightmare, but I had made up my mind to leave the program, by the end of it. I finished my contract, then we shook hands and called it a day. I had discovered another love in writing. I didn't abandon acting, but I put it into lower gear. I landed a couple more roles for the resume, a great deal of experience as a hard-core pro, and another acting award from the ACTF adjudicator of Wild Oats, as a "Moe Howard" ruffian gangleader of stooges. But writing quickly became my primary interest. It was the milieu of Detroit and the Hilberry that spawned my first script in a dramatic medium: Boniface, a screenplay.

II. A Description Of The Factors Involved In My Early Writing

Any writer's work comes from the canvas of his own experiences. In early October of 1980, I had been in the Hilberry Company for five or six weeks. I was the youngest actor in the company, and hadn't sufficiently proven myself to land any major roles. By the time I did, I was past caring. The award I had gotten for Wild Oats did not impress any director, but instead antagonized them; it was, of course, expected to go to the lead, which is what happened, as the adjudicator was out of town. I did not become angry. I just laughed about it. My two compadres, who had also received and been deprived the honors, became closer drinking pals with me as a result.

It was one episode of many, typical of my future in the Hilberry. Dissatisfaction rapidly mounted among us all, and morale was bad for a variety of reasons. Living in a Detroit slum below poverty level only intensified things, making my year in Detroit a crucible of numerous dark emotions. There were bright spots, to be sure -- but they were precious few. Summer-stock at the Hilberry was every bit as enjoyable and relaxing as the school year was taxing and demoralizing, in

fact. Still, when I remember Detroit, it is that repertory season that I recall, like a dark tidal wave which overpowers the good times. I remember it as a long, waking nightmare, a compendium of horror.

I was not unique, in this perception. Throughout the year, there were mental breakdowns, suicide attempts (especially people getting themselves into "accidents"), heavy usage of alcohol and drugs, and numerous other signs of prevalent disintegration. Whether this was due to the Hilberry's incredibly demanding workload, or living in Detroit in general, or a combination of the two, is impossible to say. Detroit is the sixth largest city in the United States and suffers staggering unemployment. Of twenty-two members in the acting company, five of us had our cars stolen or attempted stolen in the space of six months -- all cars of foreign make, with out-of-state plates. The food store across the street from my apartment at 489 Prentis still showed fire scars from the 1967 riots and there was mounting fear that the violence would return. Sneak-thieves were caught more than once backstage. Blue-lighted police call-boxes were in multiple proliferation where we lived. The increasing number of bums looked progressively more desperate as the months went on; seeing anyone out on the barren streets at night was cause to be afraid.

Detroit struck me as a city of mercenaries -- all those workers, there only to make cars -- who suddenly had no war to fight. Even I felt like an unemployed mercenary, as a

Hilberry actor. The Hilberry was only a microcosm of the city. None of us were making a living. We were doing the only thing we had to do, the only thing we knew, and not surviving for all our best efforts. The psychological and sociological milieu was extremely dark, extremely ugly.

Moreover, the city itself seemed to perfectly look what it was. The architecture was fascinating. Every building was unique, individual. It had character. I lived in an area of "brownstones," with carved stone faces on the facades, interesting trellises and crumbling stoops. In some places, entire bulidings (or areas of buildings) were marked for demolition that never came -- empty, gothic sentries beneath sloping, gabled roofs. They were boarded not by ghosts -- though it wouldn't surprise me, frankly, even now -- but by men and women who may as well be ghosts. The police even stayed away from many of them. No one really wanted to find out what squatter might have taken up residence in them.

One of the most fascinating of the lot was the old church we rehearsed in, at 490 West Forest. It became the focus of my first screenplay and was (probably still is) exactly as I describe it.

Boniface was first titled Crimson Witness, which I later felt was too esoteric. It was patterned largely on Guy Endore's 1933 epic novel, The Werewolf of Paris, and on the movie made from it, 1961's The Curse of the Werewolf. I have always loved horror movies, and among these, werewolves are a special favorite. There had been no werewolf movies made

since The Curse of the Werewolf and I thought it was time for another one. I could not realize, at the time, that Hollywood was one step behind me. Later that same year, The Howling was released, then Wolfen and An American Werewolf In London. Six months after I wrote Boniface, Thomas Tessier's novel The Nightwalker -- also about an undying lycathrope (or hopeless psychotic) -- hit the stands. And last year, the Fox Broadcasting Network launched the series Werewolf, which is exactly the kind of thing Boniface was written to be.

For having been written when I was just twenty-two, I think Boniface is pretty remarkable. It is more so for the fact that I wrote it in complete shooting script form, in five weeks, literally during my dinner hour -- the only free time I had. The form in which it is discussed here is the simplified "reading version" revision I typed up in 1983. The only real changes I made were to clean up the dialogue a bit, and remove a scene I considered supercilious. Visually, it was a terrific scene, but it drove a tack with a sledgehammer, plot-wise, so I excised it, with some remorse, but with finer sensibilities.

Boniface is about a lot of things. I had not intended it to make any commentary about the Vietnam War, but one came out all the same. It's about Detroit. It's about me, and the people I worked with. Boniface, himself, is a dark nightmare doppelganger of myself, back then, and Lockhart represents the corresponding balance of innate goodness. They have a

common goal: Boniface's ultimate redemption. They are God and the devil, working toward a common goal from opposite sides of the fence, unlikely but unmistakable allies, united to end the horror that is Boniface.

In the process, they become a beacon to others. Lockhart and Boniface are supermen among mere mortals, forcing a commitment of faith on all they come across. Those who refuse to unite against Boniface are destroyed by him -- he returns violence in kind, a bloody Jehovan Judge, witnessing the existence of God through the supernatural embodiment of His opposite. Only in an act of prescribed faith -- the silver bullet -- will his horror be removed and his redemption effected. Until then, he is both mortal and immortal monster. His curse has forced him to live in the shadows, an eternal pariah, an embittered anti-hero who will go on killing as both man and monster until released by an act of faith and love. He despises both humanity and himself, even as he desperately fights to save them, as well as himself.

What makes Boniface memorable, I think, is its characters. Lockhart and Boniface spotlight the best and worst of people, and the hopeless mediocrities in between, in every walk of life; they illustrate the battlefield of all men, the hopelessness and futility, the randomness of evil in the world -- but they also illustrate the nobility of fighting against evil's preeminence.

Boniface shows the beginnings of my later style and is

as strong, thematically, as any of my later work. It is dark, fôreboding, relentlessly menacing -- and emotionally satisfying, with a powerful, classic catharsis at the end. I consciously wrote Boniface as a three-act tragedy: the first act concludes with Boniface's line, "My love affair ..."; the second concludes with Lockhart's discovery of Boniface's curse, and his miraculous escape from Boniface's attack; the "police procedural" comprises the final act.

Boniface is also a blueprint for my most recent play: The Grave Affair.

The accomplishment of Boniface went unnoticed by anyone around me, but I was exhilarated by having written it. I enjoyed the process so much, I just had to do it again. It was only three weeks later that I decided what my next piece would be: Last Rites.

I wanted to write something "really scary." Boniface struck me more as a conventional drama, upon its completion, than the basic horror film I had set out to write. The supernatural angle in it was only that -- an angle. The Exorcist had always hit me that way, as a serious drama that just happened to be "supernatural" in orientation. For my next piece, I decided to write the scariest thing I could come up with, the most disturbing nightmare I could torture up out of my darkest imagination.

While I wracked my brains for terrors, I kept myself open

for ideas, for a plot. I found my catalyst in an unlikely place, on a Saturday afternoon scare matinee showing of a movie called Children Shouldn't Play With Dead Things. A ridiculous title. Cheap, tawdry, lurid, sensational, and at least as comic as it is horrific. All in all, minus the comedy, a pretty accurate assessment of the film.

Children Shouldn't Play With Dead Things had a reputation. My movie theater connections and extensive knowledge of horror had already built up my expectations. The movie, it was rumored, had been banned three days after its original release. I never verified the rumor, but I suspect it was true. Mario Bava's 1960 classic, Black Sunday, had been banned in Great Britain for eight years as "too shocking," and it pales in comparison to Children Shouldn't Play With Dead Things. Coming across this movie was like discovering an ancient, forbidden volume of arcane rites. In fact, the movie used that very device.

A schizophrenic, self-styled Satanist/independent filmmaker brings his hippie followers to a deserted island cemetery, ostensibly to make a black magic movie. He actually has come into possession of an ancient grimoire, and intends to reanimate the dead as his personal slaves through the enactment of one of its rituals. Initially failing, his friends regale him for the pathetic, pimple-faced freak he is, but later in the night -- they rise. The dead are plenty aggravated at having their sleep so thoughtlessly disturbed, and munch the hapless fools responsible, in a ghoulish orgy

that makes Night Of The Living Dead appear like a holy-roller revival.

The acting was pretty uniformly awful, but the script and direction were sporadically brilliant. The whole was done sans music, in a claustrophobically menacing, voyeuristic cinema-verite. It was simple, but effective. Ghoulish, gruesome, macabre. And, for all its cheap papier-mache and vampire blood, it was oddly disquieting. Like the eminently slicker The Exorcist, it somehow rose above its mere vulgar horrors, transcending into a more cosmic terror, a feeling of dread, of angst.

Such was exactly the type of effect I wanted to achieve. Annoyed by the overkill of average juveniles in horror films, I set out to write the same basic story in a more adult fashion, play on the elements of the Faust legend inherent in the idea. Once again, I was experimenting in three-act tragedy.

I had seen Richard Burton's Doctor Faustus and read Goethe's Faust in sixth grade, and they became my bedrock. I had come up with the horrific final image I wanted, and could find a way to motivate it through this Faustian-hybridized plot. I pulled a beginning from a cock-and-bull story one of directors once told me (swearing it was gospel-truth) and devised a scene half-way through the plot from a favorite old movie called Fear No Evil -- which had been written, ironically enough (I later discovered), by the same man who wrote The Werewolf of Paris

-- to maintain suspense. As I had done with Boniface, I improvised dialogue and characters as I came to and needed them, and completed Last Rites in January of 1981.

"Faust" devotees will be interested in this piece. I consider it a synthesis of Marlowe's and Goethe's rendition of the legend -- the one classic, the other romantic. Marlowe's Faustus pays the terrible price of dealing with the devil; Goethe's Faust escapes, saved by love. My version of the character, "Emery Iakovich," does both.

In form, Act One concludes with a slow zoom in on a devil mask as Elizabeth leads Iakovich off to bed, and Act Two concludes with Edward's line, "So do I," as he and Iakovich take Kraman's corpse outside. I was also experimenting with the dramatic unities. If Act One is taken as a dramatic prologue, then Acts Two and Three adhere to the French Neoclassical unities, occurring in just over twenty-four hours, in one location, in close to real time. Boniface had been a free-flowing narrative and an epic; in Last Rites I endeavored to write a practical low-budget script, filled with as many disturbing terrors and implications as possible, and intensified the relentless menace of the whole by keeping the location and characters to a minimum.

I was pleased with the end result. I revised the script at the same time I did Boniface and my next piece, The Prize Exhibit, about two years later, and then spent 1983 writing Last Rites and The Prize Exhibit as novels. In its fictional form, Last Rites is one of the finest pieces I've written.

But the film script is still a favorite of mine, strong enough to stand on its own without the additional coloring of fictional direction.

It has been leveled at me that I do not write well for women. While it is true that I write few female roles of substance, I offer Elizabeth in Last Rites in rebuttal to my detractors. I like all the characters in this piece, but Elizabeth is rather special.

For the curious, particularly those who at some time have the opportunity to read the script, most of the information in this script is accurate, and when it isn't, I admit to there "being a leap" in the dialogue. There is no such thing as a "houngan box," for instance, and the practice of "boning" is done by the aboriginal New Zealanders, not Africans, but, well, "dramatic license," you know. My apologies to any anthropologists whose sensibilities may be offended.

Lastly, the "Black Mass" presented in the script is entirely bogus. I concocted it by bastardizing a Tridentine Roman Missal. I have discovered that religious sensibilities are more easily offended than anthropological ones.

Horror is most appropriately presented in two genres: film, and short stories. In film, because horror is largely visual; in short fiction, because horror, like a joke ends on a punch-line that requires little set-up. The joke and the horror story are so close, in fact, that only the final mood

or effect they leave distinguishes them from each other.

Consider the following: "My dog has no nose." "How does he smell?" "Terrible." A joke, plainly, since it elicits laughter. And this: "What's wrong? You're trembling." "I just saw my wife -- she said she'd been to the beauty parlor." "Didn't they make her look beautiful?" "I don't see how they could have, she's been dead for over a year." Depending on how it's viewed, that one can be a joke, but more likely, it leaves its audience feeling uneasy. Surprise, in the punchline, is what makes for the reaction -- the type of surprise is what differentiates the comedic from the horrific.

William Faulkner once said that novelists are failed short story writers, and that short story writers are failed poets. Robert W. Chambers proved the point often, introducing his short horror stories with epigrams from his fictional play, The King In Yellow, that were often more effective than the stories themselves. I used one of them to introduce the "second act" of my novelized Last Rites:

CAMILLA: You, sir, should unmask.

STRANGER: Indeed?

CAMILLA: Indeed, it's time. We all have cast aside disguise, but you.

STRANGER: I wear no mask.

CAMILLA: (aside, terrified) No mask? No mask!

For all its economy and simple verbiage, this foregoing passage is arguably more effective than Poe's acknowledged

classic of the same vein, "The Masque of the Red Death."

However, I do not have Mr. Chambers' skill, at least at present, and probably not that of Mr. Poe, either. But the short story form elicits the same respect from me that it did for Mr. Faulkner.

It was inevitable that I would try my hand at that venerable form, and in August of 1981 I made my first attempt. It was called "Remembering Maggie" and was first envisioned as a short-short contest entry for that year's Twilight Zone Magazine story contest. Not only did I fail to write a short-short story, I failed to write even a short story. I wrote a thirty-three page novella, and it took me exactly nine months -- the term of a pregnancy -- with exactly one month of revision, to write.

"Remembering Maggie" is the hardest thing I ever set out to create. I was attempting to write a Poe-esque gothic romance, in the modern world of Taco Bells and cigarettes and movies and electronic appliances. I wanted to see if it could be done. The end result is artistically interesting, and has absolutely no commercial value whatsoever.

The story is more like an epic poem of obsessive love, in three stanzas, comprised as it is of almost nothing but narrative. It is visual, lyrical, and haunting. There is a strangely compelling feel to it, and I consider it probably to be the most fascinating single piece I've written. It also is probably my most admired piece of writing, by those who have read me extensively. Short of my later play, The

Grave Affair, it has brought me more attention than any of my other works. From the entire corpus of my works to date available, "Remembering Maggie" was the sole writing that Joel Climenhaga read of mine, in 1986, inspiring him with enough faith in my ability to guarantee me production of my first play -- before it was ever written. This one story alone has brought me readers, fame, friendship and even lovers.

The length of its writing was less due to selection of the correct wording to be used, than because of the story itself. The characters I started with were nobody in particular -- but before I was done with the second page, I realized I was writing a quasi-autobiographical account of my own past love affair. And I knew that my simple little short-short was going to be a much lengthier headache. But if I didn't write it, I was sure I would never write anything of substance, so I rolled up my shirtsleeves and did it. I encountered exactly this same problem in my first play, The Late, Great Doctor Death, for the same reason: I was too close to the material.

A writer's canvas comes from his own life's experience, whether he is aware of the fact or not. The only difference between me and most, in this regard, is that I am conscious of it -- usually. Even a semi- or quasi-autobiography is taxing on the psyche. The author has to continually short-circuit his own defense mechanisms, prying up whole panels of memories and rationalizations to come as close to

objectivity as possible. Objectivity is paramount, in any kind of story writing, if the story is to hold interest for a reader.

This is the prime stumbling block of novice writers, and the reason so few ever go on to amount to anything. In any kind of writing, the author reveals himself, at least in his opinions. In storytelling, a writer explores not only his own opinions and feelings, but his entire world view; by virtue of the fact he is fragmenting a story to be told by a number of characters, he reveals not only his own thought process, but how he views the way others think. So, the characters written by a neurotic will tend to express the same neurosis; of a religious fanatic, fanaticism; of a psychotic, they may make no sense at all -- for the average fledgling writer who has not yet divorced his objectivity, characters will tend to be superficial, because the writer (at least unconsciously) knows that his very thought process will be open to judgement by the public at large, and that kind of self-revelation is confined, for most, to the intimacy of the bedroom.

While I was uncovering and exorcising this necessary first real demon of writing, my thoughts must have been so arrested and preoccupied that -- like reciting a mantra, or a rosary -- my creative center was left to free-float. During the writing of "Remembering Maggie," I had an idea for another screenplay, that (until The Grave Affair) was the fastest thing I'd ever written.

It was The Prize Exhibit. The entire script sprang, full-blown, into my head, in about thirty minutes, after I read a story by Frank Belknap Long (a Lovecraft groupie) called "The Horror From The Hills." It was one of countless hundreds of Lovecraftian horror stories of its like, but it stimulated my storytelling imagination.

For those unfamiliar with Lovecraft, I must momentarily digress. In the 1920's, a new genre of fiction hit the magazine stands, which has become famous under the ignominious (but not entirely inaccurate) title of "pulp." Pulp is entirely without pretension. It never pretends to be anything other than what it is -- pure entertainment. If America has any great claim to fame in any aspect of theatrical entertainment (other than film), it is in melodrama and pulp entertainment. Britain had its "penny-dreadfuls," but nothing can quite match America's pulp magazines for sheer, silly fun. Harlan Ellison, in his preface to the "Doctor Who" books, calls the genre "elegant trash," from which (like comic books) we learn our moral/ethical standards, seeing heroes and villains in action. Good is rewarded, evil punished, the good guy gets the girl, the gold watch and everything in the end. It isn't real, and it isn't meant to be. In life, villains don't always meet their poetically perfect ends before the final curtain -- they often don't even get caught, and in fact live quite profitably. But in American entertainment -- Uncle Tom's Cabin, "James Bond," T.V. soaps, comic books, "The Little Rascals," "Indiana Jones," and the pages of the

pulps -- such glorious non-reality is the pinnacle of enjoyment.

It was in the pulp pages of Weird Tales that many talented novice writers cut their teeth, telling unbelievable stories of swashbuckling freebooters, damsels in distress, human villains beyond the pale and inhuman monstrosities (BEM's -- bug-eyed monsters) of cosmic import. Weird Tales' most popular author, Seabury Quinn, sent his French detective, Jules de Grandin, to monthly dispatch whatever foul, supernatural entities threatened Our Heroes on the streets of New Jersey. He was a forerunner of T.V.'s Carl Koschak, "The Night Stalker," in the late 1970's. Numerous others tried their hands at the form, including a New England, lantern-jawed, latter-day-Poe, named Howard Phillips Lovecraft.

Never matching Quinn's popularity in life, Lovecraft succeeded it in death. A xenophobic mass of contradictions and neuroses, Lovecraft created a mythos that spawned an entire generation of followers and imitators: Robert Bloch, August Derleth, Frank Belknap Long, Stephen King, and many others -- including myself.

I became exposed to Lovecraft in junior high, and like those countless many before me, fell in love with his curious blend of proto-sci-fi and gothic horror. Though he did experiment, his most famous -- and prolific -- work was in a realm of his own creation: the Cthulhu Mythos. In Lovecraft's Weltanschauung, we poor, paltry humans were but pawns in the game of life. The players of the game were a

plethora of "Old Ones," titanic, alien gods that lost a cosmic war with the "Ancient Ones," and were banished to various locations in and out of our universe. The Old Ones either created man for their later use, or simply found our race helpful to their cause of eventual return and domination. They are not malignant towards us -- merely indifferent. Their aims go beyond our calculation. To them, man is an occasionally helpful, eventually bothersome insect, inhabiting temporarily one of their rightful homes -- their rightful battlegrounds.

The Cthulhu Mythos holds such a sway on popular entertainment still, to this day, that the word "Lovecraftian" has become synonymous with any unearthly Gothic horror. It is a blend of traditional and science-fictional horror, much like Alien or The Outer Limits. In fact, one review of Alien described the movie as a sort of reversal of Lovecraftian theme -- in his stories, the Old Ones come to us; in Alien, we go to them.

At the time I discovered the pulp fiction of Lovecraft, I also discovered another pulp hero of fiction, James Bond. I read through Ian Fleming's semi-real spy thrillers, and even then thought that he and Lovecraft were kissing cousins. I had always wondered what would result as a union of the two men's works.

I found a practical answer in Nigel Kneale's BBC serial character, "Quatermass." Bernard Quatermass was a Scottish English rocket scientist who, in four separate adventures,

encountered an "Andromeda Strain" threat from space, "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" parasites, a five-million year old delayed invasion from Mars, and aliens from aeons past who used the standing stones to convert humans into energy food. They were remarkable, in the first place, because they weren't laughable. They were, in fact, rather fascinating. Kneale is an accomplished writer, whose work within the discipline of serial-writing proved invaluable to my own development.

Another partial answer was T.V.'s "Carl Kolchak." Kolchak, The Night Stalker, a series resulting from the record-breaking movie of the week and its sequel, The Night Strangler, weekly pitted an unwitting, obnoxious news reporter (Darren McGavin) against all kinds of ghoulish creatures. Conscious of its scare value, The Night Stalker, endeavored to keep a light touch, more fun than fear. The combination was highly successful, even if low viewer ratings and a shortage of new monstrosities for the intrepid McGavin to dispatch did cancel the show, after one year.

And screenwriter Joseph Stefano, on his show, The Outer Limits (itself a paean to Lovecraft, perhaps the best single incarnation of his type of terror), wrote one or two episodes of the same type. In one, a government agent infiltrates a seditious organization, "The Invisibles," to discover that they are hideous alien parasites that have commandeered human hosts. In another, a master-of-disguise spy is given the ultimate challenge" to become a member of an alien race,

in order to determine whether the inhabitants of a crash landed saucer are friends or foe. Meyer Dolinsky also tried his hand at Lovecraft/Fleming hybridization in two episodes of his own, on the show. The first had a team of government scientists surgically/hormonically transforming one of their own into a mock space invader, to terrify nuclear-warring nations into union, by threat of a common enemy. The second had a Senate hearing on a top-secret government surveillance device expose the machine as a tool for hostile invaders to demoralize us before their first strike.

With all this in mind, and triggered by Long's "The Horror From The Hills," I envisioned my own tongue-in-cheek hybrid of Lovecraft and Fleming, and wrote it in somewhere from four to six weeks. It owes as much to Wilkie Collins' The Moonstone and Lord Dunsany's "A Night At An Inn," as it does to Frank Belknap Long or Ian Fleming.

In order to "play the Lovecraft game," all a writer has to do is: (a) invent a new old tome of blasphemous knowledge and spells; or (b) invent a new comic icky-nasty of the Cthulhu pantheon; and then (c) involve some hapless investigation in a story involving (a) and/or (b).

To play the "Fleming game," all one has to do is follow straight melodrama formula -- but there are earmarks of the style which makes his brand recognizable. The characters are all stock, but the hero is a tad bit eccentric, (suffering specifically from satyriasis), wisecracking, and has a dry sense of humor; the heroine -- if time is spent developing

her -- is beautiful, touching, and a bit tragic, and will be physically perfect but for one marring flaw; and the villains are all flamboyant (so much so that you can't miss them at the World's Fair), will also be eccentric (bizarre and/or "kinky"), and, like the heroine, have some physical deformity. Add calculated thrills, chills, spills, conform to melodrama formula, and shake well before serving (don't stir).

Put the two together -- at least in my shaker -- and they come out The Prize Exhibit. "Suyat Suvradan" is my contribution to the Lovecraft pantheon. For die-hard Lovecraft purists, he could well be considered the incarnation of two never-seen deities of the already existing Old Ones: "Shub-Niggernath," the "Black Goat of the Woods With A Thousand Young," and "Yig, the Father of Snakes." I borrowed from existing occult mythology to concoct his basis, his strengths and weaknesses, following that old Lovecraft dictum of "never inventing a mysterious fact if there is a real one to use" (or words to that effect). His fearsome, Oriental name, I got from reading all the letters of a crossword puzzle from end to end, in seventh or eighth grade. They came out "Suyatpozogrsuvradan," which I thought was so funny I filed it away for future reference and use.

Arthur Merrit is my doppelganger; a sum total of my best character roles. He equals the way I would play "Doctor Who," if such an unlikely thing were ever to occur -- a blend of Jon Pertwee's suavity, Tom Baker's errant silliness and

alertness, and a dash of the diabolism of the Doctor's arch-nemesis, "The Master," as played by Roger Delgado, for good measure. There's even a little "Bernard Quatermass" semi-scientist in him -- the reference to a "borazon drill" was stolen straight out of the third Quatermass script, Quatermass and the Pit (filmed as Five Million Years to Earth).

I must give passing reference and a nod of the head to one of my major influences here, veteran screenwriter Richard Matheson. Until the last couple of years, I learned less about well-made-play formula from Ibsen than from Matheson. Matheson himself is plainly an educated playwright. His numerous "B"-movie film scripts of the 1960's, especially those famous Roger Corman/Vincent Price "Poe" movies, masterfully weave elements from famous historical plays into Poe's skeletal scenarios. The Pit and the Pendulum (1961), most notable, is a horrific rendition of Luigi Pirandello's Henry IV, with elements of Ibsen's Ghosts thrown in: Spanish noblemen Nicholas Medina (Price, in one of his best performances) is unsure of his sanity and very identity; he is convinced that his infamous Inquisitioner father is possessing him through his very genes, leading him to commit the same terrible monstrosities. The Comedy of Terrors, a farcical romp about a turn-of-the-century drunkard-cum-funerary-establishment-owner, is highly reminiscent of the famous melodrama, The Drunkard. In The Legend of Hell House, he even names the designer of an

unparalleled, diabolical mansion "Belasco." Matheson is a true master not only of the well-made play formula, but of mechanics of tragedy, and I owe to his genius much of my own learning. Horror and tragedy are, after all, closely intermingled, and few do it consistently better than Matheson.

After completing "Remembering Maggie" and The Prize Exhibit, the video store I worked at folded, and I spent late 1982 getting back into acting, at Denver's Aladdin Theater. I was chorus in the Denver professional premiere of the Joseph Papp The Pirates of Penzance, and followed that playing Charlemagne in Pippin, which got The Rocky Mountain News critic's "Best Production Of The Year" award. My career looked as if it were in saving, but halfway into the next show, Grease, the backers pulled out and the theater folded. Once a Denver landmark, it now no longer even exists.

I still wasn't Equity, and couldn't afford time in the candidacy program to get the card. I went to part-time jobs as a word-processor at a bank and a teacher at a modeling agency, after the lengthiest unemployment of my life, in 1983. I spent that year revising all my scripts into their present form, and writing The Prize Exhibit and Last Rites into novels. My failure to sell them and my continued poverty demoralized me, aborting six or seven new novels that I got as many as one hundred to one hundred and fifty pages into before completely running out of steam to complete any of them.

Realizing that I had lost the drive to write novels, but still wanting to write, I turned to occasional short stories.

They didn't sell either, but between them and the novels, I established a small readership of fans at the Village Inn where I wrote them. I was so much a regular there -- still am, whenever I'm in town -- that I'm virtually an institution, the stuff of legend. They were the first people I'd ever heard clamor for my work, so every now and then I wrote another one for them. It took me all of two days to write any given one, and another couple to type it up, so they were rather enjoyable to produce -- especially knowing that my miniscule but adoring public was awaiting them. There are a few I never got typed up -- they were read straight out of a notebook -- that I will someday (when I find them). I write so prolifically and constantly that my fiction and scripts are often formed piecemeal in the pages of my dozens of notebooks.

The first, following "Remembering Maggie," was "Here's Looking At You." I could say it took me a year to write, but it actually took me two days -- a year apart. I started it right before the Aladdin folded, and forgot about it in the ensuing chaos of my life. It is probably my best. It is certainly the most commercial, and definitely my most sheerly horrific. The idea came from memories of my childhood's blurred vision. I didn't know what I wasn't seeing, until I got glasses in the fourth grade. Before that, commonplace items could assume terrifying stature. As "The Bard" would put it, "But in the night, imagining some fear/How easy is a bush supposed a bear." The cabinets in the house where I

grew up were stained walnut (I believe), in which strange faces and Lovecraftian, tortured entities could be seen, by those with extreme imagination, a morbid turn of mind and blurry eyesight. Also, the picture over which the end credits of a Twilight Zone episode once ran -- I think it was just some commonplace items on a bar counter -- looked, to my blurred eyes, like some monstrous, impossible eye staring eerily up from the wood. Interestingly, Twilight Zone Magazine rejected this one, and in a later interview, the then-editor, T.E.D. Klein, made mention of not liking stories that had the exact ending of my own -- though he didn't mention it by name, he could have only been referring to this story, and if it wouldn't tip it off and spoil the ending for you, I'd prove it; without being specific, though this will tip off true horror aficionados, Klein objected to authors whose idea of horror derives from a certain famous scene in The Horror in the Black Museum, said scene of which is precisely like the end of "Here's Looking At You."

"The Midnight Masque" (which I also call "The Clown At Midnite") is the essence of horror, to me. It walks the dividing line between humor and horror, showing just how close they are. This is one of those sneaky, behind-the-scenes horrors, the kind that relentlessly menaces. A few readers have failed to fully comprehend its meaning, but all have enjoyed it. The source of the horror is specifically delineated, it just isn't traditional -- it's more Lovecraftian. It will be obvious to most that this one is derivative of

Invasion of the Body Snatchers, but its prime inspiration (again) comes from the blurred vision of my childhood. A trip through Elitch Amusement Park's "spook-house" (which is much like the one in the story) was very real for me, back then -- I couldn't see that the hissing Lovecraftian horror of Batrachian appearance was actually a very painted, interiorly lit, yellow plastic frog, that wouldn't scare The Three Stooges -- but The Three Stooges could see it clearly, and I couldn't. I only shut my eyes, but my brother swears, with much odious laughter, that I fainted from the experience; it must be admitted, I was pale as a sheet. That day, I came up with the concept of "The Midnight Masque."

My father liked to travel, and shortly before he died, shortly before I hit adolescence, I went with him to Nucla, Colorado, where he had gone to school once, and on into New Mexico. I have always disliked the Spanish/Indian/Western American decor and milieu, as drab, colorless, cold, ascetic, primitive, backward, and eerie. Combined with the isolation and loneliness of the desert, there is something downright atavistic, spectral, and haunting about it. I had one of the worst scares of my young life there, in "The Oldest House in America," a small Indian adobe hut. Alone in one of its rooms, I felt another presence -- I turned to discover an old, dead Indian, big as life, propped up in a chair nearby. Of course, he was a wax dummy, and my dad got as much mileage out of that one as my brother did the spook-house incident. Remembering the night of the "dead" Indian is what gave me the first

impulse for writing "The Temple of Topactli," a story which, incidentally, I learned later, is a favorite of Joel and Zoe Climenhaga. Joel has encouraged me to try writing "The Temple of Topactli" as a one-act play, which I may do someday. I got the idea for the fetish which appears in the story from the paperback cover of Jonathan Fast's The Inner Circle, which also dealt partially with Mexican mythology, and the image of the old man in the circle of fire -- as well as the primary idea for the story itself -- came from the teaser of an Outer Limits episode called "Corpus Earthling" where paranoid young newlywed Robert Culp (in a haunting, windswept, isolated, Mexican setting) ignores portentous warnings, and discovers that his bride -- isn't his bride; she is a Lovecraftian icky-nasty. The moment chilled me, demanding eventual exorcism in "The Temple of Topactli."

The idea for "Looking Back" came to me from the cover of that year's "Best Horror Stories," annually put out by Daw paperbacks. It's a familiar horror movie image; a beautiful young woman looking into a mirror, to see some hideous thing, wearing her clothes, where she ought to be. Such dramatic images can be painted in more unsettling fashion by suggestion than by graphic delineation, and that was precisely what I set out to do in "Looking Back."

III. A Description of the Writing and Production of The Late, Great Doctor Death

I could write a tome the length of this entire volume on The Late, Great Doctor Death alone, and have, all of which writing is to be found in my various notebooks. For the reader's sake, I have expanded tremendous time and effort to condense all that material.

Four years elapsed between The Prize Exhibit and this, my first play. I was busy, all that time, supporting myself on numerous part-time jobs, to leave time free for my acting and writing. "Remembering Maggie" and The Prize Exhibit took up 1981 and 1982, along with revisions of Boniface and Last Rites. I spent 1983 turning The Prize Exhibit and Last Rites into as-yet-unsold novels. 1984 saw me write as many as one hundred or more pages in several uncompleted novels, and a few short stories. 1985 brought me only more short stories, and more part-time jobs, ending in a year's employment as group sales administrator and semi-professional actor at Scarlet's Dinner Theater, in Aurora, Colorado.

I had worked for Scarlet's producer in 1982, at the Aladdin Theater. The theater folded before my acting career could take off, and it was anticipated that Scarlet's could

revive it. Unfortunately, the critics completely ignored Dr. Carrasco in Man of La Mancha, and my John Adams in 1776 wasn't even seen by them -- I assumed the role two weeks into an eight-week run, after the previous leads left -- and the reviewers had already come and gone.

I still did not have my Equity card, when Scarlet's folded in the summer of 1986, one year after its opening. Out of a job and desperate, I decided to enroll in the Theatre Program of the Department of Speech at Kansas State University, through the prompting of Joel and Zoe Climenhaga, who had given me my first semi-pro summer job, nine years before. I went for the Master's degree with an emphasis in playwriting, because if I saw the inside of another acting class, I was going to throw up. At that, I had no intention of writing any plays -- I just wanted to write, and "playwriting" was the closest I could come.

The sole reason I wrote The Late, Great Doctor Death was because I was promised production, if I wrote a play. Zoe had read The Prize Exhibit, the novel of Last Rites and my short stories, and Joel had read "Remembering Maggie." On the strength of those pieces, Joel finagled me a slot in Kansas State's Purple Masque Theater, if I would write a play to put in it.

The Purple Masque is the size of a respectable tabletop, seating just a few more than one hundred people, with extremely limited facilities. Given its lack of space and capacity, I fell back completely on the concepts of the

French Neoclassical unities, and determined to write a small cast, single-set, two- or three-act play.

Time was of the essence, so I decided to write a simple character comedy, based on people I knew. I called the working script The Fabulous Five, deriving from a group of friends I've had since high school. I wanted to write about this one really magical night we all had together, which had just been a year or two before. In one of those weird self-fulfilling prophecies in which life imitates art, I had joked with them, that night, that I would put the bunch of us on stage, charge admission, and entertain an audience for two hours. They didn't believe me, of course.

I've had an uncanny knack for glibly prophesying such outrageous things into reality, however, and this was one of them. I knew from experience and feedback that my greatest strength was in dialogue, and I had played at stage restrictions with Last Rites, so The Fabulous Five seemed a pretty good bet for something I could realistically write. As is typical of me, I fired the rough-draft off as from a gun, in twelve days. The dialogue was flawless, but it had no plot or central character.

I argued that plays didn't have to have central characters, but the criticism was unanimous, so I entertained suggestions for revision. Joel had already suggested that I make one of the characters terminally ill, to enhance my theme of friendship surviving death -- it proved too nebulous, the way I had it. So, we came up with a subplot. It was so cliché and outdated that

I hated it, at first: make one of the characters a closet gay.

I hated it because it was too melodramatic, and just not an effective "shock" anymore. Also, I was seeing my character comedy rotating into a character drama, and I just didn't want to spend the time and emotional keel-hauling necessary to write a drama. It wouldn't let me go, though. The damned thing wanted to be a drama, despite my best efforts at keeping it light. That special night we'd all shared had been our last. Since that time, serious rifts had occurred, in more than one configuration, between us all. I hadn't wanted to deal with it all, but everyone who read the first draft sensed the ghosts beneath it. They were restless, hungry to be sated, just as Maggie's ghost in "Remembering Maggie" had been. And, remembering that story and her ghosts, I sat down with a soul full of lead in the middle of the ocean, to write exactly what I didn't want to do: a drama.

It took me two and a quarter months to finish, and I hated it. It ruined my life, during that time. I became irritated, subject to fits of despondency and black-dog depressions, generally atypical of me. I suffered headaches. I avoided people I knew, because I was all-around pretty unpleasant, during the writing. Joel and I even had a senseless fight over it one night, during which I almost threw the whole thing out the window. It was the same thing which had happened to me when I had written "Remembering Maggie" all over again, but intensified by the accelerated pace at

which I was working.

The major breakthrough on the script -- when I started to calm down and begin enjoying it -- was on Hallowe'en. Initially set over Christmas (the suicide season), Hallowe'en suddenly hit me. It's always been my favorite time of year, and the death imagery and masks appealed to my new sense of the characters. What if I made Bob, not a mere actor, but a new T.V. star, for "significance," and to give him something more than his friends to lose? And since he's dying -- what if "Death" were the character he was ironically identified with, like some cruel joke? And why end there -- why not have all the characters masquerading in the ultimate deception: masquerading as themselves?

I wove it into what I already had, and it worked. It gave the first act a new dramatic thrust -- the conflict between Bob and Ken, over his condition -- and colored the whole with subtextual meanings and symbolic overtones. Suddenly, I liked it.

When I was done, I read it over -- and I hated it, all over again. It took me a few weeks to get to like it. I felt exactly like Dr. Frankenstein. The entire project had been vomited forth in chunks that were stitched together and sewn backwards, changed, revised, trashed, renewed, restored, rearranged, until I just didn't recognize anything in it. It was a miracle that I ever finished it, and I hope I never have such a trying experience again.

It was suggested I might want to play Bob, and ironically,

I did not. At that time, I didn't trust myself to keep my own lines straight, let alone the names of the characters. Still, when I read it, I sometimes slip in the names of people the characters are based on.

It must be mentioned, in fairness to those people, should they ever read and/or see the play, that it is only quasi-autobiographical, for me and them. No one in the real group ever had the conflict expressed in the play, though some of the tensions present have existed, in roughly similar form. It is a work of fiction, and I hope that they, as well as the audience, will bear that in mind.

David Burris directed the production, which performed February 26 and 28, 1987, in Kansas State's Purple Masque Theater, juxtaposed in repertory with two other student-directed plays. To my thinking, the real star of the show was the set: it had the perfect homey-cluttered, friendly atmosphere I wanted, and it was achieved with virtually nothing. There were just a few chairs, really, and some interesting knick-knacks, but they managed to sustain the feel of a bachelor apartment, both seedy and inviting.

Mark Cross, a young, budding Robert Redford type, played Bob. He suffered two drawbacks; along with everyone else in the cast. He was inexperienced, and tone-deaf. The former showed itself in a curious arrogance and insecurity in line delivery, and the latter was something of an enigma to me. I don't think I'd met two legitimately tone-deaf people before, but all five of the cast members couldn't carry a tune to save

their lives -- and in this script it was a noticeable flaw. Aside from that, he had the secure and regal bearing I had envisioned for the character, and handled the dramatic moments pretty well. Mark, especially, improved with rehearsal.

Tony Soucek's Bern was a pleasant surprise. I had reservations about Tony because of a slight lisping quality I had perceived in his voice -- for that role, a serious mistake, and Tony had no control over it. If Bern comes off as anything other than a truck driver or hard-assed Marine, his character is ruined. Still, Tony was competent, and had a good feel for the drama. The confrontation scene between him and Bob was wonderful.

My personal favorite in the show was Sean Comer, as Jerry. Jerry is a tough, thankless role, I think -- but Sean found so much to pull out of the character that it was a joy to watch him. He had an entertaining, self-deprecating Rodney Dangerfield feel to him.

Steven Baker was the one actor we were instantly agreed upon, for Cal. We nicknamed him "buzz-cut" for his peculiar, short hairstyle. He was weird and likable, with a radio announcer's voice and just the right kind of chaotic energy to him. Cal can easily run away with the show, if the others can't match him, and it took some work to do so. He did have one problem, though, which he never really overcame: he wandered a lot, and tied-in to the furniture. Also, there was a repetitive vocal pattern he couldn't always break.

I was worried most about David's choice for Ken, Pat Mahoney, a fresh-faced kid with only a modicum of talent and no experience. David cast him for the vulnerability he had, and a certain lovableness that is difficult to define. He never did get much polish, but he jelled well with the others, and his quality did work.

David was most skilled in that area: creating an ensemble. I'd given him a solidly-crafted ensemble piece, and he pulled that out very nicely. He had a good sensitivity for the characters, which I think communicated to the audience. He also picked music that ironically matched very well with the action on stage. His greatest drawback was in time: David works very slowly. The cast wasn't out of book until the week before the show opened and they had a tendency to relax into the script so much that it sometimes disappeared completely, replaced instead by chaotic, uncontrolled improvisation. Also, he was remarkably perceptive at pulling out fine subtleties, but often ignored or completely missed the obvious.

It is still my contention that The Late, Great Doctor Death should run 100 to 110 minutes, at 50 to 55 minutes each act. David, however, couldn't pull the show in at under two hours playing time. With an intermission, that was ten or fifteen minutes too long. Curiously, though, it worked. The length was in Act Two, making the play bottom-heavy -- a flaw, in my book -- but it performed really wonderfully; better, I think, than the first act ever did. David did marvelous work,

in that second act.

I all but absented myself from rehearsals, and never butted in -- only observed. I've been an actor too long not to know the director's job, and I didn't want to complicate it in any way. Certainly, there were things I would have done differently, but I was comfortable enough with David to leave him be. The playwright should never do more than answer questions, once rehearsal has begun, and occasionally authorize script changes, should they prove necessary. .

The opening night audience took well to it. I listened, from backstage. Partially, this is because I am a coward, in this one regard -- it is impossible to describe the feeling a playwright experiences, watching his own work being watched by an audience. Primarily, though, I didn't want to hinder the enjoyment of the audience by my presence, in case that should make them feel self-conscious. I got far more from listening to my words than seeing them performed, anyway.

As I had hoped, the audience continually laughed, in varying degrees, all through the show. It was sort of a "ripple effect," ranging from titters to guffaws, in an ebb-and-tide. The final confrontation brought a sudden silence that made way for the proverbial pin drop, until the final curtain. That was the most gratifying thing -- I had endeavored to tickle the audience with a feather, then suddenly turn it into a knife -- and it worked.

Without exaggeration, the applause was thunderous, deciding me in that moment to writing another play. Closing

night was far less auspicious. We were sleeted out by a last-minute, February weather twist, and the resultant audience of 20 to 30 people was far less responsive, though the show was as good as it ever was. The Late, Great Doctor Death bowed out, not with a bang, but a whimper.

For my own part, I have virtually no opinion of the script. I remember writing it, but it feels distant from me. Sometimes I like it, sometimes I don't. I'm fairly ambivalent to the type of script it is -- a nebulous, naturalistic creature I call a "character drama."

Character dramas are those scripts with no plot to speak of, just an interaction between characters. They aren't dramas, though they contain dramatic moments. They aren't comedies, though they are often funny. They aren't anything, really, but 90 minutes to two hours worth of conversation and group therapy.

The form has been around at least since Emile Zola introduced naturalism to literature, and caught on dramatically. Anton Chekov described his The Sea Gull as having "little plot, lots of conversation, and ten tons of love" (or words to that effect).

Since 1981, the character drama has enjoyed a tremendous popularity in the movies, with such films as Diner, My Dinner With Andre, The Big Chill, St. Elmo's Fire, The Breakfast Club, and Stand By Me. These movies can't be synopsized, any more than The Late, Great Doctor Death can. They don't have sufficient plot to be synopsized. They're about a lot of

things, and nothing particular. They're just about people.

For all their formlessness, they're surprisingly hard to write. To paraphrase the dying words of actor Edmund Keane: "Drama is easy ... character drama junk is hard." There is no criterion to decide if a character drama is good or bad, except whether or not you liked it.

I neither like nor dislike my own. As I've said, I'm ambivalent to the form. Sure, sometimes I think it's neat. Other times, I shrug, and say "Junk," with a smile.

One thing I'm sure of: if all my plays are published, The Late, Great Doctor Death will see more production than any of them, by mere virtue of the facts that it is contemporary, has a single set, a small cast, is the kind of thing that is "popular," and is easily digestible.

IV. Writing and Directing The Grave Affair

It is not possible to say where The Grave Affair began. Creativity, in general, is a tough road to track. Mary Shelley claimed to have gotten the entire idea for Frankenstein in a single nightmare, but one can't help thinking that her own travels and life experiences with the English Romantics in Germany had something to do with it, and that the idea had been fulminating in her brain for quite some time before she simply "had a nightmare" and whipped the novel off in record time.

Similarly, my own inspirations for The Grave Affair go as far back as perhaps 1965 or 1966. Like Mary Shelley, I had the entire play envisioned, start to finish, in a single half-hour before I went to bed one night. It took me only twelve days to write the first draft, and fewer than twenty-eight -- with amazingly minimal revision -- to roll the script out of my typewriter as it appears later in this report, which is how it was performed on October 8, 9, and 10 of 1987, in Kansas State University's Purple Masque Theater, under my own direction.

To have produced a script the caliber of The Grave Affair, in only forty days, can only be considered Herculean; at the risk of demythologizing the feat, I have taken a great deal of

time and trouble to elucidate the very lengthy creative process that must have occurred to enable it. I'm not sure I entirely know, myself. But I do have a grasp on many of the presuming elements I had been exposed to, that -- consciously and/or unconsciously -- consolidated into the award-winning play I wrote and presented.

Always an avid fan of horror movies and tragedies -- and when well-written, the two genres are one -- I was exposed to both when I was no more than eight or nine, in the form of a Hammer/Universal "B"-movie entitled The Curse of the Werewolf. It was an epic tragedy, about the illegitimate son of a society-made rapist and a peasant girl, born on Christmas Day, who was orphaned after birth and raised by a nobleman "uncle." The lad, Leon, is a born werewolf, and his adopted family conceal the awful truth from him, locking him up on nights of the full moon and submerging his animal nature with tender, loving care. As he leaves home in young adulthood, however, sexual passions reawaken his curse, and poor Leon returns to his double life as a nocturnal murderer. Leon discovers the nature of his curse, but disdains his family's plan to lock him up and care for him, as his true love for a certain young lady of breeding seems to keep him from his terrible transformation. Imprisoned for one of his murders, however, he is kept from her -- and he escapes from his inadequate prison in his lupine form, terrorizing the enraged populace who pursue him, until his uncle ends his tragic plight with a silver bullet cast years before.

This movie was one of my first exposures to tragedy and it had a lasting effect. The horror and pity I felt for the doomed Leon provided a catharsis that still affects me. I couldn't know at the time, of course, that there were elements from more than one classical tragedy in it: Oedipus Rex, for instance, and The Bacchae. But the tragic form is solid and recognizable, no matter its trappings.

Not surprisingly, tragedy and tragic heroes proved to be my forte, as a developing actor. When I turned to scriptwriting, it was tragedy I began with, and it is still with tragedy I continue to experiment and develop. Shortly before I acquired my Bachelor's Degree in December of 1979, I came across the novel that The Curse of the Werewolf had been based on: The Werewolf of Paris. Written by American Guy Endore in 1933, the book was (and is) exceedingly hard to come by.

The bare plot of the book and the movie were the same, though the action was transported to 18th century Spain, instead of Paris, during the Franco-Prussian War and Commune of 1871; presumably the movie-maker had as hard a time as I did, when directing The Grave Affair, coming up with authentic costumes and props of the period -- or even being able to research them, for that matter.

Endore's novel was a curious blend of history and social satire, less a tragedy than a bizarre and fascinating black comedy. It was witty, sexy, scary, sometimes kinky, and terribly adult. Endore's primary thesis was that Bertrand

Caillet (the original Leon character of the movie) was no more a werewolf than the rest of revolutionary Paris -- perhaps only a more open and honest animal, when all is said and done. He had the character conceal his homicidal impulses in the guise of a National Guard sergeant, his crimes unnoticed against the backdrop of the war, and the grislier horrors of the resultant Commune. The novel was rangy, labyrinthine, and convoluted, lacking the dramatic form the film provided it. It was more a series of vignettes, clever anecdotes, to compare the actions of one unfortunate werewolf with the sins of a greater homicidal society. The questions of whether Bertrand actually undergoes physical transformation or is merely a misunderstood (and extreme) psychological aberrant is never answered, and no silver bullet dispatches him; instead, while in a drug-induced delirium at the mental hospital in which he has been incarcerated, he plunges to his death while fantasizing his escape with his lady love (who was, in reality, a mongoloid idiot from the next cell). Such is the note of wry humor in Endore's entire story, that the tragedy is continually a simultaneous comedy.

The book became one of my favorites, just as the movie still is. I was taken with Endore's juxtaposition of a single homicidal psychopath against the backdrop of the horrors of war, just as I was with Hans Hellmut Kirst's in The Night of the Generals. I recommend both novels -- for those unfamiliar with Kirst's, it deals with a Nazi general who moonlights as a slasher of prostitute civilians; is it any more a crime than

his daily activities in the war zone? There is perhaps one element of this novel that found its way into The Grave Affair, as well: the psychopathic General Toht (a pun on the German word for "death") is ultimately confronted with evidence of his crimes, and saves his honor by pronouncing death sentence on himself, so his crimes need never become public.

The idea propounded in both stories became a primary basis for my first screenplay, Boniface. Shortly before I left Detroit, I came across a book on abnormal psychology, in a used book bin, which revived my interest in this plot line in a new way. It was an incredibly well-researched history of superstition and mental pathology called The Vampire, by Ornella Volta. Among its fascinating case studies was that of one Sergeant Francois Bertrand, court martialled in France in 1848 for necrophagic activities (specifically, sexually violating corpses, dismembering them, and consuming their flesh). Endore's "Bertrand Caillet" consumed freshly buried corpses, on nights he could find no living victims. I hadn't realized that Endore had based his novel on a true story, and discovering the fact, I sought out more information on Francois Bertrand, over the years.

The occult and abnormal psychology are connected studies. I had minored in psychology as an undergraduate, and had long been a student of abnormal psychology and occult history. My library on the two subjects is extensive -- I continued to expand it, and found very little about Bertrand on the way.

Most information recorded about him comes from his own confession and trial transcript, and is all in French. Just like the bizarre witchcraft trial of Urbain Grandier in 1634 Paris, it would have been hard to research. Had it not been for Aldous Huxley's scholarly book, The Devils of Loudon, the English-speaking world might never have known much about the Grandier affair, which has since spawned a John Whiting play and Ken Russell movie, The Devils. And had it not been for the scholarly efforts of one Dr. Bernhardt J. Hurwood, I might never have found more about Bertrand, save very brief and bald mention in abnormal psychology text books.

Considered one of this country's foremost experts on the occult, Hurwood recounts Bertrand's story in two of his books: Vampires, Werewolves and Ghouls and Terror By Night. Volta wrote primarily of the man's court-martial, and Hurwood dug a little deeper, telling the story of how Bertrand was arrested and the aftermath of the trial.

Between the two of them, I got the following story. In 1847 France, just before the second Communal Uprising, a series of grave violations at all the cemeteries in the country caused an outraged indignation among the populace. It was many months before the perpetrator was caught, during which he achieved not some little notoriety. The best efforts of the police were inadequate to apprehend him. He eluded sentries, traps and guard dogs with equal ease. Rarely glimpsed, and then in bad lighting, in a spooky setting, he was said to be a werewolf, an incredibly agile figure capable of acrobatic feats.

The Surete eventually discovered what they believed to be his point of entry at Montparnasse Cemetery, and set an explosive trap for him. It worked. The man was wounded, leaving behind a clue in his escape: a tattered fragment of a military uniform. Within two weeks, the wounded Sgt. Bertrand was discovered and apprehended. He immediately rendered a full confession.

Haunted by bizarre sexual fantasies and an unaccountable, periodic violence toward inanimate objects, Bertrand had always been excited only by the thought of sex with the dead, and with cutting them up to squeeze their innards and eat them. Nothing could prevent him, when the urge was upon him. After one of his episodes, he would sleep as if in a coma for many hours, and have disturbing nightmares. He could not understand or control his impulses.

Physically fit and alert, Bertrand had no difficulty eluding all hindrances. He had stepped in traps before, and simply took them apart when caught -- his pain threshold, like most of his senses, was far less acute than most men's. When approached by sentries, he rolled into open graves and played dead. His eyes seemed to have virtually a hypnotic power, as he could literally stare guard dogs into submission and silence -- even when they were with their sentry masters.

Bertrand was twenty-five years old, a Ph.D. from the seminary at Langres, and a soldier by choice -- he refused the commission he was entitled to. The movement of his outfit gave him easy access to all of France's cemeteries, and made

where he would strike next unpredictable. He was, by all accounts, a very handsome, charming and personable young man, of meticulous dress and habits, and otherwise high moral fibre. He was popular with the ladies, but rarely slept with them, preferring his more unusual nocturnal escapades. He was offended at the suggestion that he might be homosexual, and was inordinately proud of the fact that he had never slept with a married woman. An entirely pleasant and cooperative defendant, he had a slight tendency toward occasional cockiness and performing for the onlookers at the trial. His men were an excellently disciplined outfit, and fond of their sergeant. (Sergeants, at that time, were not promoted, but more "elected" by popular vote.)

Bertrand was given the maximum sentence of a year in prison, which he peaceably served. After his release, nothing more was recorded about him. He was a young man of means and station, and so presumably found gainful employment in another city. As for his nocturnal activities? Nothing more is known. Doubtfully cured, he probably just became more cautious. In many ways, he was the Oliver North of his day.

My studies also uncovered two other interesting cases of French necrophiliacs, above and beyond the most famous one, Marshall Gilles de Rais. One was about twenty years after Bertrand -- about the time of the Franco-Prussian conflict -- who was also military, the unnamed son of a high-ranking officer. The matter was handled quietly after having easily been solved, to avoid scandal.

The other was at the turn of the century, a man named Victor Ardisson. Ardisson was a benign psychotic and a true necrophiliac -- not a necrophage, as was Bertrand -- who had a fixation on dead girls of adolescent age or younger. He kept the head of one special girl, "his fiancée," in a sack in his closet, which also contained "precious objects" (worthless cut glass). He fantasized that she floated about the room and spoke to him, from time to time.

Deemed insane (Bertrand was not), Ardisson was Dr. Alexis Epaulard's single best case study and most model patient. Mild-mannered and urbane, "The Vampire of Muy" was a tender and loving soul, who just happened to be acutely aberrant. Like Bertrand, he suffered certain sense-defects. His pain threshold was all but nonexistent, he enjoyed but couldn't remember music (not even the national anthem), and had an exceptionally poor sense of taste and smell. Ardisson periodically escaped from his cell to have "liaisons" with recently deceased village girls, and sometimes brought back mementos -- such as his "fiancée's" head -- which were eventually detected and removed (until he would bring back the next one).

For all the horrific surface appearance of his deeds, Ardisson could only be considered a meek and tender soul, and genuinely loving, in a sort of infantile, child-like manner. Both he and Bertrand were decidedly unusual -- but neither was in any way a threat to anyone living.

Two other famous necrophiliac cases, I am sure, were

hovering about my brain at the time I wrote The Grave Affair. One was Edgar Allen Poe, so obsessed and haunted by death that he channelled all of his appreciable creativity into that direction, and by his own admission, "could only love, in death" (or words to that effect). Though it is doubtful he actually ever engaged in a necrophiliac affair, his soul was plainly -- at least in part -- with Bertrand and Ardisson.

The other was the case of the "goodbar murderer," a true tragedy if ever there was one. The famous double-lived schoolteacher of the deaf who all but brought on her own murder by another lonely and tormented soul was recounted best in Lacey Fosburgh's non-fiction account, Closing Time. One of the very first of literally dozens of non-fiction crime stories I have read, the tragedy and bizarreness of its culmination has lived with me. After killing the poor girl in a fit of passionate rage, the murderer made love to her. When confronted with the shockingness of the deed and asked why, he answered simply and sadly, words to the effect of: "She looked so lonely and cold. I only wanted to make her warm again." Something in those words haunted me, making my heart break in pity for both the victim and the killer. It was like the coda to an epic poem of universal loneliness, the sadness of death's parting.

It was partly this that I had been trying to capture in "Remembering Maggie," using the horror of the imagery as a vehicle for the theme. I had consciously been attempting to write a modern gothic in Poe-esque style, which has since

been a continuing experiment and goal of mine.

As early as June of 1986, I began a draft of a play called Bertrand, driven by the desire to tell the bizarre story of the French army sergeant in my own style. In design and execution, it was a free-flowing narrative in the manner of Peter Shaffer's Equus, which I greatly admired. I got no more than ten or fifteen minutes worth of material completed before abandoning the project, however. The cast was growing too large, the telling of the story was too convoluted, and despite the fact that I had a good angle -- using Bertrand as a socio-political pawn in a power struggle -- I just couldn't get the focus I wanted from it. I abandoned Bertrand to the "back-burner," fairly well convinced that it would remain forever there, and purposely forgot about it.

Fate, however, renewed the dead idea. In January or February of 1987, in Modern European Theatre class, taught by Dr. Harold J. Nichols, there was an option of a final project in place of a final research paper, which was to write a play in a style akin to one of those studied. A one-act would suffice, but, never one to do things in halves, I immediately resolved to write a full-length play. I kept my radar open for ideas and in less than three weeks, Bertrand was revived as The Grave Affair.

The trigger was a play written by Eugene Brieux of the French Academy in 1900, The Red Robe. A transitional play from melodrama to dramatic realism, it was a four-act about corruption in the criminal justice system. Brieux's realistic

plot and settings housed melodramatic, passionate characters, and bordered on the line of poetic drama. The title of the play derived from the prosecutor's garb of highest honor -- purchased by innocent blood -- and becomes a bloody red robe at the end, when the corrupt prosecutor is stabbed in rough-justice retribution by an innocent he has destroyed.

Within a week of reading it, I had my familiar "overnight" idea, a resurrection of the dead Bertrand, but in complete focus. I could not tell my story in modern, formless format -- but within the unities, utilizing more than one set and a period style, I not only could tell the story, but tell it superbly. I abandoned trying to tell a factual story about the Bertrand court-martial, assuming dramatic license for my ends. We had gone over French plays all that week, the sum plot of which boiled down, in my mind, to "joie d'affaires." Inspired by that, and by the poetic drama inherent in Brieux's title, a brilliant idea hit me: change Bertrand's name to "Grave." His crime was an "affair of the grave;" the situation in Paris was a "grave affair;" his trial would be dubbed "The Grave Affair;" and if the love interest I wanted was present, it would be another "Grave affair." I commandeered the historical character for my own poetic/dramatic ends, making him -- and the story -- entirely my own.

Utilizing three or four sets, I could see the entire play's structure like a mould, in my mind. All that remained was to pour the dialogue into the characters in the mould, and

let it all solidify. And the rest, as they say, is history.

I refreshed my history of the Franco-Prussian War (retaining Endore's idea, for my own purposes) even as I wrote it, with Alastair Horne's The Fall of Paris. In keeping with my socio-political angle, I chose the precise week in January of 1871 when France was at its maximum political unrest -- the week in which the war with the Prussians was just concluding, and in which the French first started drawing their own blood, for my play's setting. Grave's trial became a tie-in with that day, when the Communards stormed the Hotel de Ville. I found numerous historical ironies to play on, some conscious, some not. The action occurring on theoretically the same day as the Hotel de Ville riot was one. Colonel Montmartre's name was another; he represents order at any cost, in my play, and it was from Montmartre Cemetery that the Communards were blasted out of their final stronghold -- which was at Pere Lachaise, where my play begins. And, interestingly, the warrant officer who put down the bloodthirsty Communards in that initial Hotel de Ville riot was named "Bertrand." (I also can't help chuckling to recall that, while I was writing this play, I lived at 726 Bertrand Street.)

For background research, I was also indebted to Frederick Brown's Pere Lachaise; Elysium As Real Estate and a chapter in Robert Anton Wilson's historical novel, The Widow's Son, which gave me some fascinating insights into the history of the infamous Cimetiere des Innocents, and

the Parisian view of death in general. There is another irony present here, which history buffs may note: I refer to cremation in all four of my acts; France, with the worst sanitation/death-disposal in Europe was the first nation to propose cremation on the continent and the very last to adopt it.

Having only recently discovered it, there is a final, personal irony I feel constrained to report, before analyzing those I deliberately placed for dramatic purposes in the play, and the play's structure in general. Guy Endore, billed as an American, was born in 1901, undoubtedly on this continent. From his name, and the fact that he wrote almost exclusively about France and French history, there can be little doubt that his father or grandfather was actually in France during the Franco-Prussian conflict and the Communard uprising. His love of France -- even for its failings -- is apparent in his works, two of which have at least partially inspired three of mine.

As a Rux, I am only second or third generation American. (I'm still not positive whether my grandfather was born on this soil or in our native land.) Our roots are German, though we have had question about our actual origin, especially since the present name has been shortened, and we don't know what it used to be. My father had researched the Rux line to our entry in America, specifically from where -- and found the original name; unfortunately, he died with that knowledge. From his notes, I recently discovered (along with

some proofs from materials in old trunks and desk drawers) at least the first half of the original name -- "Ruchx" -- and that it is, in fact, German. Specifically, it is Prussian. My great-grandfather, Augustus Ruchx, appears to have emigrated to America in approximately (the nearest I can figure) 1878, from Berlin, which was at that time the capital of Prussia.

It is perhaps of only passing interest, but still interesting, nonetheless, that the man for whom I obviously have some kindred spark of soul and so many similar pursuits had direct relatives (more than likely) involved in a war which fascinated both of us -- and that I have direct descendancy from a man on the opposite side of it, who was there when the French Empire fell and the German Empire reached its height. Endore's immediate ancestors and mine both saw the goose-stepping Prussians' victory march; his in Paris, mine in Berlin.

For purposes of the class project, The Grave Affair was patterned largely after The Red Robe, as a four-act drama of social realism, dealing with societal problems of Brioux's day (he would have been twelve, during the Franco-Prussian War). Brioux chose to deal with the problems of political ambitions and the legal system; I utilized the same, adding those of war, government and disposal of the dead. Both plays utilize three realistic sets in the four acts (repeating one), and outwardly comply with the French Neoclassical unities: i.e., implied (though in actuality unlikely) twenty-four hour

time lapse, all occurring in Paris, with an uninterrupted realistic time lapse for each act. The characters and dialogue are outwardly realistic. Brieux and I both employ a recognizable and melodramatic (though perfectly credible) red-robed lawyer-villain, who shatters young lovers with his chicanery, and who meets a violent end through his actions. Our characters are slightly melodramatic and subsequently passionate, and we conclude our plays with incomplete resolutions (though deducible beyond the final curtain through the action of the play), punishing evil, but leaving virtue unrewarded. Brieux and I both seem to hold a view that virtue is, in fact, victimized.

Brieux does not succeed in perfectly crafting social realism, and neither do I. It is often a trademark of great plays that they step beyond their disciplined bounds, transcending their specified genre in some way. Brieux's play more closely approximates poetic drama, at least in symbolism and theme. So does The Grave Affair.

The Grave Affair employs deliberate ironies, above and beyond those already mentioned. To mention a few: neither Grave nor Ilse is able to consummate love in life; they each fall in love over the resemblance the other has to their dead loved one. Grave begins his necrophiliac activities immediately following his fiancée's death (only in death has he been able to communicate with her), and Ilse only fulfils her love with him after death, placing the ring from her dead lover's finger onto Grave's, completing an ironic circle. The

Parisians are more concerned with the Siege of Pere Lachaise -- their city of the dead -- than they are with the siege of the living city of Paris. Grave's eating and violation of the dead merely punctuates Paris' destructive/necrophiliac treatment of herself (elaborating on Endore's central theme); Grave attacks decomposition, while everything in Paris decomposes -- relationships, politics, even the uniforms. He is literally and figuratively the target of Paris, and literally and figuratively stripped of his rank before the trial. The war with the Germans ironically is all that is saving Paris from war with herself; the French windows first blown out by the Germans at the beginning of the siege are later destroyed by the French themselves, and the very civilians Regardez serves so ceaselessly to protect turn on and perhaps mortally wound him. The church makes its last stand for supremacy in an age of enlightenment and literally falls to its demise -- not completely dead, but still exerting influence, even as a comatose cripple. Ilse finds more satisfaction tending to the wounded enemy than she does with her own people, even when she is universally despised for it, and Grave ultimately prefers "the understanding of the dead" to the senseless isolation and destructive lack of understanding in the living.

There are also traces of the naturalistic movement in the play. Ample groundwork is laid to demonstrate that the actions of all characters involved proceeds directly from their environment. Just as Gerhardt Hauptman's The Weavers has an

"offstage protagonist," The Grave Affair utilizes an "offstage antagonist" in Coldert's bloodthirsty mob. Grave's suicide may ultimately be interpreted not as an altruistic martyrdom, but a masturbatory pinnacle of self-achievement -- the final and ultimate orgasm.

That The Grave Affair is a tragedy, there can be no question. What is unclear, however, is whether it should be deemed "classical" or "romantic." It is structured entirely classically, and Grave conforms to the requirements of a classic hero: he is of noble family, respected, educated, accomplished, brave, self-sacrificing -- and his necrophilia is, of course, his tragic flaw. Taken in the context of its illusion -- that it is an undiscovered Brioux script -- it would be considered contemporary, and possibly classical.

At the time of the play's writing, however, I was reacquainting myself with a perennial favorite, Cyrano de Bergerac, by Rostand. The Grave Affair has much in common with it, as a romantic tragedy. Again, both are classically structured -- Rostand's down to verse for the text -- and Cyrano's action plainly violates the "24-hour" rule, where mine can more credibly be conceived to take place in perhaps a week than a day, but is not plainly declared. Grave and Ilse do not speak in verse, but their language is stylized and lyrical when conversing with each other, in that style deemed "actor's poetry." Like Cyrano and Roxanne, their romance is never allowed to find fulfillment in life, but survives beyond death.

In other words, the structure of The Grave Affair is classical, but its thematic content is more closely akin to the romantic tragedy. Also, given the fact that it was written about events in 1871 Paris by an author in 1987 America, the historified setting combines with the theme to strengthen the claim of a "romance."

In the realm of what we call poetic drama, there is perhaps a higher octave -- or at least a different one -- in the "allegorical drama," such as Coxe and Chapman's Billy Budd, adapted from Herman Melville's novella. I had been exposed to Billy Budd as an undergraduate, but only recently read it. It bears many similarities to The Grave Affair, but it is not as solidly structured. Melville's Moby Dick has long been a personal favorite of mine, and is also written in allegorical style.

Though it should be apparent to the reader of imagination by a mere perusal of the character names, The Grave Affair was consciously written in allegorical terms. The title character's name alone stands as a solid indicator, not to mention such others as a captain who continually sounds the note of dire warning being named "Regardez," a journalistic helpmate to the hero whose name is virtually "companion," and a villain whose name is overtly satirized in the play as "cold air." Each character represents a larger worldly body or concept, with Ilse herself as Goethe's "eternal womanly, that draws us ever upward" (or words to that effect).

What similarities exist between The Grave Affair and

Billy Budd are entirely coincidental, as I only in the past month have any recollection of reading and seeing it (in the much better dramatically structured Peter Ustinov film version), but the similarities are striking. Both plays are allegorical dramas set in a wartime military trial, in an atmosphere of threatened mutiny; the tragic act in both is caused when an innocent, goaded by a superior Satanic figure, accidentally strikes that superior dead in an articulate rage (which is caused by "Satan's" goading; and both, after philosophical discussion of law vs. justice, conclude with the martyrdom of the innocent, for order's sake.

As a play, Billy Budd is dry, simplistic, and curiously anticlimatic. Its structure is weak, and it insufficiently establishes the background of the mutinous threat to justify Billy's execution. The Ustinov film version is vastly superior, accommodating for these weaknesses in the playscript, but I still find it inferior to The Grave Affair.

On its own merits, judged independently, The Grave Affair is a structural masterpiece. I was experimenting with what I call "sequence storytelling," an idea I got from reading the "Quatermass" BBC serial scripts of Nigel Kneale, and which was employed with varying success on the BBC's more famous Dr. Who series. Kneale's four Quatermass adventures were each written in six half-hour episodes, each one of which was virtually a self-contained story; but that, when combined with the other five, became a greater overall whole.

There was no reason that same principle couldn't be

applied to the structure of a stage play. I envisioned The Grave Affair as four separate stories, which could interlock variously to create two other separate stories, and combine all together for the overall story. I found the technique to be so solid that I found numerous other ways in which the full play could be broken down and performed. Writing within that concept, the discipline instinctively creates dramatic plateaus where they need to be, keeping the play vital and continually intriguing. With the possible exception of the fourth act standing alone (which in any event would not be especially entertaining), I believe the play can be performed successfully in all the ways I enumerate on the first breakdown page. Dramatically, it could even sustain a mathematically proportionate fifth act division by dividing Act Three in half, and might be performable in more ways than I list. I intend to experiment further with this form, in future -- the structure is so solid that bridges can be built out of it.

Difficult to exactly define, I ultimately call The Grave Affair a Gothic romance. Literarily, it hearkens to such stories as Victor Hugo's The Hunchback of Notre Dame and Gaston Leroux's The Phantom of the Opera, or possibly to what may have been the forerunner of the Gothic, Goethe and Schiller's Weimar classicism. It is an option for the creation of "optimistic" tragedy, in an age that denies that the tragic form can continue. Formulaically, it can best be described as outwardly classical and realistic form and trappings,

poetic/melodramatic characters/situations, and a romantic/uplifting theme. If the formula seems at all contradictory, it must be remembered that Goethe and Schiller took the world by storm with it; that it is directly akin to (and may even have directly inspired) the Gothic and poetic drama modes; and that these forms, though often criticized for a lack of purity, have proved to be immensely popular and enduring since their discovery.

Having analyzed The Grave Affair structurally and dramatically, and providing as complete a history of its creative components and development as possible, what remains is to discuss the play's Purple Masque production in Manhattan, Kansas, on October 8, 9, and 10, of 1987.

I initially disdained the option of directing the play myself for a variety of reasons. First, I was working on other projects. Second, I considered the facility and talent pool of Kansas State hopelessly inadequate out of which to pull a decent production of the play. Third, directing -- at least for the stage -- does not fulfill me anywhere near as much as acting or writing. And fourth, I was busy teaching public speaking classes, to make ends meet.

I finally agreed to do it because I frankly couldn't pass up the opportunity. Stage directing is more often an administrative chore than a creatively fulfilling experience, reminding me of Bill Cosby's quip: "I have seen the boss' job -- and I don't want it." But it is in directing that control lies, and if I wanted to see the play done as I saw

it, I couldn't rely on someone else's "vision," which too often means the commandeering of the playwright's work toward bastardized self-aggrandizement. Writing, acting, and directing may be equated with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost of the Temple of Theater. The writer, God the Father, provides the whole cosmic blueprint; the actor, God the Son, provides the living, breathing embodiment of the plan; and the director, God the Holy Spirit, invisibly weaves the whole together. So long as each member of the Trinity maintains his own function, all runs as well as can be expected. Unfortunately, the inexperienced too often attempt to change places, or commandeer more than their allotted space. The Son wrests control from the Holy Ghost, or the Holy Ghost insists on also being the Father. God's "tension headache" can greatly be reduced if the Father and Holy Ghost are one, so that at least they are in complete agreement with one another.

There is a creative schizophrenia which occurs from the hat-changing, and only the experienced are encouraged to attempt it. A tremendous amount of objectivity is required to write the play, alone, the playwright finding himself in the process fragmented to argue credibly every point of view before the concluding synthesis; to then step into the director's shoes and analyze the play requires an even greater objectivity. The playwright has to schizophrenically dissociate himself completely from his own work, and view it as a neutral party would. The few capable of maintaining their sanity and self through this trying process deserve

admiration, and the title "auteur."

Barring an extreme panic attack on the first readthrough of the script by the cast, after which I attempted to abort the project entirely, I had no problems. Whatever vestige of the playwright that remained was, on that night, sent fleeing in terror, leaving only a director with an over-acidic stomach, a firm resolve of patience and determination, and urine in his boots.

Dr. Norman J. Fedder, in whose Advanced Playwriting class The Grave Affair had been given an early reading (as, incidentally, also had been the case with The Late, Great Doctor Death during an earlier semester), offered me backup support if I needed it. More importantly, he, too, had become completely familiar with the script by this time. Dr. Harold J. Nichols, Head of the Department of Speech, in whose class in Modern European Theatre The Grave Affair had been written, also promised backup support and was most understanding. Joel Climenhaga, of course, had worked with me from the beginning of my ever writing plays. Unfortunately, by the time I was faced with this production Joel had left Kansas State University, having accepted the position of a visiting professor at Tarkio College in Missouri; fortunately, however, he remained in close contact with me by mail and telephone (I don't know how many times I talked with him by telephone, sometimes either getting him out of bed or keeping him out of bed late at night to do so), as well as through occasional visits he made back to Kansas. The understanding, support,

and companionship of these three teachers was most helpful to me -- and in spite of the acid in my stomach, I determined to wash the yellow stuff out of my boots and march my soldiers on.

Stephanie Sikes and Terri Luesenhop, my assistant director and stage manager, provided me with moral support, courage, and a tremendous number of helpful ideas in time of trouble. I was blessed with an outstanding technical crew and sympathetic friends and family members -- not to mention a cast who made up for in enthusiasm what they lacked in experience -- who all went far above and beyond the call of duty in putting together a show which, for all its limitations, was eminently better than I believed possible.

I called my cast "The Dirty Dozen," since I had twelve of them (with doubling) and their situation -- our situation -- was so impossible from the start. Many of them weren't even theater majors, let alone actors. For the majority, it was their first college show -- for some, their first show, period.

I knew from the start that I wouldn't find the people I wanted for the roles, but solidly in the director mode, I discarded all previous conceptions and looked for what would work. I wasn't going to get an Oliver Reed and Judith Chapman for Grave and Ilse, but in Joel Herndon and Stephanie Hug I got an interesting blend that was like having Anthony Perkins and Ingrid Bergman. Joel had a handsome but strange look about him, sort of a dark, demented Romeo, full of nervous energy and intensity; Stephanie had Bergman's youthful good looks

in a Germanic kind of cast, and an open lovable vulnerability in her style that was reminiscent of Natassja Kinsky. Both of them -- in common with the rest of the cast -- grew tremendously as actors, before the run was over.

For professionals, Act Two would have been fairly simple, but dealing with amateurs -- and extremely young ones at that -- the poetic monologues/soliliquies and the love story proved the hardest going. I have to give Joel and Steph credit: first night off the book, she had her lines down, letter perfect, and Joel was about ninety-five percent. They were a little scared of the material's delivery, the same way I had been ten years before (at about their age) of performing Lillian Hellman's wooden-line-dated The Children's Hour. The material in Act Two is extremely adult, requiring a confidence in the actors I was afraid I wouldn't get -- but, hard work paid off for all of us, and I was immensely pleased with the end result.

Act One, similarly, needed a great deal of development. My most inexperienced actors were in it, but they were industrious. (I privately call the act "Abbot and Costello in the French Foreign Legion.") I couldn't find a Herbert Lom for Regardez -- so I contented myself with Mark Banks' crisp, authoritative career-captain (I envisioned more Lom's put-upon bureaucrat-on-the-edge), and two clean-cut, very boyishly charming young men named Robert Brown and Roger Burns for my world-wise straight-man and his comically bumbling sidekick. I discovered that it is surprisingly difficult to teach

low-brow comic pratfalls to novices, but they fared all right, when all was said and done.

Act Three, which I had envisioned as the Monster That Ate All Rehearsal Time, proved to be a walk in the park. It required less time than any of them, magically falling into place like jello in a mould. The only real problems that act ever had were mine, not problems of the actors. I had to revise the set and reblock a couple of times, to manage considerable body traffic in a space with the world's worst sightlines, but it flowed with the beauty of clockwork. It began well and consistently improved, always the best act in the show.

The only actor problem in that act was the understandable one of keeping cues straight, but I had splendid actors to do it. Matt Mazur's Colonel Montmartre had a Gregory Peck officiousness and authority about him that I liked, but had to shape and tone down considerably. At his best, by opening, he was crisp and clean, with all the earnestness and conviction of the young William Shatner (back in the days before he became a caricature of himself). His Act Four work, especially, was superb; Montmartre carries a lot of dry but necessary material in the resolution, and Matt gave it a vitality I will always remember.

He and Thayne Emrich, as Cardinal Coldert, I thought were the best in the show. I wouldn't get a heavy, aged Boris Karloff for the Cardinal, but Thayne gave me a remarkable performance. His look and quality were amazingly like Joel

Grey's and he plugged into the role perfectly, not under or overplaying, as that role could easily degenerate into. He was mellifluous, withered and icy, but never lapsed into anything less than complete believability.

For Compaignon, I wanted a Peter Lorre or a comical/obnoxious Darren McGavin, a la his famous Night Stalker role. Unable to find that, I put Tony Soucek into the part, who gave me a sophisticated Bugs Bunny. It was offbeat, but it worked. Rounding out the Tribunal was Scott Kelly, who I thought had been shafted in casting, before. He has a tendency to overplay, but can be controlled and takes direction well. There is a stiffness to him which hinders him from many roles, but it was well-suited to Major Delacorte.

I cast Roger Kloeppel as my corporal/guard, because he was fresh-faced and eager. Jeff Winkler was similarly in need of a break, and handled comedy pretty well, so I cast him as Dr. Giraux. And Carla Boullion-Richard was a literal "new kid in town," anxious and very talented as a character actress, so I made her Mrs. Beaufort.

The members of my technical crew were so industrious and inventive that I haven't got sufficient praise for their efforts. Stephanie and Terri were superior sounding-boards and helpmates, to whom I owe more gratitude than they know. Joel Pollack, one of my chief moral supports, designed some splendid make-up and special effects -- especially the head of Jeannine Barraux and the "squib" blood-pack for Grave's suicide -- that was absolutely beautiful. Deborah Pierce

spent hours with me, plotting special lighting effects I didn't think I could possibly get under the conditions in which we operated, but did. Trudy White had the Herculean labor of collecting and controlling the mammoth number of sound cues, the crowd noise, and my numerous music cues (and how she managed, I'll never know). Jeannie Castalleta, my props-person, kept bringing me better and better props long after I told her the job was done.

Since I knew we had no real budget to speak of, and couldn't possibly get period costumes of any consistency, I originally planned to costume the cast in black rehearsal clothes, a la Richard Burton's Hamlet, with suggestive props and isolated clothing pieces. But everybody -- I mean, everybody -- cast, crew, running crew, friends, family and families' dogs of the running crew, kept coming up with combat boots, period-looking costumes (if not authentic, "good enough for government work"), needed last-minute props, etc. Thanks to their limitless contributions, we pulled the entire show off for (I believe) under eighty dollars, and made somewhere over two hundred.

The show was an ACTF associate entry, adjudicated by Bela Kiralyfalvi, of Wichita State. While he admitted that the play was the work of a "master dramaturge," he confessed to not liking plays with "pathological leads." He was most impressed with the "lyricism" of the script, and the complete believability of Grave and Ilse and their doomed love affair, but thought the necrophiliac angle was too horrific and

grotesque to invite sympathy. He also felt that, despite considerable effort on my part for an authentic period feel, and the establishment of camaraderie between Grave and the Tribunal, the attitude of their desire to save Grave was not believable. He thought the Tribunal was inadequately matched against Coldert who (along with Ilse) was his favorite character in the play. As adjudicator, he gave the Irene Ryan nomination to Stephanie, suggesting the other go to Thayne. I was in agreement on Thayne, but thought the other should go to Matt. Ultimately, the second nomination went to Joel. Their work was solid, but I think Mr. Kiralyfalvi was awarding more the roles than the performances.

Quite simply, I think Mr. Kiralyfalvi missed the boat. A Hungarian, I was a little surprised at his parochial attitude toward the underlying subject matter -- I had expected a bit more broad-mindedness. I can't help wondering how Tennessee Williams would have fared with him. I'm not sure that the play I wrote and the one he saw are the same, and am at a loss to understand the discrepancy. What can I say, in response? Mr. Kiralyfalvi is mistaken. Somehow, he missed the whole show. Some deep-seated disgust at the subject matter and symbolism caused him to miss a really great play. In cruder terms, I have heard at least one professional producer make approximately the same comment -- and I think they are both short-sighted.

This line of attack falls back on Aristotle's principle that the tragic act must not be so horrific as to excite

disgust, but I don't believe I have done so. I believe it was surprisingly tastefully rendered in fact. More than one audience member told me that I might want to play up the necrophiliac angle more, as it tended to be forgotten. My most eloquent defense lies in the little old ladies in the audience. On opening night, there was one, front row center. She was appropriately horrified, but sat through the whole show. She came back, with other little old lady friends, who also occupied the front row. They passed the hankies at all the appropriate moments, especially at the very end. If little old ladies in Kansas can see the love story more than the horror that underlies it, then I have hardly offended Aristotle.

I consider that I directed well, because my influence was somewhat prevalent in the play, but not obtrusive. The loudest my voice was heard was in the selection of between fifteen and twenty minutes of music that I used in the show, which got me many compliments, and I feel perfectly expressed the feelings in the play. The main theme music was from Jerry Goldsmith's The Final Conflict, ominous and noble at once. The love theme was from Phillipe Sarde's Ghost Story, the lyrically haunting quality of which could not have more perfectly ended the story. And a brief stretch of "foreboding doom" music from John Barry's The Black Hole found voice, in Coldert's death sentence pronouncement. I'm a great believer in music as a unifying element in production.

What more can I say about The Grave Affair? I might

abbreviate its first act by about a quarter, to allow more breathing room for the second, and trim the final exchange between Montmartre and Grave by a hair. The show runs, at a good clip, close to two and a half hours, including a fifteen minute intermission. While I have no dislike for plays of length, I have an appreciation for the soreness of audience buttocks. Other than that, I think it is a great and beautiful play, and that its detractors were blind.

V. The Writing of Cutthroat And A Description
Of Its Production

Chronologically, Cutthroat is my most recent play. However, I do not believe it to be in any sense a culmination of my ability in the writing of drama. The Grave Affair represents that culmination in my writing career -- at least, for now. Cutthroat is a diversion, nothing more.

It was written at the specific request of Joel Climenhaga, who had accepted the position of Visiting Professor of Theatre Arts at Tarkio College, in Missouri, part of his responsibilities being that of developing a New Plays Program. (Joel had accepted this position after retiring from active status at Kansas State University in May, 1987.) During the summer of 1987, I had been hired as an actor for the Mule Barn Theatre at Tarkio College, of which Wesley Van Tassel was the producer. It was during this time that Joel asked me to write a one-act play, telling me if I did so it would be produced as part of the first bill of one-acts at Tarkio College during the Fall semester. In other words, Cutthroat was written "on assignment," so to speak.

I adapted it from one of my unpublished short stories, "Cards On The Table," which I intended for something like

Mike Shayne's or Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazines. I had written that story in two summer afternoons of 1985, when I was bored. I'd just read a few stories in an Alfred Hitchcock anthology, and wanted to try my hand at a clever, straightforward, suspenser. I view it as part thriller, part black-comedy. Even while I was writing the story, I thought it would make a good one-act. Maybe a "Hitchcock Presents" episode.

I whipped this play up in about a week, at a leisurely pace. I'd just finished the season at the Mule Barn Theatre, and had a few days before I had to settle in to my final semester at Kansas State, and directing The Grave Affair.

It opened at the Mule Barn after The Grave Affair closed, performing October 30 and Halloween nights (appropriately enough) under the direction of student Doug Ward. The production was pretty awful. Ward, typified by many of his peers as "an arrogant ass," lived up to the title. A failed writer himself, Ward took the next obligatory step of failed playwrights, and became a "concept director."

Concept directors rank with collaborators, in my opinion, tying for lowest rung on the creative ladder. (Perhaps critics belong to the same stratus, but it is highly debatable.) Unable to create themselves, concept directors feel blessed above all other creatures in the Divine Right of raping others' work, to their own ends. They arbitrarily change lines, stage directions, themes, meanings, characters and anything else that gets in the way of their "vision," instead of doing what a director should do, which is to realize the script at hand.

In true form, they always fall back on two dictums, as if they were the sole Scripture of theater: "Theater is a collaborative art," and "The director is the final authority." As I have mentioned, that use of the word "collaborative" only proves that the concept director and collaborator are extremely close relatives on the creative ladder of evolution -- related, say, as spit is to mucous. In answer to their highly selective use of quotes, I offer two of my own, from the Bible: "Judas went out and hanged himself," and "Go thou and do likewise."

Little need be said of the various atrocities Ward perpetrated upon the script, but to say that what was submitted as a finely-honed, slick script to Joel Climenhaga was transformed into a muddled, confused "vision" with an unclear ending. In order that my charges not be considered merely vituperative, I offer several examples.

For one thing, in reading the play it should be apparent that "Mr. Smith" and Sybil need to be somewhat mistakable for each other in the eyes of third parties. Fat chance in this production directed by Mr. Ward! He was white and she was black. For another, the actress playing Sybil telegraphed everything, from Frame One. A third: confused Mr. Smith became a menacing, obviously psychopathic meanie, which -- fourth -- made the ending very unclear, added to by the fact that (fifth) the final, necessary stage directions were altered, as was the delivery needed to pull the whole bit off, and sixth, there was a whole long, weird, religious bit stuck in at the end which made it stranger still! This religious

bit was stuck in, I was informed afterwards, because Ward had fathomed (in what I must assume was his infinite wisdom) "the true meaning inherent in the script" -- that Sybil represented "Fate," and Mr. Smith, "Man." (God only knows what the policeman represented -- perhaps the playwright, come to shoot a murdering director, for practicing creative thought without a license.)

Ward was, as I understand it, appropriately villified by all and sundry, far more than I have here besmirched him. Curiously, he didn't offend me -- though his attitude did. I laughed, and shrugged the whole thing off. I do, however, reserve a few sharp words for any institution that encourages directors to behave in such irresponsible fashion. In a word, it is unethical.

My convictions on this subject are very strong. They are, I believe, important enough to be mentioned. Theater is not, was never, and will never be a "collaborative art." It is a cooperative one. In that cooperative art, never let it be argued that anyone but the director is the final authority on the production; nevertheless, it is also just as strongly not to be argued that only the playwright is the final authority on the script. And I politely and respectfully point out that if you are in the cooperative art we call theater and disregard the common sense and professional courtesy elucidated in this paragraph, then there are not words strong enough to convey -- (what I want to say is "unethical slime") -- you are. However, I grant it is hyperbole to say "unethical slime." It is not my

intention merely to mudsling and be insulting. These words are for all producers who keep insisting the director has any and all rights to do any and all things to a script in the name of production "necessities," as well as to the institutions who support those producers. I have very strong feelings about such practices, and see no reason not to say so. In point of fact, I believe I've been more than gentlemanly and quite professional in doing so. If I speak in strong words, it's only because it's about time somebody did. I'm as laid-back a writer, director, and actor as you could ever hope to meet -- but even a gentleman and a pro cries, "Rape!" when a rape is in evidence. At least, they ought to!

That's all I have done here.

There will be a few more comments on this and kindred subjects in the concluding chapter, in which I will attempt to summarize what I've learned from the productions of these plays.

But, first, I hope you will now read these plays -- the manuscripts of which follow.

VI. The Manuscript Text of The Late, Great Doctor Death, As Produced at Kansas State University

I-1-1

THE LATE, GREAT DOCTOR DEATH

(A Drama in Two Acts)

★

The Characters:

ROBERT RUHL - Tall, handsome, extraordinarily self-possessed. An actor by temperament and profession, he is alert and talented. His appearance could be almost menacing - but this is swiftly allayed by his warmth, sensitivity, and genial, cavalier manner. He conveys a strong feeling of dignity.

His costume: "Doctor Death," a role he recently played on television -- this may be a Cavalier Death, a la Lon Chaney's masquerade ball costume in The Phantom of the Opera, or a simpler black funerary tuxedo with a red rose in the lapel and a skeletal opera mask. In either event, he should have a cape, and a tall scythe.

KEN LEHMAN - Average-looking, with a sad, somewhat vulnerable quality about him. He is often clownish and humorous, but is also quite sensitive. As he drinks, he tends to become maudlin and depressed. He frequently seems nervous or high-strung, and is gangly and physically clumsy.

His costume: Charlie Chaplin.

JERRY BACHMAN - Physically fit, robust of body and sense of humor. Very genial, he is a lover of harmony and tranquility and companionship. He is equally fond of laughter, and prefers hearing jokes to telling them. He wears short hair and glasses. He sometimes seems a little "nerdy," but is very likeable.

His costume: A Catholic priest, with a Roman collar, or perhaps the hooded robe of a Franciscan friar, with a rosary belt.

BERNARD PACE - Powerfully built, with a strong macho air about him. Strong, silent and a bit rigid usually, he loves nothing more than companionship to loosen him up. Drinks and smokes heavily. He appears to be warm and friendly, but there is an oddly disquieting shiftiness about him, as if he is perpetually hiding something.

His costume: "Mephistopheles," an Elizabethan devil. He should have a Spanish goatee or forked beard and a pitchfork. He may even have horns and a tail.

CALVIN WICHER - Short, possibly frail, but with a bounding vitality and energetic personality. Something of an asshole - rude, pushy, obnoxious - he is nevertheless very entertaining, and enjoyable. He has an infectious, braying guffaw of a laugh, which he uses frequently, as he finds almost everything funny. His tongue is facile.

His costume: A Gothic jester, a "Fool." Parti-colored, with foolscap and a jester head on a stick.

The young men are all twenty-seven. They have known each other, as a group, for twelve years - some of them have known each other as far back as grade school. Individually, they are very different, with distinctive mannerisms, laughs and personalities; together, they tend to act like kids: Immature, enthusiastic, fun-loving, sentimental, irreverent, abusive and absolutely impossible to offend. They are as close as human beings can be.

*

ACT I

Before the play begins, we hear Saint-Saens' "Danse Macabre" playing. As it ends, the lights come up to reveal Jerry and Bern's apartment. It is the lower level of a condominium. Presently, it is decorated for a Halloween party - paper skeletons and black cats line the walls, an unlit jack-o'-lantern is on the table, bags of party favors and noisemakers are about, orange and black crepe paper have been strung. A sharp rapping is heard on the door, accompanied by a nasty, sinister laugh. We hear the voices of Bob Ruhl and Ken Lehman, from outside. When we see them, they are wearing identical coats.

BOB

(Evilly jubilant.)

Open up, children! There's no escape! Death has come to sow your seedy souls upon the Reaper's wind!

KEN

That a line from Doctor Death?

BOB

If I said it, it is. I am Doctor Death.

KEN

Hey, guys, open up! It's cold, out here!

(Pause.)

You sure they're here?

BOB

Maybe they're trying to scare us. Let's break in, and scare them . . .

KEN

I have a credit card - here.

BOB

Have you tried the knob - ?

KEN

No - why?

The words have barely left his mouth, when the door opens. Ken, who was kneeling and leaning against it, falls into the room, flat on his face. He is dressed as Charlie Chaplin. Bob is dressed as Death.

BOB

(To no one, gesturing to Ken.)

Who hired this clown?

KEN

You might have tried the knob, first!

BOB

Lighten up, clown. You're out of character.

KEN

(Quietly, a little strangely.)

Are you?

BOB
Pardon - ?

KEN
Nothing. I was wondering where the guys are.

BOB
They should be here. They were going out for beer, when I left to get you at the airport. With that, and putting on our costumes at your place - Christ, it's been an hour, I wonder if they -

KEN
Whose idea was the costumes?

BOB
(Absently - he is preoccupied, looking for a note.)
Hmm - ? Mine. Almost Halloween, thought it would be fun. Got to be - where would I put a note - ?

KEN
You pick that costume out of the studio?

BOB
Are you kidding? The director would kill me, if I used it for anything but a promo tour.

KEN
They gonna make Doctor Death a series?

BOB
Ratings were good. I imagine so. They left the door unlocked . . . where . . . ?

KEN
They wouldn't - give the role to anyone else, if they did. Would they?

BOB
(Chuckles.)
Not if I can play it, they won't.

KEN
Then - why did you leave L.A.?

BOB

Already told you - got a cushy theater job out here, for six months. If Doctor Death hits the tube, it won't be till next year. Plenty of stuff I can do, in the meantime.

KEN

I was just thinking - now that you finally got your big break, why don't you stay out there, do a couple guest shots on Falcon Crest, or Cheers, or something? I mean, you're almost a name now, right?

BOB

I am a name now, thanks to that part. You sound like my agent! No, six months away won't kill me. Vince just got his theater started, out here. He really got me started on my professional acting road, you know - I owe him a favor, or two. Besides, the pay's terrific, and it's so close to home . . .

KEN

Yeah - I guess.

BOB

Why do you sound so depressed? You've been acting funny, ever since we left your place. You jealous of me, or something?

KEN

(Genuinely.)

No! Not at all. God, you kidding? I get to tell everyone I acted with you, in high school, and they go nuts. I'm popular as hell, thanks to you.

BOB

I'm glad. I did worry about that, for awhile. The rest of the gang seems to feel the same way.

KEN

Shit, yeah! You make the rest of us look good. You were the only one of us had any real big talent. Just - keep it up, you know? More power to you!

(Brief pause.)

Jeeze, cold as it is outside, it's sure warm in here! Give me your coat, I'll hang them up.

BOB

Don't bother, I'll do it. I know where they go.

KEN

No, really, I'll -

BOB

(Spots a note, on the jack-o'-lantern.)
Ah-ha! Jack-be-nimble, Jack-be-quick, message on his
candle-wick!

(Takes the note, lectures the pumpkin.)
Spring-heeled Jack! See what you get for playing with knives?
They lop off your head with it, cut you a new face, and put
you on coffee tables with a fire inside you! Tch-tch-tch!

(Reads the note.)

"Gone to get Cal. Let yourselves in."

(Laughs.)

Must've forgot to put it on the door!

(Reaches in his pocket, for a cigarette,
chuckling.)

KEN

(Laughs.)

Just like them! They used to miss their cues, too!

(Has taken off his coat.)

Here, give me your coat. In the bedroom?

BOB

Yeah, that'll be fine, I'm sure.

Bob pulls an empty cigarette pack from his
shirt pocket. He crumples it, absently,
reaching into his coat pocket for his extra
pack. His hand in the pocket, he suddenly
freezes.

KEN

(Almost too quickly.)

You gonna take off your coat, or what?

(He seems a little nervous.)

BOB

I'll take them.

KEN

Oh, don't bother, I've already got -

BOB

I think we must have got them mixed up, at your place.

KEN

Yeah, we might have. Same coat, we're about the same size. No
biggie. We'll just make sure we have the right ones, when we -

Bob has taken his coat from Ken, ignoring him.

He reaches into one of his coat pockets,
pulling out the spare pack of cigarettes.

BOB

It was in the other pocket.

KEN

The cigarettes - ?

BOB

(Pulls out an opened envelope.)

This.

KEN

(Innocently.)

What is it?

BOB

"Will they make a series out of Doctor Death," is what it is.
"Will they give the part to anyone else." You've read it.

KEN

I don't -

BOB

(Weary sigh.)

You put it back, upside down.

KEN

(Caught.)

Damn it, Bob, you could have pretended not to notice!

BOB

I would have.

KEN

Well, why didn't you? I didn't mean to read it. I reached in my pocket and, well, there it was, and I didn't remember putting it there. It was already open, and . . . it's a promo gag, right? I mean, it's not real?

BOB

I'd have let you pretend, but we might not have much time - I need to know what you're going to do about it.

KEN

(Laughs, slightly desperate.)

Do? Well, it's a joke, right? You set it up for a joke! I'll - what did you want me to do, pass it around to someone else's pocket maybe, so they could find it, and then later -

BOB

(Serious.)

No. It's not a joke. You know it's not. It's a second opinion - which confirms the first. They're pretty accurate about predicting these things. I've got about six months. I wasn't going to tell anyone. I have to know that you won't.

KEN

Oh, my God . . .

BOB

Don't freak on me, Ken. I need you. You hear me? Listen - it's no different. It's just like when we were in California, remember? I was dying then, too, and it didn't make a difference. We still laughed and joked, had fun - I came back, for that. Don't ruin it for me. Or them.

KEN

Oh, God . . . you don't, Bob, lie to me, for God's sake! How am I supposed to deal with this, on my own?

Sounds of someone approaching, outside - a little laughter, conversation. Bob lights the jack-o'-lantern.

BOB

Same way I have. By just not even thinking about it.

KEN

I don't know if I can.

BOB

You'll look foolish, if you try to tell them.

(Lights his cigarette - and the envelope.)

I'll deny it, and turn it into a joke.

KEN

(Resigned.)

This isn't only the first time we'll all have been together, since high school . . . Bob, don't you want them to know?

BOB

And have them act like you are? Have my funeral six months early? No.

KEN

(Pause.)

I see what you mean - but -

BOB

(Light sigh, and a smile.)

Let's enjoy the last. Okay?

KEN

(Pause. He nods.)

Damn it - it won't be easy. All night, I'll be thinking - that I'll never see -

Jerry enters, carrying a sack and a case of beer. He is dressed as a priest - or perhaps, a Franciscan friar. A rosary dangles from his belt. Bob cuts Ken off, exuberantly giving the punch-line to a joke.

BOB

Wharf? I thought you said, "Go down on the dwarf!"

(Laughs.)

JERRY

Ken! Bob! It's so good to see you both here!

(Sets his things down, embraces them warmly.)

Bob, you're still telling that awful joke!

BOB

Still gets a laugh!

KEN

Jer - God, you look great!

JERRY

I still play tennis, now and then.

BOB

(Shakes his head and smiles, at Jerry's costume.)

I always knew you'd end up a clergyman.

JERRY

Only on Halloween! And "Doctor Death!" Jeeze, it's beautiful!
(Laughs.)

And Charlie Chaplin! Wait'll you see Bern. He's right behind me - he had to get something from the car. I'm glad I got to you first.

(To Bob, just the slightest worry in his voice.)
You talked to him, since you got back? I know you two were a little strained, before you left. Have you - ?

BOB

We'll be fine. I recently decided life was too short for grudges.

JERRY

So you haven't really - ?

Bern enters, carrying more beer. He is dressed as the devil, in Spanish garb, replete with beard and pitchfork. Everyone laughs, as they see him. He is in high spirits.

BERN

I heard your voices, outside - here they are, the gang, the gang - how've I ever gotten along, without you guys!

(Goes straight to Ken, nervously passing Bob.)
Ken! You look different!

KEN

It's just the costume.

BERN

Still - well hell, you look good, you look good.

(Turns to Bob - very warmly, though reserved.)
Bob. Gee, it's - God, seems like forever - I, uh, haven't had a chance to see you, since you got back in town. You - glad to be home, again?

BOB

(Smiles.)

Oh, yeah. It's good to see you, too. Ya putz!

JERRY

(Relieved that everything is cool, as Bob and Bern embrace, and slap each other's backs.)
Oh, - this is - I'm so excited! Here's four of us - now, where's Cal?

BERN

We drove by his place, but his car wasn't there. He must be on his way.

JERRY

I hope he doesn't have the same problem we had. We almost didn't make it back - some fool was sliding all around us, honking and making noise. He practically ran us off the road.

BOB

Probably some drunk, from another party. Those roads are sure slick tonight, aren't they?

A knock on the door. Jerry answers it. As he opens it, it is pushed forcefully open from the outside, causing Jerry to jump back. A jester head on a stick is held in the doorway, shaking violently, jingling its bells, accompanied by a braying laugh. A moment later, Cal leaps in, spectacularly, a huge, idiotic smile on his face. He is dressed in a parti-colored jester's outfit, with jingling bell-cap.

ALL

Cal!

CAL

(To Bern and Jerry.)

What's the hell's the matter with you guys? I honked, I waved, I was right behind you, for about two miles!

JERRY

I should have known! That wasn't your car?

CAL

Totaled it, last week. That's the new one.

BERN

You fool! You could have killed us!
(But he is laughing.)

CAL

Fuck, Ken wasn't here to do it, so someone had to uphold the bad driving traditions of -

(Sees Ken, lets out a delighted scream.)

Ken! Aaaaaaugh! Ken!

(They embrace.)

God, how the hell are ya?

(Laughs.)

Charlie Chaplin! Suits you!

KEN

Ya creep! I resemble that remark! Yours fits you, better.
Clown!

CAL

Who you callin' a clown, clown?

BOB

You, clown!

CAL

Aaaugh! Doctor Death!

BOB

Surely, you jest.

CAL

No, I don't - and don't call me Shirley! Look at you! It's great! Do you know how many times I've gotten laid, just because I can say I know you? I get a couple drinks in 'em, and drag 'em back to show off pictures from those terrible shows we did in high school!

JERRY

Cal - you told us you were going to quit that, after you got married.

CAL

I was! I just haven't been doing a very good job of it.

BOB

I like it, Cal. It's you. You're looking good.

CAL

(To Jerry.)

You I see all the time - to hell with you. Bern! God, I haven't seen you in a while - not since you started rooming with Father Flatulence, here. How's it goin'? You devil, you! You still look like hell!

BERN

(Smiling.)

Am I going to have to beat the shit out of you, or what?

CAL

I had enough of that, senior year, thanks.

JERRY

(Confused.)

When?

CAL

When he thought I was fucking him up with Noell! God, he didn't talk to me for two years, you have to remember that!

JERRY

Oh, yeah, yeah - I remember. I didn't see much of you, right then. What started that?

CAL

I don't know - but his bouncing my head off the walls ended it!
(Laughs, infectiously.)

BERN

You were trying to get her in bed. That's what started it.

CAL

Yeah, something like that. Well, what the hell. She hated me, you married her, she divorced you, and we're still friends. And I got a few concussions.

BERN

And your face rearranged.

CAL

(Laughs, points to Bob.)

I looked like him! You eating right, Bob? You look like you've lost weight.

BOB

Actors never have money. Even successful ones. Especially in Hollywood.

CAL

(To Ken.)

Last I heard from you was about two years ago - you still mixing drinks?

KEN

Never mix drinks. It makes you barf.

CAL

I'll tell the jokes, thank you.

KEN

You are a joke. So, what are you up to these days? Still emceeing "Night of the Thousand Bars," or doing real broadcasting work, again?

CAL

They've got me dee-jaying every blue-hair get-together in the state. Watch, next year, they'll have me doing our high school reunion!

JERRY

(Amazed, suddenly realizing.)

No shit -

BERN

(Interjecting - no one heeds him.)

Such language, from a priest!

JERRY

God, it's really almost here, isn't it? Are we that old?

CAL

And not much to show for it.

(Assumes dramatic A.M. radio patter:)

Bern Pace, who spends his days insuring that our cars will never cease to run - a white-collar worker in a blue-collar warehouse! Trapped in a car-parts industry, not of his own making! By night, an unassuming putz from suburbia - by day . . . Auto-Man! Restorer of defunct jalopies, by proxy! And . . . Jerry Bachman -

JERRY

(Inserting.)

In this corner, weighing in at one-eighty-five.

BERN

And a half.

CAL

- ordinary nerd from the middle classes, taken from his life as an average schlub, is transformed by the power of the government, into . . .

BERN

(Doing a drum roll.)

Budda-budda-budda-budda . . .

CAL

Jerry Bachman, Venereal Disease Investigator! Armed only with a hypodermic needle containing the rare substance from his long-dead home planet, Penicillin, and ampules of - what are those pills?

JERRY

Tetracycline.

CAL

I ought to know, I've taken enough of them - terracyclone, he prowls the streets, by night and day -

BERN

(Inserting, as an Indian.)

From moon to sun -

JERRY

(In the same vein,)

From sun to moon -

CAL

- keeping our heathen society safe from . . .

(Suddenly becomes a Southern media preacher.)

Gon-no-rhea - ! Her-pes Sim-plex - ! Nasty demon crabs, from other dimensions near the Crab Vulva Constellation, and - yea, verily, brothers - Satan Syphillis, Hissself! Porgive us our sins, Brother Bachman! Hallelujah, Je-suss - !

BOB

What a great name for a weekly T.V. drama: "Jerry Bachman, V.D.I.!"

CAL

A Quinn Martin Production.

They laugh.

JERRY

(To Cal.)

And you, permanent Master of Ceremonies, in the Dance Hall of the Dead!

CAL

(Imitates his nightly routine - a tired, bored F.M. announcer.)

Well - ll - ll, and welcome, ladies and gentleman -

(Bern switches stereo to "amplify," and hands Cal a mike.)

- yes, that's right, "gentleman," singular. All one of you. Unless some of you are transvestites. Thank God none of you know any words that big. Can you spell transvestite? I knew that you could. Welcome to the beautiful downtown "Panda Room." The mirror ball is spinning, along with your memories, and blinding me as it reflects off your hair rinse. We have some really big hits from yestercentury here for you, tonight. So, all of you - so many of you, there must be hundreds, thousands,

CAL (continued)

more than that even, five - all five of you get out on that dance floor, and boogie down, to Don Ho's "Tiny Bubbles." Later, we'll start really getting down, with Lawrence Welk's rendition of "Personality," and Mitch Miller's "I Got Rhythm." So, just follow the bouncing mirror ball onto that dance floor - yes, you too, sir, they'll look awful funny, tripping all over each other's high heels, without you there to catch them, when they fall - and step up those pacemakers. Warm up those dancing canes and walkers - and your partners, I think some of them are dead (if you hurry, you can get one more quickie in, while they're still warm) - and let's . . . get funky . . . !

Bob has been imitating a little old lady, responding genuinely to Cal's performance. He does a slow motion dance out on the "floor," mugging faces. The others include themselves in the joke, except for Ken, who looks a little uncomfortable - though he is having fun, this entire spiel has reminded him of Bob's condition.

CAL

(Continued)

This average-looking man off to the side here, is a late-night surprise, for all of you - an old high school friend of mine, Ken "The Klutz" Lehman. He's not dancing, because his feet are lethal weapons - to himself. These days, he's a San Francisco low-life, mixing drinks. For the Mob. Those of you looking for a little added cheap entertainment may want to check out his stable of used blonde floozies, after the show.

KEN

Floozies? Hey, I'll have you know, this outfit cost me forty bucks!

BOB

(To Ken, smiling gently, trying to make him relax.)

I wouldn't be caught dead, in such an outfit!

KEN

Bob -

BOB

Don't sweat it, man - liven up!

Ken starts to move into the comical dance, but trips over his own feet, to everyone's amusement. Bern moves over to help him up, but Jerry gets there first. Ken somewhat self-consciously edges past Bob, dancing with Jerry. Bob dances with Bern. They converse casually, as they dance, with interplays occurring, virtually ignoring Cal, who blithely continues his schtick. Ken is nervous about dancing too close to Bob or Bern, but Jerry is completely at ease. Bob and Bern are being outwardly pleasant with each other, but something in their eyes says otherwise - Bern's are a little ill at ease; Bob's are knowing, and perhaps forbidding in their penetration.

CAL

This skeletal geriatric will be familiar to all you tube-boobs, out there - he is Robert "The Red Death" Ruhl, escapee from Arkham Asylum for the criminally insane, come to perform his personal rendition of The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Part 2 . . . just . . . for you . . . ! Bob is a pro sales-fraud agent, for network T.V. He may have sold you that blue stuff in your hair, ma'am, between The Young and the Breastless and The Days of our Week. He was our high school lead, in everything. It looks like he'll be hosting a new weekly horror anthology show, which will put Elvira and Tales From The Darkside where they belong - in the grave! Let's give Doctor Death a big hand - those of you whose arms haven't fallen off your bodies.

They stop, and applaud Bob, who directs the applause to Cal. Ken doesn't applaud, but no one notices - except Bob, who gives him a menacing look of friendly warning.

JERRY

(To Bern, gesturing to Cal.)

Does he ever quit?

BERN

No "off" switch.

BOB

Alas, poor Yorique - I'll shut him up, Horatio,
(Wrestles the mike away from Cal, who laughs, and speaks into it.)
Someone shut this hyena up.

CAL

(Laughing.)

Give me that, you creep!

BOB

Not only is he ugly, but his mother dresses him funny.

CAL

Unfair! You're bigger than I am!

BOB

Everyone's bigger than you are.

JERRY

Switch the dial!

BOB

Where?

JERRY

Next to the F.M. tuner. Bern, switch the -

BERN

Never mind, I'll switch the -

BOB

Oh, this -

(Turns switch, his voice suddenly normal.)

- one? What have you got on?

Bern turns on the stereo. Three Dog Night's
"Joy to the World" plays.

KEN

(Groans, laughs.)

Oh, no - not The Big Chill!

BOB

(Resigned.)

Yes, The Big Chill.

CAL

(Guffaws.)

The Big Chill!!

JERRY

What's wrong with that? We thought you guys would like it! You know, old friends together?

KEN

We've all seen the movie, you don't have to explain.

CAL

It's cliché! Give me a break!

(He runs the needle over the record, ruining it.)

BERN

I just bought that! It cost me eight ninety-nine!

BOB

Cal, you dick, what the hell are you doing?

JERRY

God, Cal, what's your problem?

KEN

Cal - Cal, you asshole!

CAL

Guess I ruined it - here.

He strides over to the door, takes a sack in from outside, that he brought with him, and removes another copy of The Big Chill soundtrack out of it, handing it to Bern. Bern ignores him, inspecting his stereo arm. Everyone laughs.

CAL

I knew one of you would bring it, so I ran out and bought another copy - just so I could do that! You should have seen your faces!

JERRY

Hey, Bern, what's wrong?

BERN

(Despondent.)

You might have hurt my needle.

CAL

Hurt your needle? "Chill" out, man, I'll buy you a new one!
Hurt your needle?

Everyone laughs, including Bern.

BOB

Well, shit - what are we waiting for? Put on some music! Booze!

Drugs! KEN

Women! CAL

No women. BERN

No women? CAL

(Shakes his head.) BERN

No women. CAL

(Exuberant.) CAL

No women! Let's party!

What do we start with? JERRY

What do you got? KEN

I mean, music. JERRY

I brought a tape. Special selection, for The Fabulous Five. KEN
(Gets his tape.)

I want to hear The Big Chill! BERN

We'll get to it, soon enough. Plenty of time. Meanwhile - BOB
I'm thirsty. Booze. Booze. Thirsty. Booze.

Don't tell me - you didn't bring any. JERRY

'Course not. I've never bought anything I couldn't mooch. BOB
Whatcha got?

JERRY

(Who has ambled over to the kitchen.)

Beer, wine, some leftover tequila and whisky, and I think some Scotch.

BERN

(Rolling joints.)

And pot.

(Sings, while he prepares them)

"I don't want to set the world on fire . . .!"

CAL

(Joining him)

Light us up!

BOB

(Lighting a cigarette.)

Beer, now.

BERN

You gonna toké with us?

BOB

I'm allergic.

BERN

Oh, come on!

BOB

No, really, man, remember that time you lost your girl?

BERN

Which one?

BOB

Marcie, I think.

BERN

Yeah?

BOB

And we listened to your stereo all night, 'cause your parents were out of town?

BERN

Yeah?

BOB

And cried about nothing, just to salt our beer?

Yeah, yeah?

BERN

And we split a joint, and my throat swelled out like a bullfrog?

BOB

That was the cats you were allergic to.

BERN

It was the pot.

BOB

Cats.

BERN

Your cats weren't home.

BOB

Previously shed hairs.

BERN

Pot.

BOB

Cats.

BERN

Beer. (Turning to Jerry, who hands him a beer.)

BOB

Michelob good?

JERRY

Terrific!

BOB

Yeah, it is, which is why we don't got any. Bud.

JERRY

Bud's for puds.

BOB

All I got.

JERRY

So I'm a pud.

BOB

(Takes the offered beer.)

One for me! CAL

And me! KEN
(Putting his tape in the stereo.)

I'll take one of those. BERN

Ken starts the tape, which is silent for a few moments. They all gather around the kitchen, beers in hand. They suddenly realize their mirth has subsided, and look at each other, as if for the first time.

Jeeze, here we still are. JERRY

No shit. BOB

Fuckin' "A." KEN

Cheers. BERN

They clink cans, solemnly, and drink deeply. In mid-swig, the music starts: the sweeping strings of the theme from The Magnificent Seven. Cal laughs, choking on his beer.

Fuck, what the hell is that? CAL
You just wanted to see me choke, didn't you?

(Drily.) BERN
I've always wanted to choke you, Cal.

It's The Magnificent Seven. KEN

I'm waiting for Bruce Springsteen, and the wild west charges in through the snow! CAL

Hey! It's better than The Big Chill! KEN

CAL

I don't know - you felt the weather, lately?.

JERRY

He's right, guys - come on, think about it.

BOB

I see it.

JERRY

Old friends who have always ridden together, even when they're apart. Each different, but with the bond of shared experiences between them. Riding on, always, forever . . .

CAL

And just when you thought it was safe to camp out on the prairie again, the sequel!

(Starts to laugh, but is impressed by the analogy.)

BOB

Exactly. The sequel. And another. And another. Because The Fabulous Five . . . nothing separates them. Not ever. Not really. Even if they're only together once every few years, in a theater near you.

BERN

You know, you think you're joking -

KEN

Hell - he knows he ain't jokin'.

BOB

(Smiles at him.)

Fuckin' "A."

KEN

(Raises a toast, pointedly to Bob.)

To The Fabulous Five . . . may we ride forever.

(He almost chokes on this last, but gets through it.)

ALL

Forever.

They clink cans again, and finish their beers. Each takes another, as they follow Jerry and Bern into the living room. As they talk, they

unconsciously take "stations" around the coffee table. Jerry sits on the counter of the sofa, with Bern and Cal flanking him. Ken takes an easy chair next to Cal. Bob drapes himself in the most comfortable chair, next to Bern and across from Ken. The music is optional, and may segue as desired, with no respect to whether a song is yet completed - it is, after all, a manufactured tape. Selections should be made that fit the mood at any given time, almost as if the music is subliminally leading the dialogue. These should be a combination of styles: pop, rock, jazz, sentimental, easy listening -- with a lean, if possible, toward the hits of nine or ten years ago. Drinking, smoking, and quick jaunts to the bathroom occur randomly, and when someone finishes a can of beer, if he doesn't grab another himself, someone else makes sure to grab one for him, virtually without thinking. These men are all quite at home, here. Their conversation tends to overlap. Silent interchanges, and sometimes quite verbal ones, occur often between them, whether they presently "have the floor" or not.

JERRY

How long has it been, since all five of us were together?

BERN

Quite a while.

JERRY

Bern and I still keep tabs on Cal. We see him every now and then. And I've seen Bob a couple times, since he came back. You've been the longest gone, Ken, with Bob a close second. Since he's moved back a few months, and we'll have plenty of time to catch up, fuck him. How long you staying?

KEN

Just the weekend. I only came out to watch the 49'ers kick ass, Sunday. I was due for a vacation.

From the mention of another team beating the home-town team, there are groans and dissenting voices.

CAL

The 49'ers can't kick sand, let alone us.

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KEN

Yeah, yeah - put your money where your mouth is. They don't have to kick sand - they'll kick field goals, all over -

JERRY

Take the bets later. We'll make you see the error of your ways, by Sunday. Ego te absolvo.

(Makes the sign of the cross. Bern mock shudders.)

I'm trying to place the last time all five of us were together. It wasn't that opening Raiders game, was it, in - ?

CAL

No, no - I wasn't there.

BOB

Should have been - great game!

CAL

Like hell! I lost forty bucks to Mr. Chaplin!

KEN

See? I'm tellin' ya, the 49'ers.

JERRY

Was it when we did Oliver, the summer after graduation?

BOB

No, Bern wasn't in that one.

They lightly pick on Bern, all saying together "Should've tried out, Bern!" and he demurs to them.

JERRY

Then - oh, yeah! The last time we were all together - God what an awful reason!

KEN

(Realizing.)

It was my mom's funeral, wasn't it?

BOB

No shit. I guess it was. Shit, that was six years ago, just before I went to Detroit.

BERN

That long?

BOB

Would have had to been.

(To Ken.)

You and I got together, before you left for California, right after the funeral. All five of us were there.

BERN

It was pretty sudden. I mean, our hearing about it. We knew your mom had been sick.

JERRY

Cal and I went to see her in the hospital. She looked pretty sad. We cheered her up, as much as we could.

KEN

She told me. She was glad you took time to come by. I felt kind of bad, couldn't even visit her - I'd just moved, hundreds of miles away -

JERRY

Yeah, yeah.

CAL

Hey.

KEN

She was glad someone could keep her company, even for a little while.

BOB

I thought you didn't see her, before -

KEN

She wrote. Not real long. Her muscles, you know.

BOB

I guess so.

KEN

It's good she went, when she did - she was pretty bad off.

BOB

(Gently, looking Ken in the eye.)

Death isn't so terrible - it's a blessing.

KEN

(Returning the look, with meaning.)

When its time is right.

(Takes a heavy swig, and a toke from the passing joint.)

JERRY

Yeah, you're the longest gone, Ken. Except for me and Bob, seeing you last Christmas.

(Nudges Bern.)

You weren't home. We tried to get you.

BERN

I know, I know. I was out with Mary. And wouldn't you know, that was the night we broke up. I'd much rather have been with you guys.

CAL

I wasn't even in town. I was sorry I missed you.

JERRY

Well, we made it. And we're all here, now. We got all fucked-up. Ken and I were tokin' up a storm - you were taking hits with us, too!

BOB

And got sick later.

(To Bern.)

Allergic.

BERN

Cats.

KEN

We all got sick!

JERRY

Gee, I wonder why - we only drank every last drop of your dad's liquor cabinet, and toked, I don't know how much.

KEN

Who did first? Get sick?

BOB

You did!

KEN

No sir! I held it back! I was last. I hate getting sick.

CAL

(Laughs.)

But you always drink until you barf!

KEN

I didn't say I didn't like getting drunk.

(Looks at Bob, takes another heavy swig.)

JERRY

(Smiles.)

Price you pay! I got sick, first.

BOB

Did you? Yeah, I guess you did. Yeah, I remember. You just didn't seem sick. You stood up, natural as could be, said, "Excuse me, I'm going to puke now," and came back two minutes later, like nothing had happened.

BERN

Just like always! When did you start that Roman feast bit? Sticking your finger down your throat?

JERRY

Junior high, I think.

CAL

(Laughs.)

Since I've known him! That's always disgusted me, Jer!

KEN

Me too - tell him, talk some sense into Brother Barf, Cal.

JERRY

(To Cal.)

Let's talk disgusting - let's talk about your seedy, ugly girlfriends -

CAL

No, let's not.

JERRY

That you used to fuck in the back seat of my parents' car -

CAL

(Laughing.)

Well, I had to do it somewhere!

JERRY

And you always used to leave all that -

(Makes a series of grotesque gestures and sounds.)

- for me to clean up, so my folks wouldn't think I was doing it!

KEN

But sticking your finger down your throat? Your own throat?

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JERRY

You'd prefer I stick it down someone else's?

KEN

(Laughing, in spite of himself.)

Yucch - !

JERRY

(Rationally.)

I simply realized that I could be sick now, or later - but whenever, I was going to be sick - and decided it was better to get it out of the way.

CAL

But then you keep drinking!

JERRY

Well, when I've just thrown up, I have more room.

CAL

But then you have to do it all again!

(Laughs for awhile, gradually subsiding.)

JERRY

Anyway, I was the first.

KEN

(To Bob.)

And you - you didn't even get sick. Now that's disgusting -
(Pauses a moment, his mirth subsiding somewhat.)
You were never sick. I don't - you were never sick -
(He seems bewildered, and a little sad.)

BOB

I got sick. After I got home.

JERRY

I'm surprised you made it home. You drove, didn't you?

BOB

I'm surprised, too. Only time I ever drove drunk, like that. I was lucky, the streets were empty.

(Chuckles, looking at Ken, trying to cheer him up.)

Maybe I've been on borrowed time ever since, and should be grateful for any life I have left. I staggered in, when I got home, felt fine - and five minutes later, got up, said, "Excuse me, I have to go puke," to no one there -

CAL

(To Jerry.)

Now, where have I heard that line before?

BOB

And then projectile-vomited my soul into the toilet bowl.

CAL

(Laughs.)

Disgusting.

BOB

Next thing I remember, it was morning. and I was on this hard bed. Then I realized it wasn't bed. It was the bathroom floor. And I had a blanket over me. My mom had thrown a blanket over me, after I passed out.

BERN

(Drily.)

She was just covering the corpse.

Ken looks up, almost as if stricken, and quickly composes himself. Bob directs most of his next comment to him.

BOB

Funny thing was, it was the best night's sleep I'd had in years. I think it was just knowing the company I'd been with. Made all the difference.

(More to everyone, with renewed vitality, smiling.)

What a puke, though - BAM! It was one of my better pukes.

BERN

(Smiles mischievously, deliberately getting Bob started.)

Bob wrote the book, on puking.

BOB

(Scientifically.)

You got your three basic kinds of puke -

Ken, who had seemed a little removed, suddenly laughs and groans. Then everyone laughs. They know what is coming.

KEN

No, no! Don't start him!

Too late!

CAL

Bob dramatically interprets each, as they come along, aiming the performance primarily at Ken. The others partly join in, genially ganging up on him. Ken protests, but smiles and enjoys it, in spite of himself.

BOB

You've got your "Cookie Toss." That's the easiest. That's what Jer does. You feel - kind of queasy - and you amble over to the john, and just - blugg. Pretty simple, nothing too awful.

JERRY

That's what I keep telling everyone, but they never listen.

KEN

Must we - ?

BOB

Then you've got your - "Oh, no."

KEN

Oh, no!

BOB

That's where maybe you feel fine, and it just all of a sudden hits you, or sometimes you've been feeling ill for awhile, and it suddenly catches up to you. Kind of creeps up, gets you unawares.

BERN

(Hick voice.)

Help me, ma! It caught me in my underwears!

BOB

You - suddenly - turn green - and you say - "Oh, no." And you dash to the john - might make it, might not - and - sploresht! It kind of flies out of you.

KEN

(Setting down his beer, eyeing it distastefully.)

On second thought, I really didn't want any beer, tonight!

BOB

Then - you've got your all-time worst -

KEN
Oh, no - oh, no - oh, no - !

BOB
(Menacingly dramatic, dripping.)
Projectile - Vomit - !

KEN
I don't want to hear this!
(He tries covering his ears, but is laughing too hard to succeed, and is being tickled and teased by the others.)

BOB
It's the sneakiest - the nastiest - the most evil - a prelude to hell - !

BERN
(Evilly, to Ken.)
Bru-ha-ha-!

KEN
(Appealing to Jerry.)
No, no, God, no - !

BOB
You feel fine - you may even be sleeping, fitfully - when - ping! Your eyes open. There's a light tremor in your body, the sympathetic vibration of a deep, deep rumbling, in the core of your being - and you sink. You get to the bathroom - calmly, but quickly - you don't dare run, for fear of exploding -

KEN
Exploding! No - ! I'm not listening. Do you hear me?
You're wasting your time! I'm not listening! I'm not hearing you! I'm drowning you out!

BOB
(Continuing, ignoring him.)
You catch your reflection in the mirror. You're bloated.
Fat. Swollen up, like an overripe tomato, or a sated leech.

KEN
Aaagh - !

BOB
You hunker down - grip the bowl - breathe shallowly - praying for release, as the pain swiftly crescendoes in your gut, to piercing agony - your body starts to stiffen -

KEN

Jesus, save me!

BOB

And you start whipping from side to side, in a dance of nausea like some voodoo rite. And you mutter - waca-waca-waca-waca - waca-waca-waca-waca - waca-waca-waca - and then, violently, WACA-WACA-WACA-WACA - !

KEN

I'll never sin again! I'll be nice to my brother! I'll pay my dad back every penny I ever borrowed from him!

BOB

And your whole body becomes hard as a rock, turning into an open tube, which stretches all the way from your open mouth, down past your stomach, out the soles of your feet, and all the way to the very center of hell - !

KEN

I'll give my house to "Jerry's Kids!"

BOB

You rumble - and suddenly - all the way from the inferno's nethermost abyss - like molten magma from the very center of the turbulent Earth, itself - it - goes - BLAM-M-M -! with the force of an eight-hundred millimeter German cannon shell!

KEN

(Worn out.)

God - oh, God - !

BOB

And then again! BLAM-M-M -!

KEN

He's not finished!

BOB

Once more! BLAM-M-M -!

KEN

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!

BOB

(Suddenly casual, conversational.)

And you've blown your toilet bowl in half, and then you feel just fine, and go back to bed.

Disgusting! Disgusting! KEN

(Taps Ken on the shoulder.)
Hey, Ken - blaugh! CAL

Barf, Ken! JERRY

Blurrch - ! BERN

(Laughing hysterically, hits them with pillows.)
Stop! You're all sick! KEN

All over you, Ken Blaargh - ! CAL

They all mime "barfing" on him again, until they are laughing too hard to continue. Ken recovers, with difficulty.

KEN
You want to hear about my grandmother's gallstones, now? I had an operation on my testicles once, will that satisfy you? Want to hear now my pet rabbit got hit by a train?

This just sets them all off again. As they subside, Jerry moves to Bob.

JERRY
There was never any doubt in our minds, Bob, that you were the actor of the bunch!

KEN
You don't have to keep proving it, okay?

CAL
We always knew you'd go far.

JERRY
We counted on you. We dream dreams - you live them for us.

BOB
As long as I can.

BERN

We weren't surprised, seeing you on the tube. Jer said, "Look, there he is!" And I said, "Foregone conclusion."

JERRY

It's true, he did.

BERN

How could you fail, having worked with such fine supporting performers, before?

JERRY

(Pats Bern on the back, smilingly, jokingly.)

The best!

CAL

(Pats Jerry on the back.)

Bester!

BERN

(Pats Cal.)

Bestest!

(Points to Ken.)

Better than bestest!

(To Bob.)

Bestest bestest!

BOB

It's just a good thing you didn't try out for Oliver, Bern. You'd have gotten Sikes, instead of me! That was an important part, for me.

JERRY

(Ribbing Bern.)

Did we tell you, "Try out, Bern?"

BERN

You told me, "Try out, Bern."

JERRY

Did we say, "You'll have fun?"

BERN

I had to work, that summer!

JERRY

But no-o-o! You wouldn't try out!

BERN
I was a putz, okay? That's right - pick on the putz!

KEN
Bern, ya putz!

CAL
Ya putz, Bern!

BOB
Putz!

BERN
Yeah, yeah. Just as well, though. Now, you may be doing your latter-day Bill Sikes routine, week to week.

JERRY
And we'll watch, and be proud of you.

KEN
(Gloomy. No one really hears him.)
On reruns.

BOB
You were a real Bill Sikes for awhile, weren't you, Bern?

BERN
Junior high, you mean? Yeah, I was pretty nasty.

CAL
That's like saying Adolf Hitler was "a little upsetting."
You carried chains.

JERRY
You wore them, half the time.

CAL
You must have had a dozen knives confiscated, between eighth and ninth grade.

BERN
(Dreamily sad.)
Some of my best knives, too! I had a "Bloody Mary," once.

KEN
Is that the switchblade like Alan Arkin had, in Wait Until Dark?
The kind that comes out the end, instead of the side?

BERN

Yeah. Great knife.

(Wistfully remembering.)

I stabbed my kid brother with that knife, once.

CAL

You were evil, Pace! Jer and I used to hide from you, in the halls.

BERN

I wasn't after you guys then, was I?

JERRY

You were after everybody! You used to armed-rob everyone's lunch money.

BERN

(Nodding, as it comes back to him.)

For cigarettes, yeah.

CAL

(Imitating a police-band radio.)

Be on the lookout for Bernie "The Face" Pace - bzzz - he is considered armed and dangerous - bzzz - he'll rip your mother, for milk-money - bzzz -

BERN

Was I really that bad?

JERRY

(Pulls up his sleeve, shows a scar.)

Yes, really!

BERN

I never stuck you!

JERRY

No, you didn't. I saw you coming one day, and I said - "Oh, no."

BOB

Promptly ran to the john -

(Nudges Ken, gets him to smile.)

JERRY

And I ran into an open locker door, and gored my arm. You never even knew.

CAL
(Kidding.)
But it's still your fault.

BOB
It's all your fault.

JERRY
Babies die in Biafra, and it's all your fault.

KEN
Every problem in the world is all your fault.

BOB
Death, taxes - your fault.

CAL
Lighten up, willya Bern?

JERRY
(Melodramatically.)
Scarred - for life - by Bern Pace - !

KEN
(Imitating Edward G. Robinson.)
Your fault, see? Nyah. Nyah. You scarred my brother -
(Switches to Jimmy Cagney.)
And now, I'm gonna scar you - you dirty rat!

BERN
(Laughing.)
You guys!

They raise their cans, in turn, looking each other over.

JERRY
Hey.

CAL
Hey.

KEN
Hey.

BOB
Hey.

BERN

Hey.

(They all drink.)

Lemme see that scar. It's a scratch! I can't even see it!

JERRY

I never said it was big -

Bern undoes a couple buttons on his shirt. A big scar is visible through the hair on his chest.

BERN

And this is a little one. A chain, with razors in it.

KEN

You're shittin'.

(Looks closer.)

Shit, you're not shittin'!

BOB

Weren't you telling me once, that you lost use of your arm for awhile?

BERN

A week. It stayed numb, for a whole year. Scared me to death.

KEN

God! How did that happen?

BERN

A rumble. Old-fashioned kind. Got hit in the back, with a big - I mean big - thick chain. I went down like a ton of bricks, unconscious. Saved my life. They left me for dead.

KEN

How are you still alive, Bern? I never knew all this. The last thing I would ever have described you as would be a street-punk.

BERN

I'd outgrown it, before we all became friends. I guess I just needed something, I don't know, creative to work on, instead. It was only about a year. Last half of eighth to last half of ninth grade, about. I got so scared that last time, that I quit the gang altogether.

KEN

Who were you hanging out with? I know any of 'em? Let's see - you guys went to North -

BOB

The evil junior high. We used to hear horror stories, about North.

JERRY

They were all true.

CAL

We were the other side of the tracks from you and Ken, Bob. We had all the devil's own.

KEN

Not all! We had Shockley and Gayutin!

JERRY

I give you that. Gayutin was pretty bad. Shockley was just a crazy.

BOB

Plain crazy motherfuckin' asshole.

CAL

Mo-fo ass-ho. But we had Dean to contend with.

JERRY

(Pointedly trembles.)

Dean!

BERN

And Curt and Marty Welch.

JERRY

Welch!

CAL

And all the other little Welches, that hung around their big brothers, ripping-off hubcaps and old ladies' purses.

JERRY

They were a dynasty!

KEN

Worse than Shockley?

BERN

Worse than Shockley. About the same as Gayutin, worse than Shockley.

KEN

You ran around with these guys, Bern?

BERN

With Gayutin, yeah. And Curt Welch. Never could stand Marty.

Jerry

Whatever happened to those walking-homicides-waiting-to-happen, anyway?

BOB

Shockley got married.

KEN

Yeah?

BOB

He used to live down the block from me. Word travels fast, in neighborhoods. Yeah, to some girl he met in college, last year. Sounds like he's settled down a lot, over the years.

KEN

Scary thought - he's old enough to reproduce.

CAL

Kill it, before it multiplies!

BERN

Dean joined the army.

JERRY

Psycho-squad, probably.

BERN

The Welches all married-up. They're all settled down too, I guess.

CAL

What about Gayutin?

JERRY

(Suddenly remembering.)

I just read something about him the other day. I knew I recognized the name when I read it, but I couldn't place from where. He died.

A subtle air of sadness pervades the group. Ken becomes uncomfortable, and heads for the kitchen, holding up his can and looking at the others. They signify whether or not they want another, and Ken gets them. Bob suddenly seems very sad and tired. He walks slowly to the stereo during the following, unnoticed, and turns off the tape. He opens the Big Chill soundtrack, and studies it for a couple minutes, handling it gently, as if it were a rare jewel. Partly, he stares off into space, thinking private thoughts.

CAL

Knife-fight?

JERRY

No, a car accident.

CAL

Probably racing down the strip.

JERRY

Know what he was doing? He was an insurance agent. Car ran a red light, hit him in the crosswalk.

BERN

God. I practically grew up with that guy. He was just all fucked-up, then. All fucked-up.

CAL

Huh. Accident. Huh.

BERN

Wonder if he ever shaped up? Must have, some. He was an insurance agent.

JERRY

Yeah. For once, he wasn't even doing anything wrong. Even getting an honest life going for himself, sounds like.

BERN

Hope it was quick -

Ken returns, and notices Bob standing off by himself. He looks at the gang, as if weighing a decision - he wants to tell them, and can't. He hands each their beers, and deals with the problem by becoming more cheerful.

As he speaks, he tries to include Bob in the conversation. For the moment, Bob doesn't even seem to notice.

KEN

Hey - remember those poker games we used to play?

Suddenly, they all talk at once, laughing and chortling, in high spirits.

BERN

Poker games?

CAL

God, yeah! With the costumes and the toy guns and the whisky sours and stale beer, every weekend -

BERN

Wally Weston! Is that a name from the past! He used to crash your games, and you'd throw him out -

JERRY

I never went to one of those things, but I've heard Cal and Bob go on about them -

CAL

I didn't even go that often! I always lost! These two were the perpetual poker players!

(Indicates Bob and Ken.)

KEN

How do you know about the games, Bern? You were never there! I guess we used to talk about them a lot -

CAL

(Laughing.)

And we always played James Bond soundtracks, during the games, and stuff from westerns and adventure movies -

JERRY

(To Ken.)

Did anyone other than you or Bob ever win?

CAL

(Guffaws.)

Wally Weston! He started those games, didn't he?

KEN

He'd like you to think he did. I started them.

CAL

You both started those games.

JERRY

None of us could stand Wally! Ken, you practically ruined his car, in the space of two years.

BERN

Ken ruined everyone's car, in less time than that.

CAL

Put a beer in his hand, and the boy is lethal behind a wheel, totalling everyone's auto-mo-bile!

JERRY

(Laughing.)

You practically killed us both, when you wrecked your brother's car!

They all laugh. Ken groans, but half enjoys this.

KEN

Oh, good. Right. Pick on the one who's been gone the longest. "Hey, Ken, good to see you - haven't had anyone to slap a big red nose and big floppy feet on, in a while." Just great.

BERN

We only pick on you because we like you, Ken.

CAL

(Singing.)

"You only hurt - the one you love - !"

KEN

(Stands up, bends over, points to his ass.)

Sure, love me some more. Go ahead. Go ahead. I can take it.

(Sits back down.)

JERRY

(Still laughing.)

You weren't even drunk! You just turned a corner, and went BAM! into a culvert! Totaled the car. Smacked my head into the windshield. Half my scalp is still in it!

KEN

Not again - not again -

JERRY

And you sat there saying, "Oh my God, I wrecked the car!! Oh my God, I wrecked the car!!" Turned to me for a second: "Jer, you okay?" "Yeah." "Oh my God, I wrecked the car!!"

KEN

Could've happened to anybody. I wasn't that bad!

CAL

Not that bad?? How many times did it take you to get your driver's license? Four?

Through all this, Bob has been slowly smiling, remembering all this. He has unwrapped, and put on, The Big Chill. He turns back to the group, answering, revitalized. Ken notices, and suddenly seems happier.

BOB

Five.

CAL

Five!

(He is lost, in laughter.)

KEN

It's not funny!

(But he is laughing, too.)

BOB

He didn't even need a can of beer. The first time he went for his license, he ran a red light.

KEN

It was a stop-sign.

BOB

Whatever. The second time, he backed into another car, leaving the parking space.

KEN

Yeah, yeah, yeah -

BOB

The third time -

KEN

It took me a while, okay? You never learned to swim!

BOB

- he caused a fender-bender, turning too fast in the left-hand lane, into a brand new, off-the-lot car. The fourth -

KEN

You wrecked my bicycle, in fourth grade!

BOB

- was when you were taking a defensive driving course -

KEN

It was my best bike!

BOB

- which they made you take, before they would even consider giving you a license. The fifth -

KEN

You sat your fat ass on it -

BOB

I wasn't fat!

KEN

You were Godzilla's revenge!

BOB

I was just outgrowing my baby-fat.

KEN

Hundreds of pounds of baby-fat.

BOB

That bike was decrepit. Anyone who sat on it would have broken it.

KEN

But you sat on it. You sat your fat ass -

BOB

It was all timing. I just happened to sit on it at the right time -

KEN

- and it busted. I don't mean, "bent." I don't mean "broke."

BOB

- and it didn't matter then, who sat on it -

KEN

I mean - busted! Spro-o-oing!

BOB

If ninety-pound Mike Stutz had sat on it, it would have busted.

KEN

The wheels popped off - the seat collapsed!

BOB

I didn't break your bike!

KEN

The entire bike's spirit fled! In fear of your fat ass!
Busted! Spro-o-oing!

BOB

Let's talk about bikes, and your driving skill.

KEN

They're still cleaning up the remains of that bike - ! To bury it!

BOB

You thought you could make it to the top of Death Slope, at the park, on that outdated, rickety one-speed of yours. I don't know - fifth, sixth grade, maybe.

KEN

Its spirit haunts the garage.

BOB

We all said, "No, Ken - don't try it - you'll never make it - !"

KEN

It cries out, "Whose fat ass has wrought my doom?"

BOB

But you insisted. You gained speed. Pedaling, faster, faster -

KEN

(Picks up the jack-o'-lantern, waves it
before his face, like a mask.)

Its voice ghostly wails, "Who-oo-oo broke my go-o-o-olden frame - ?"

BOB

You started up the slope, straight as an arrow. Halfway up, the speed started dying -

KEN

Who-oo-oo broke my go-o-o-oldden frame?

BOB

Oh-shit-oh-shit-oh-shit! And you sped down the hill - straight as an arrow, feet working backwards, knees flying up and down - gaining speed, until - !

KEN

(Simultaneously.)

YOU did it!

BOB

(Simultaneously.)

BAM! Straight into a tree! The crack of skull on wood echoes, still!

KEN

I almost made it! I was inches! Inches!

BOB

(Disparagingly, shakes his head, smiling.)

Miles away!

KEN

Inches! I've still got a knot, on the back of my head.

BOB

The tree's got a bigger one.

They are all laughing, especially Bob and Ken, who regard each other warmly.

JERRY

Good try, Ken, but face it - you were a terrible driver. Worse than Wally.

BOB

And Wally was bad.

KEN

And you were fat.

BOB

(To Bern.)

Pot.

BERN

(To Bob.)

Cats. But you're still a good kid, Ken. We all love you.

JERRY

(Pontifically blessing/christening Ken.)

Goo-kid-one-can-car-crash-Ken!

KEN

Orson Welles should be so fat. I've gotten better.

BERN

(Playfully "tch-tch-tch-ing.")

Ken, Ken, Ken. What are we going to do with you?

KEN

Send me to bed without my supper.

CAL

Cheer up, Ken. We'll pick on someone else, for awhile.

KEN

Yeah, let's love Bob, for awhile. He won't be with us, that -

BOB

(Cutting him off, as Ken realizes what he almost said.)

You already loved my fat ass.

BERN

Who doesn't? It's so adorable. Kiss me, big boy!

JERRY

Now, there's an area we've all bombed out in.

CAL

Speak for yourself! I'm still married.

BOB

Not for long.

CAL

You don't think so?

JERRY

(Considers, agrees.)

I don't think so.

BERN

Me, too.

CAL

Et tu, Bern-ay? Why?

JERRY

Well, the fact that you can't keep your dip-stick out of every crank-case you come across might have something to do with it.

BOB

The bee, to pollen.

KEN

Hippity-hoppity rabbit.

BERN

Constant as water.

CAL

Admitted. She knew that when she married me, though.

JERRY

Doesn't make it any easier to accept.

BOB

She thought she could change you.

CAL

Listen to the expert! You never even married! Have you had a girlfriend?

BOB

Yes, I have.

CAL

When? You were never out with the girls!

BOB

None of us are, right now. We're out with the boys. That's our problem.

CAL

How many ladies you had, in the last twelve years?

BOB

My share.

CAL

Which is - ?

(133)

BOB

What? You want their names and addresses, or what?

They all laugh.

CAL

No, I'm just -

BOB

You want a rating?

CAL

I was only -

BOB

You want to know if they're clean, you'll have to ask Jer.
They didn't give me anything.

CAL

Which is why you're out with the boys!

A punch-line. They laugh, and subside.

BOB

Score one, for Cal! Really, though, we do all have the same
problem.

BERN

(Melodramatic shock.)

We're all gay!

JERRY

I used to wonder about that. I said to myself, "Gee, are we
all maybe secretly gay, and just don't realize it?"

CAL

And - ?

JERRY

I pictured sucking BERN's dong, and said, "Naw-aw-aw!"

Group groan, laugh.

BERN

I happen to have a very nice dong!

KEN

Yeah, all two inches, peckerwood!

More'n you!

BERN

Oh, yeah?

KEN

Yeah!

BERN

Yeah?

KEN

Yeah!

BERN

That's telling each other, guys!

CAL

Put 'em in their place, I always say!

BOB

So - what's our problem? I married, I divorced. Bern married, divorced. Cal, you're -

JERRY

I'll save you the trouble - yeah, we're probably headed for The Big "D."

CAL

(Sad.)

BOB

For real?

(Sighs.)

CAL

I think so, yeah.

Bern, you've had one romantic shambles after another, since the split. Ken, you can't keep a romance going for -

JERRY

Oh, maybe two weeks.

KEN

Two weeks, okay. Bob - well, Bob. So, what's our problem?

JERRY

A thoughtful silence falls. There is a long pause.

Hark - a pin droppeth. BOB

Weak laughter. Resumed silence.

We're all assholes. CAL

Goes without saying. KEN

So, why say it? BERN

Silence.

Theory. BOB

Shoot. JERRY

We're all pathologically narcissistic. BOB

Throw in "atavistically infantile," and you may have something. JERRY

In English, please, professors. CAL

It means we're all like you. BOB

Yeah, what he said. KEN

Oh. CAL

(Pause.)
Just what is that supposed to mean?

(Suddenly.) JERRY
I think I have it.

(They listen attentively.)
It's a spiritual thing. The whole time I was with Beth, it often occurred to me that she and I never - never - were as close as we all are. We tried. We really tried. It just wasn't there.

BOB

(Musing.)

Male-bonding. Nothing more solid, in the world. Closer than old Army buddies, living in the trenches for months, under German artillery fire.

Ken absently makes an explosion sound.
Another silence.

BERN

I felt the same way. I still do. Never met a woman who understands me, as much as you guys.

CAL

Ditto, ditto.

KEN

That's really it, isn't it?

BOB

That's really it.

JERRY

What's the solution, I wonder?

Pause. Ken looks at Bob. He is teetering on the verge of becoming maudlin. Bob notices it.

KEN

I can't imagine life without you guys.

BOB

We'll have to face it, eventually. When Doctor Death calls, you go - friends or no friends. My anthropologist said, once -

JERRY

Not to be confused with his gynecologist.

BERN

No, certainly not.

BOB

- that the reasons parents die are so their kids can live. Maybe it's necessary, for evolution.

KEN

Then why do the young die? The ones with their lives still ahead of them.

BOB

Hell, I don't know - I'm not the Buddha.

(Gestures to Jerry and Bern.)

To keep them in business, maybe. To keep other young people from becoming old, before their time. Break them out of ruts, keep them growing, make life more valuable, to those who -

Bob's face suddenly goes blank. He stops still, like a machine that has been switched off. His eyes are open, but dead - he doesn't even appear to be breathing. He stays this way much longer than is natural, puzzling everybody - everybody but Ken, whose eyes widen. He is quietly terrified. Bern snaps his fingers, next to Bob's head.

BERN

Hello, Bob!

CAL

(Imitating a radio.)

Earth to Bob - bzzz - Earth to Bob - come in, Bob - bzzz - !

KEN

Guys - guys, you don't understand - don't - Bob is -

BOB

(Comes to, disoriented, slightly shaken.)

Where was I - ?

CAL

Good question. Alpha Centauri, I think.

Laughter.

JERRY

Did you get a sudden Divine Revelation?

BOB

(Recovers, smiling.)

Of course!

BERN

What was it?

BOB

I felt myself leaving my body - I was in this big tunnel - and I saw a great light. It bathed me with warmth and goodness - and said - "Take a number, and be seated, please."

Laughter.

JERRY

Ken was saying something about you.

KEN

I have to tell them, Bob. I'm sorry - I have to! I - Bob is -

BOB

(Matter-of-fact.)

Dying.

(Half-pause.)

His cat. You know - "Bob" cat? A stray, he picked up. I named him.

(To Ken, gentle but deprecating.)

He's just a cat, Ken. You'll get over it. Granted, he's adorable, but -

KEN

Bob -

BOB

I didn't want him to bring it up, 'cause I thought you guys would think he was silly.

CAL

(Sympathetic.)

No, not at all!

JERRY

It's okay, Ken - nothing to be ashamed of. I felt awful, when my Boxer died.

CAL

Hey, man, it's cool - really. You get attached to the little fuckers, I know.

BOB

(To Ken.)

Glenda's cat was expecting a litter, pretty soon, back in L.A. Why don't you ask her for one? I know she'd love to give you one. She likes you.

KEN

I - uh, yeah. I guess I will. I'm sorry, guys. It's just - been bothering me.

BOB

I'm sure your cat appreciates that. Hey, guys - you know what it's time for -

Wild Turkey! BERN

ALL
(A battle cry.)
Wild Turkey!

JERRY
(Heads to the kitchen.)
C'mon, men - let's conquer that Wild Turkey!

CAL
(Following. A la Leonard Nimoy.)
"In Search of - Wild Turkey - "

JERRY
I'll get the flask.

BERN
(Following.)
I'll get the beers.

CAL
We'll get sick.

BOB
At least you will, Ken.
(Gently.)
I did warn you. Better, now?

KEN
I think so.

BOB
Good.

(Calls out.)
Ken's taking barf bets!

CAL
(Returning, with a beer in each hand.)
Don't want to miss that! What's your bet?

KEN
I bet - Bob drops first - damn. Then Jerry, then you, then me.

CAL
No, you'll drop first.

KEN

I'm tellin' ya - I got an inside track. How much?

CAL

Ten.

BOB

Twenty.

KEN

You don't have twenty - you're an actor. You still owe me five, from twelve years ago, over a lost bet on the color of a plastic monster out of a cereal box.

CAL

Pretty stupid bet for you to take, Bob - you know better than anyone else, that you're color-blind!

BOB

I'm good for it.

KEN

(Disparaging laugh.)

Right - how would I collect? Hell, I'll take it. Give me a point spread.

CAL

A point spread? On what?

KEN

All right, win, place and show, then.

CAL

Odds?

BOB

Standard?

KEN

Standard. We'll check the paper, tomorrow. See how it's paying, these days. Doesn't matter. You'll all lose. I'm tellin' ya - Bob drops first.

BOB

(Amused.)

Flatter yourself, flatter yourself!

CAL

Fuck that! Okay. You, then Bob, then Jer.

KEN

Bob?

BOB

You, Cal, Jer.

Jerry and Bern return from the kitchen, with beer and "The Flask."

JERRY

I heard all that. You have no faith in me, is that it? I bet Ken passes out. Then Cal. Then Bob.

BERN

You're all wrong. Bob will last it out. Ken, Cal, Jer. You didn't see Bob and I pound down more booze than any of you have ever seen, two years ago New Year's. And remain conscious.

Ken

What all did you have?

BOB

A bottle of burgundy, half a bottle of champagne, a bottle of brandy alexander -

KEN

Oh, my God - !

JERRY

(Simultaneously.)

Oh, Jesus - !

BOB

(Continuing.)

- three quarters of a bottle of Pina Colada -

JERRY

Christ - !

BERN

(Proudly.)

And a flask of apricot brandy, which we downed in ten minutes in the Village Inn parking lot.

CAL

(Laughing, mock-retching.)

Sounds like a "Number Three" puker to me!

BOB

It was a "Two," actually. And we didn't do that until dawn. And we stayed conscious, the whole time. We wouldn't even have barfed, if we hadn't had all that coffee.

CAL

Who would want to stay conscious, the whole time? Sweet death, release me!

BOB

He will, Cal. He will. Some day.

CAL

Which reminds me - I brought the Doctor Death soundtrack, in honor of Bob. Mind if I put it on?

KEN

Well -

JERRY

No! Go ahead!

BERN

Been meaning to give it a listen, anyway. Perfect season for it!

Cal quickly changes records, and the group gathers around. The music begins, as they begin their ritual. It is the "Danse Macabre," again. (For production purposes, it may be an abbreviated version, which can easily be manufactured.) For awhile, the music is spry and lively, almost festive.

JERRY

All right. Ready? Light joints.
(They do, and pass them.)
Ready?

ALL

(Holding up their beer cans.)
"Ready." "Aye, aye, sir!" "Are you kidding?" "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow - " Etc.

JERRY

Cans up. Pop tops. Swig.

They do, healthily. Each swig is about half a can. Bern holds up The Flask, solemnly, to appreciative "ooh"es and "aah"es.

BERN

The Flask!

Bern takes a swig, passes it on. The others follow suit, talking while they continue to drink, quickly and progressively becoming drunker. They have been drinking since before they came, and are going through their liquor at a phenomenal rate. Cal wipes his lips, passes on the flask. He picks up the record jacket to The Big Chill.

CAL

The Big Chill. When I saw that, I said, "God, there's us, there's the Fabulous Five." And I thought of Ken's mom's funeral.

JERRY

Why does that have to be what brings people together?

BOB

Because they come together to stave it off. Death, I mean. By celebrating life, and recognizing how short it is.

KEN

Yeah, shit, yeah.

CAL

Ain't it the truth?

KEN

Fuckin' "A".

(He is beginning to get maudlin again.)

I was so glad you guys were there. Seriously.

BERN

Hey. Ya know?

JERRY

What are friends for?

KEN

For drinkin' boilermakers with, peckerwood.

(Raises can, in a toast.)

To boilermakers.

ALL

Boilermakers.

(They drink.)

BOB
For breaking friends' bikes.

ALL
Friends' bikes!
(They drink.)

CAL
For remembering bad theater productions they all did together.

ALL
Bad theater!
(They drink.)

KEN
(Looking at Bob - sad, but proud.)
For riding with together - forever.

ALL
Riding - forever!
(They drink.)

KEN
Wherever the road may lead.

BERN
Whatever nameless dangers -

BOB
Nameless fears.

CAL
Poker games.

ALL
Poker games!
(They drink.)

BERN
(Passing The Flask's fourth round.)
To each of our ex-wives - and - ex-wives to be -

CAL
Hear, hear.

BERN
God bless 'em.

JERRY
And us.

BERN

And us. May we somehow, manage, to - manage together,
and not - ex, or - something.

They all drink.

KEN

Wally Weston.

ALL

Wally Weston.

(They drink.)

BOB

Scott Shockley, and Gayutin, and them.

BERN

Gayutin -

CAL

Yeah, what the hell.

KEN

Sure.

BOB

Them guys. May they all be happier.

ALL

Them guys.

JERRY

Hear, hear. And us, too.

KEN

(Chuckling.)

"God bless us, everyone!"

Laughter. They drink. It is getting much
drunker in this room. There is a pause.

CAL

(Breaking the pause.)

Ken, Ken -

KEN

What - ?

CAL

There a deck of cards, here?

Don't know. Why - ? KEN

We have to play one hand. For old times' sake. CAL

Face-off? KEN

Stud. CAL

Five - or five? KEN

Five - or seven - you mean? CAL

Yeah. Seven, or - seven? KEN

(Correcting him.)
It's Wild Turkey. BERN

(Confused.)
Huh - ? JERRY

Not Seven-and-Seven. BERN

Oh. Yeah. Uh-huh. JERRY
(Takes a swig from The Flask, as if to be sure.)

You got cards? Bern, Jer? KEN

(It takes him a second.)
Uh - yeah. BERN

Could we use 'em? CAL

Uh - sure. BERN

CAL

(After a pause.)

Well - will you get 'em? I don't know where they are.

JERRY

We left 'em at a poker party.

BERN

Oh - yeah.

(Pause.)

I got a tarot deck. You can use those. Just take off the picture cards, and they're just like - any other deck.

CAL

(As Bern gets the cards.)

You and me, cowboy. Face-off.

KEN

Stud.

CAL

Stud.

KEN

You don't -

(Belches.)

- stand a prayer.

CAL

You wish!

KEN

This deck ain't big enough for the both of us - Black Bart.

CAL

Fuck you -

(Belches.)

- Clean Gene. Deal.

Bern has gotten them the cards, and reseated himself. Ken starts counting off the Major Arcana cards from the strange deck, in drunken slow motion. There is only the sound of the music and belching, and one or two quiet interplays.

BERN

(After a pause.)

This is the greatest. How've I ever gotten along, without you guys?

JERRY
We's the greatest.

BERN
Is we a thing?

JERRY
We's a thing.

BOB
(Contemplative, looking at Jerry.)
I wonder -

JERRY
Yeah?

BOB
I wonder if the Last Supper was like this -

JERRY
I guess. They was buds, wasn't they?

CAL
(Still studying the soundtrack cover of
The Big Chill.)
Great movie, Big Chill. So - real, ya know?

BOB
Yeah.

CAL
I was afraid that - when we next got together - it would be
one of us. Dead.

JERRY
I used to be afraid of that. Glad it's not.

CAL
I had us all cast, in the different parts.
(To Jerry.)
You were Jeff Goldblum. Ken was William -

BOB
Hurt.

CAL
William Hurt.

BOB
I was the actor, of course.

CAL
No. I didn't have you cast in the principals.

BOB
(Surprised.)
Why?

CAL
I had you cast as the corpse?

BOB
Why me?

CAL
Well, I said, "Which of us will go first, when we finally go?"
And I thought you, because you were the palest.

This makes Jerry and Bern laugh. Cal gets his own humor, and laughs with them. Bob looks tired, and older. The "Danse Macabre" is becoming frenetic, sweeping, menacing. Ken has been frozen, looking at one card. His eyes have widened, and he has been listening to the music and the conversation - a catatonic corpse with terrified eyes. His gaze has been resting on Bob, for the last few moments. Cal notices, and takes the card Ken has been studying from his hand.

CAL
Wha'cha got there, cowboy?
(Sees it, does a mock-shudder, and shows it.)
Death - ! Blauggh - ! Looks just like you, Bob!
(Laughs.)

Ken suddenly lunges over to the hanging paper skeleton, and tears it from the wall. He looks back toward Bob, his hands around his face, looking as if he is about to scream.

KEN
It's too close! I can't deal - !

BOB
(Quickly, springing to his feet, exuberant.)
Freak-out! Freak-out! First of the evening! Time to start dancing out the booze!

They all laugh, except for Ken, who really is
freaking out.

JERRY

Hey, Ken - it's cool. We're here. You're safe.

CAL

Liven up! Dance those magic, klutzy feet!
(Begins dancing himself.)

BERN

Calm down, man - you know you're with friends.

KEN

He's dying - !

BOB

He's just a cat, Ken - we'll get you a new one!

KEN

You can't - you know you -

BOB

(Cranks the music to high volume. drowning
him out.)

Just the booze, Ken. Dance it out! Dance, dance!
(He grabs Ken, and swings wildly with him
about the room.)

Live, Ken, live! Smile, laugh, for those who can't!

KEN

Stop - Bob - stop - stop -

The others dance to the music, which has
become sweeping and almost maniacal. They
laugh - all but Ken, who looks sick. Bob
finally spins him away from the group.

BOB

If death can be happy - why can't you?

KEN

Stop - !

(He pulls away, and stumbles. Bob
catches him, before he falls.)

BOB

(Speaks to Ken urgently, quiet and intense.)
It's a fact, man - deal with it, deal with it and live! We
are all of us dying, from the moment we're born!

KEN

(Pulls away, in terror, seeing only Death before him.)

No - !

(Pause. He swoons.)

I'm - gonna be sick -

Ken reels to the bathroom. The music has reached its crescendo and climax, and become sad, but peaceful. A few moments later, retching is heard from the bathroom. Bern puts The Flask back on the table.

BERN

That means enough for Round One, I think.

JERRY

Think he's down for the count?

CAL

I'll let you know.

(Checks - returns a moment later; a la DeForrest Kelley.)

He's dead, Jim!

They all laugh, except for Bob, who only looks wistful and a bit sad. He collapses in a chair, with a sigh.

BOB

Well - who's next - ?

The music ends.

BLACKOUT

END OF ACT I

ACT II

The scene is the same, three hours later. In the darkness, mellow "piano bar" music plays, on the stereo. It is a pastiche of James Bond locale themes. "Diamonds Are Forever" is finishing up. All but Ken, who is offstage, sing its final strains, brokenly and off-key, while the lights fade up. They are all on the floor, comfortably sprawled and propped about. Beer cans are everywhere. The lights are low, the fireplace flickering, smoke in the air. The four are calm, subdued. Bob belches loudly, as the next tune starts.

BERN

(Referring to the belch.)

And that was a little one.

CAL

(Using an empty can for a microphone.)

Evenin', y'all. Got some music here that's so mellow, it'll make your skin crawl. Slow-dance city. Prop up your partners. If they're stone-cold dead, this music is enough to unstiffen their limbs. Men, it'll put your ladies in the mood - but you'll never get it up, so -

BERN

Which one's this from?

JERRY

Huh?

BERN

Movie. James Bond movie.

JERRY

That what this is?

BOB

Thunderball. "Cafe Martinique."

(Hums some of it, while the others talk.)

JERRY

If it's movies, just ask Bob.

BERN

Or Ken.

Ken still out? CAL

Whose turn to check on him? JERRY

Yours, I think. CAL

(Getting up.) BERN
No, mine. Back in a minute.
(Staggers off.)

JERRY
First James Bond movie I saw - let's see - the one with the
Dracula guy, the one that does those British ick-flicks -

BOB
The Man with the Golden Gun.

JERRY
(Belches.)
Yeah. That one.

BOB
Christopher Lee.

JERRY
Yeah. I always get him and Peter Cushing mixed up.

CAL
There any horror movies you haven't seen?

BOB
(Drinks.)
Nope.

JERRY
James Bond movies?

BOB
Nope.

CAL
Any movies?

BOB
Uh-uh. Seen 'em all.

CAL
 Bet you haven't seen Return of Revenge of the Bride of the
 Son of Frunobulax the Snot Monster from Venus vs. the Aztec
 Mummy from Borneo.

BOB
 Bet you're right. Only because it doesn't exist yet.

CAL
 How do you know?

BOB
 Because I'm writing it.

There is a light groan and thump, from
 offstage.

JERRY
 Must be Ken.

CAL
 Dead. Dead to the world.

BOB
 Gone forever. Never coming back.

CAL
 He's the one been gone the longest, we're most looking forward
 to seeing again, and he barfs-out on us.

JERRY
First.

CAL
 Fucked-up his bet.

JERRY
 Bob, you've been gone almost as long. You'll probably be
 next.

BOB
 Nope. First.

JERRY
 Think Ken's coming back?

BOB
 Nope.

JERRY

Then he's first. You'll be coming in second. Tough luck, old pal.

BOB

Yeah - tough luck.

BERN

(Returning.)

He's all over the floor.

JERRY

(Upset.)

He puked all over the floor!

BERN

No. He's all over the floor. Sort of wedged up against the bowl. His arm's over the bowl, his head's between it and the wall, his leg is sprawled over the tub, and his other one's up over the doorknob. His body's blocking the door. Can't open it more than an inch or two - just enough to see him in the mirror.

CAL

In other words, he hasn't moved since I looked in on him.

JERRY

Two hours ago.

BERN

Right.

JERRY

Good thing we have two bathrooms.

CAL

Just like the poker parties. We used to clean up, make sure everything was put away, check on Ken to make sure he wouldn't fall in a position where he'd choke on his own puke, and lock up as we left.

JERRY

Those were the days.

CAL

Yeah.

(Pause.)

How would you know? You never played poker with us.

JERRY

He was the same when we partied, during college.

CAL

I never knew you guys went to the same college!

JERRY

We didn't. I came home on weekends, and partied with him.

CAL

Oh. Yeah. Yeah, that's right. I never did college.
 Couldn't dig it. Except for the broadcasting scholarship.

BERN

Me either.

CAL

Couldn't dig it?

BERN

No money.

Cal

Oh.

(Pause. Laughs.)

BERN

Bobby-baby, he did Detroit. And L.A.

CAL

(Laughs.)

"Bobby Does De-troit!" Triple-X!

JERRY

Of all the places in the world, Bob -

CAL

Even the license plates are black!

JERRY

But it's a pretty place.

CAL

Gray stone, against gray stone.

JERRY

Gray streets.

CAL

Gray women.

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Gray moods.	JERRY
And black men!	CAL
Unemployment.	JERRY
<u>One-third</u> unemployment.	CAL
Fire-bombed stores.	JERRY
People dropping dead on the streets -	CAL
The <u>gray</u> streets -	JERRY
From exposure and starvation.	CAL
Smog.	JERRY
Riots.	CAL
Vandalized cars.	JERRY
<u>Abandoned</u> cars.	CAL
Poverty.	JERRY
Depression.	CAL
But it's a <u>pretty</u> place.	JERRY
Pause.	

BOB

(A smile grows on his face, and he sings.)
"Green Acres is the place to be! Farm livin' is the life
for me!

BOB & BERN

(In duet.)

"Land! Spreadin' out, so far and wide - "

ALL

"Keep Manhattan, just gimme that countryside!"

They laugh.

BOB

You guys, play that at my funeral. That's my secret funeral
song, that only you guys will know. When the somber bullshit
is over -

JERRY

Why did you go to Detroit?

BOB

Couldn't beat the scholarship. Or fate. If I hadn't gotten
my ass to Detroit, I never would have met Jackie.

CAL

And gotten it laid. That was where you lost the "Big 'V',"
wasn't it? I understand you guys swapped "When I Lost It"
stories last year, and I wasn't there to hear. Catch Bern
and me up, willya?

BOB

(Rolls his eyes.)

Oh, jeeze, what's to tell?

CAL

Well, Jer tells me you guys were all wrong about each other's
first.

BOB

Boy, were we - ! We were sure we had each other figured out,
and we were years off.

JERRY

And we'd thought Ken might have been gay.

They laugh. Cal looks meaningfully at Jerry.

CAL

And whose fault was that?

JERRY

I know, I know. But you all thought so, too.

CAL

Because you, with your on-the-job expertise, thought so!

JERRY

Well, he fits the pattern. He'd just come off of two bad jilts, and then just up-and-disappeared to San Francisco, of all places. I meet a lot of gays with the same story, who are just afraid to let anyone know, in their hometowns.

BOB

We were all wrong about that, yeah. We laughed about it.

BERN

You were all wrong about me!

(Smiles.)

JERRY

Yeah, but we found that out, years ago. You were the first to lose it, at the bleachers. No, that's what we thought at first - in Grayson's car, right?

BERN

Right. With Syl Schwartz.

CAL

(Laughs.)

Syl Schwartz! Her figure was the envy of all twelve-year-olds!

BERN

Hey!

CAL

Well, okay, she was kind of cute. Sure blimped-out, later!

JERRY

We all knew when you lost it, Cal. It was only a month or two after Bern. You did it at the bleachers!

CAL

Under the bleachers. And that was only because I thought that's where Bern did it.

JERRY

You were always after all our girlfriends. Or kind of imitating what we did with them. I always thought that was kind of weird.

CAL

It was, wasn't it? Don't know why - but you all had me pegged, anyway. I've heard Ken's and Jer's stories, so what's yours, Bob?

BOB

Where do I start?

CAL

Well, what did she look like?

BOB

A goddess. She was - beautiful. Did a lot of commercials.

CAL

(Aside, to Jerry.)

She was probably Quasimodo's mother!

Bob smiles, smugly, removing a photo from his wallet, which he hands to them. Cal whistles.

JERRY

She really is beautiful.

CAL

(Turning the photo over.)

Jesus, she even wrote on the back! "To my perfect lover: an early riser, and a late comer!"

(He bursts into laughter.)

This is a gag, right?

BERN

No, I met her. She came out and spent a couple days with Bob, before he went out to L.A. The picture doesn't even do her justice.

CAL

Bet your mom loved that!

BOB

We booked a hotel room.

Appreciative "oohs" and "aahs" from the others.

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Gee, she still sees you? JERRY

Sometimes. BOB

You gonna ever marry her? CAL

(Small pause.) BOB
No.

You love her? JERRY

Almost as much as she loves me. BOB

What, then? She married? Never stopped me. CAL

She's a widow. BOB

You're kidding! JERRY

She was thirty-six, when I met her. BOB

And twenty-four, and thirty-six again. CAL

Matter of fact, she is. BOB

How old is she, in that picture? JERRY

Forty-one. BOB

JERRY & CAL
(Disbelievingly, simultaneously.)
No-o-o - !

No shit. BOB

JERRY

God, she sure ages well. You worried about the age difference, then?

BOB

No.

CAL

She is.

BOB

Bothers her less than me.

JERRY

Well, what's your problem, then? What keeps you apart? Just geography?

CAL

For her, I'd live in Detroit!

BOB

(A little sadly.)

So would I.

JERRY

So, what?

Brief pause. Bob laughs.

BOB

How did we get on this, anyway?

BERN

Let's see - we were talking about Detroit and movies, then school and funerals and loss of virginity stories.

JERRY

A typical conversation, for this group.

BOB

Oh, yeah! I was telling you about my secret funeral song -

CAL

I want the "Big 'V'" story!

BOB

(Sighs.)

Okay, okay. Not much to tell.

CAL

How old were you?

BOB

Twenty-one. Just turning twenty-two.

CAL

Does that make you last?

JERRY

No, Ken and Bob were about the same time. I was last - six, eight months later.

CAL

That's right! You were a virgin on your wedding night, weren't you? No wonder your marriage had problems! You hadn't even gotten to know each other, yet.

JERRY

(Protesting.)

We'd known each other for years!

CAL

Not the same.

BERN

My marriage busted up because Noell and I slept together before we got married. I think God doesn't like it.

JERRY

That's all I was doing. I was just trying to be a good Christian, and wait.

CAL

And it didn't help either of you. You both divorced.

BOB

God's got no place in the bedroom.

JERRY

(A gentle note of warning.)

God's got no place in this conversation.

BOB

Fine.

CAL

Christ, Jer, it's not like Beth was a sainted virgin, charming unicorns out of the trees, when you married her.

JERRY

Yeah, well, she converted at the same time I did, and put it behind her.

CAL

And you both married on a religious high, that's the problem.

JERRY

Maybe it was - but let's not talk about it - okay?

BERN

Religion may not mean squat to you, but it's important to us, okay?

CAL

(Laughs.)

Bern, that's what's wrong with you and girls! You keep putting God in the bedroom! How can anyone make love, married or not, with a bloody tortured man on a cross over their head?

BERN

C'mon, Cal.

CAL

Or the smiling virgin, saying, "Now, now!"

BERN

Enough, huh? You got your views, we got ours.

CAL

Yeah, whenever we talk about sex, it's your views - but the rest of the time you never bring God into anything! Like the bedroom's the only place for Him! I mean, make up your mind, really.

BERN

(Getting tight.)

Hey.

CAL

(Backing off.)

Okay, Pace, hey. God forbid I should step on your vast knowledge of Him. I'm just a lowly sinner - what do I know?

JERRY

Enough, guys, come on.

CAL

No problem. My marriage is bustin' up, too. And it's my fault, incidentally, not God's, which is all I was getting at.

BERN

You just never quit, do you?

CAL

Not when it ain't finished.

BERN

This is finished.

CAL

Good. I want to hear Bob's story, anyway. Where'd you meet her?

BOB

In a coffee shop. I'd admired her from afar, for many months, not even knowing who she was. I finally met her through a mutual acquaintance. I knew she liked me, straight off, by her smile. I can always tell - by the smile. And the look in her eyes. And she sort of put her thigh against mine, and left it there while we talked. I was nuts about her. Better still, I could tell she was just bowled over with me. We started "bumping into each other" a lot, after that. You know, accidentally on purpose. It was three or four weeks before we actually went to bed together. She said I was the toughest man she'd ever tried to seduce.

CAL

She chased you? Ya dope! I'd have been on her, in a shot!

BOB

I'm sure you would have - if she'd have anything to do with you.

JERRY

Score one, for Bob!

CAL

What took you so long?

BOB

I don't know. Because I'd never done it before, I guess. Isn't everyone a little scared, the first time? I mean - what if I was no good? Or she was no good? Just butterflies.

CAL

And - how was it?

BOB

A lot less exciting than I expected. Actually, I thought it was kind of humorous. There were all these strange sucking and slapping and slurping sounds, and everything was so sweaty and serious, that I finally started laughing. And she started laughing. It sure broke the ice, if nothing else.

JERRY

Strange age we live in, huh? You go to bed, then you break the ice!

BOB

I couldn't even come, that first night. I labored and heaved and worked and perspired, and I couldn't come. I thought, Jesus Christ, here I am losing it, finally - the time is right, the woman is right, the mood and the feeling are right - and I can't come! And sort of detached, I thought: if I don't come, does that mean I haven't lost my virginity? Or do you lose it with vaginal penetration? Or is the line drawn earlier than that, say, with petting, or heavy kissing, or just seeing a woman naked, or just when, exactly? Did I lose it the day we met, when I first looked into her eyes, and knew that we would be lovers? And the more I wondered, the more I realized - good God, I've been lovers with women I've never even touched! Is that possible?

CAL

I think you're touched!

JERRY

I understand it.

BERN

So do I.

CAL

You two become monks in bed, and he turns philosopher. Doesn't anyone just have a good time, any more?

JERRY

You do, Cal.

BERN

But does she?

JERRY

Score one for Bern!

BOB

Anyway, it's what I felt. Well. She was very gracious. "You're tired," she said, as I finally withdrew - what, about forty-five minutes, an hour later?

CAL

At least you've got staying-power!

BOB

My body was sore, my hip was bruised, from banging into her pelvis - God, so much work, to do this "fun" thing, this thing that's supposed to be the most incredible thing in the world, that men have murdered for, fought wars over, toppled empires to obtain. And all I could think was - this is it? It wasn't the firecracker-Fourth-of-July I expected - hell, I could jack myself off to a more intense orgasm, if that was the point. But it was - nice. Kind of gentle, you know? I marvelled at how well our bodies fit together, like they were meant to. And afterwards, we were so comfortable together. We smoked and joked and swapped life stories till dawn, and I realized - that this was what I had wanted, from sex. That the act itself was a means to this end. I guess it was love.

(He pauses.)

That was in the Spring. We saw each other through the summer, and the love-making - the sex - got better. I guess it does for anyone, with practice. I got hired out here, then L.A., and she still swings by, whenever she's in the neighborhood. We've talked marriage, but - her last kid just grew up and left the house -

(He seems to become preoccupied, not talking to them at all.)

- last year, I think. And she still - she still has her work, just like I do. Can't leave that. Too much still to do.

Just getting things going, finally. And she -

(Laughs, uncomfortably.)

- uh - her last husband, it was a bit of a start for her. He died young. She woke up one day, and he - uh - he was just dead. She'd gone to bed with him warm and alive and loving, and woke up with him cold and dead, and - uh - I don't think she's quite ready to - the age difference, she doesn't want that to happen - to me - some day -

CAL

But you still see her? Still get along?

BOB

Oh, yeah. Never better.

JERRY

Sounds like it's all working out. Why don't you marry her? I mean, hell, I don't know about Cal or Bern, but you've already got it better with -

(He can't think of her name.)

BERN

Jackie.

JERRY

Jackie - I swear sometimes he's psychic - than I ever had with Beth. I don't know, I've always thought if one of us could make a lasting marriage, it'd probably be you. I know you never thought that, but, well - you know, if you, like, need or want our blessing, or anything, you know, I mean, I'd say "Go for it."

CAL

Shit yeah, Bob. But I think you're a fool if you let it slip by you - if it's the real thing, you know?

BOB

So do I.

CAL

You think you'll ask her?

BOB

(Preoccupied, speaks after a few moments.)

Nature calls. Time to give some of this alcohol back.
(Exits.)

CAL

We'll be here!

JERRY

Check on Ken!

(Once Bob is gone.)

I tell you - if one of us can do it, it's probably him. 'Course, I thought I could, too. That was sure fun.

CAL

Hey, you didn't have a custody battle.

JERRY

Gonna fight for your kid?

CAL

Great parent that I am? Shit! She'll give me visiting privileges, whenever I want. We don't hate each other.

JERRY
Really think you're splitting?

CAL
You did, earlier.

JERRY
That's 'cause I know you too well. She doesn't.

CAL
(A little sulky.)
Don't bet on it.

BERN
I really thought Noell and I would stay married.

CAL
I didn't.

BERN
Why? You knew me too well?

CAL
I knew her too well.

BERN
Not long, you didn't.

CAL
Oh, Christ, Pace, that's not what I meant, and you know it. I may be an asshole, but I'm a human being. She goes back with me further than you do. And whose side did I fall on, after the divorce? Yours. It wasn't her fault either, I don't think. You just weren't suited, in the first place.

BERN
Yeah. I guess.

JERRY
I wasn't sure you'd make it with Noell, either.

BERN
Neither was Bob. Why didn't you guys all tell me, before?

JERRY
Would you have listened to us?

BERN
Probably not.

JERRY

There you have it. I really did think you'd make it with Julie, though. You were far enough removed from the divorce that it didn't seem like a rebound. Then that all fell apart.

CAL

I never did get the whole low-down on that. You two seemed to be getting along fine for awhile, then I heard it was all blown apart, and no one ever said why. What's the story?

JERRY

(A little uncomfortably.)

Let's not get into it - it's not important.

BERN

I don't have a problem telling him.

JERRY

Bern -

BERN

Why not? Bob? He and I got all that settled, a long time ago.

CAL

All what? How does he enter into all this?

JERRY

She and Bob were old friends, like you and Noell.

CAL

(Laughs.)

Let me guess - he slept with her! At least you stay true to pattern, Pace!

JERRY

No -

BERN

She lied to me. She cheated on me. Not with Bob. I don't know who. Is it important?

JERRY

Bern - I don't think you really want to -

BERN

She gave me the clap. Right after we were engaged. After we both swore there was no one else, and promised there wouldn't be.

JERRY

I liked Julie too, Bern.

BERN

What if you do? Doesn't alter things, does it?

Jerry doesn't say anything. He looks away from Bern and Cal, and is the only one to notice that Bob has returned and heard much of this last exchange, standing in the hallway. Bob listens, smoking quietly.

BERN

(Continuing.)

I don't judge her for it. I just didn't want anything more to do with her. I don't like people lying to me. I just don't. And then she made things worse, by telling Bob I'd given it to her.

CAL

Must have put him in a tough spot -

BERN

It rocked us for awhile. I had to give him my word of honor on it, before he believed me. Then he went to L.A., and things have been pretty well smoothed over since.

JERRY

(Looking at Bob.)

We've all had a few strains over the years. Nothing to break the group up over. It's all in the past, anyway. Ancient history.

Bob nods slightly, and withdraws back into the hallway before he can be seen.

CAL

I never knew Julie all that well, but I never thought she had it in her to be really devious.

BERN

Well, she was. I hadn't thought so, either.

Bern has been very direct in his speech, but there also has been an underlying discomfort in him. A door thumps, off, and Bob makes some noise returning.

BOB

Dead, dead, dead.

JERRY

Ken?

BOB

Who else? Funny - you know, I looked in on him, just lying there, so motionless - and I thought, "What if he really were dead?" Just keeled over, heart given out. What would we do?

CAL

Call the hospital, I guess. And the police. And flush our drugs, fast.

BOB

Have a wake for him, after the funeral? Wonder what last words he might have had in him, before it happened, other than, "I think I gotta puke, guys?"

CAL

(Chuckles.)

Well - I'd never stopped to really think about it - but I suppose so.

BOB

I know what I might wonder.

JERRY

What?

BOB

If he'd told us everything. Everything we ought to know.

JERRY

About - ?

BOB

Everything. Blood, maybe. "It will have blood, blood will have blood, they say - "

CAL

Macbeth.

BOB

MacBob.

JERRY

(Becoming slightly wary.)

What are you doing, Bob? What's slushing through that alcoholic mind?

BOB

Ghosts. Ghosts from the past - the same thing that's always held us together. Ghosts are always hungry -

BERN

Whose ghosts? Our ex-wives? Ken's best bike?

BOB

(Ominously.)

Ours.

(Long, thoughtful pause.)

When's the last time we bled? Opened up old scabs, let the bad blood out?

JERRY

(Almost warning.)

We haven't needed to. Nobody's fucked anyone over, lately.

(Glances quickly at Bern, then back to Bob.)

Besides, we take care of that shit between whoever's involved - as it happens.

BOB

Have we always?

BERN

Well - yeah.

Bern looks to the others, who signify affirmation. Bob leans forward, looking Jerry in the eye. His smile is crooked. There is a glint in his eye, as if he has become possessed by some Puckish spirit.

BOB

Jennie Buford.

JERRY

What about her?

BOB

I wanted her.

JERRY

So did I.

BOB

Bad.

JERRY

(Confused.)

Yeah, I know. Me too. We both knew that.

BOB

We both made moves on her. Let the best man win. Talked it over, like men, and reached the civilized conclusion. No hard feelings, regardless of the outcome.

JERRY

She ended up with you, after graduation.

BOB

(Nods.)

For a few months.

JERRY

(After a pause, still confused.)

Yeah, well, so what? I mean -

BOB

She chose me, because you - were actually - gay.

Pause.

JERRY

Say what?

BOB

She saw more of me than you, working on the shows. We worked closely. We talked. She asked. I hinted. She bought it.

JERRY

No.

BOB

Yes.

JERRY

Bullshit!

BOB

Truth.

JERRY

When?

BOB

(Thinks.)

Would have been - February, of our junior year, the same night that -

(Ticks events off, in his mind.)

The middle weekend. The Friday night closest to the fifteenth. Whatever that was.

JERRY

(Realizes.)

Jesus Christ - that was right when - you son of a bitch!

BOB

Hear me out.

JERRY

What a fuckin' low blow, you son of a -

BOB

Hear me out?

(Jerry says nothing.)

All through high school, I bowed out of all your guys' romantic entanglements. I was too busy. Rehearsing every night, studying. You - Bern, Cal, Jer - you went after bunches of them. Girls that would never have met you, except for coming to see me in the plays. You hung around like a bloody gang of camp-followers, absorbing my glory - and I let you. I even let you have what came with that glory. Didn't bother me much. Sure, I might have liked to date one or two of them - but just no time, no time. They still liked me, and so did you, and my ego got fed fine. I let you have all the rest of it.

(Pause.)

Everything but her. Her face, her legs, her smile, her laugh, her voice - I was in love with her, Jer, the first time I'd really loved. I was in love with her. And you weren't. She was just another one of the throng you kind of liked, wouldn't have minded getting to know better.

JERRY

That didn't give you any kind of right to suggest I was gay, damn it! What if she spread that around to her friends? That could've really fucked me up!

BOB

(Simply.)

Jennie Buford had no friends. She was the shyest wallflower who ever lived, except on stage.

JERRY

That's what attracted me to her.

BOB

Attracted you! I loved her, Jer. She was scared and vulnerable and sad. We were a lot alike, except that I dealt with it much better. I knew her instinctively. We could have helped each other - and did, a couple years later. She was the only girl I ever wanted, the whole time we were there.

CAL

(Strangely fascinated by all this.)

What about Lyn?

BOB

Lyn, you'll recall, I went for on the rebound. She and I had a lot in common, but just couldn't work out, because we were both on the rebound. It might have worked later - but things got complicated between us.

JERRY

(Has cooled down considerably.)

Complicated, how?

(A touch of snappiness.)

Someone suggest you were gay?

BOB

(Smiles, nods.)

Matter of fact, yes.

JERRY

Who? None of us were after her.

CAL

I was.

JERRY

You said Bob was queer?

CAL

No, Bob, I never did, I swear.

BOB

I know you didn't.

JERRY

Well, then, who -

(He suddenly remembers, covers his mouth
in surprise.)

Holy shit - !

CAL

What?

JERRY

It was Ken, and I knew about it! He told me. That was -
God, two, three years after school. I'd completely forgotten
about it. I thought it was funny, at the time -

BOB

I bumped into Lyn last year, on the coast. She's married,
now. We had a couple drinks, talked over the past - and I
heard all about it. She'd taken it as gospel truth. I
assured her it wasn't, she believed me, and we laughed about
it.

BERN

(Softly.)

You ever confront Ken about it?

BOB

I didn't have to. He told me last month. I figured he would
- if I gave him time. Like I'm doing now. It was too funny,
too poetic. Goes around, comes around.

JERRY

(Struck with the ironic humor, laughs.)

Well, damn it, Bob, you deserved it!

BOB

(Laughs.)

So do you, you son-of-a-bitch! You knew Ken was doing it to
me, and you never told me!

JERRY

Oh, fuck. Maybe so. I'm too tired to fight you, anyway.
You'd just get me laughing, and I'd lose.

CAL

Water under the bridge.

BERN

Ancient history.

JERRY

But gay?

(He can't help laughing, and it becomes infectious.)

That was really rotten!

BOB

(A big smile.)

Stinks, don't it?

JERRY

Why didn't you just tell her I had infectious hepatitis, or something?

BOB

It was the first thing that came to mind. It was from a movie I'd just seen. The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes. See, Watson wants to get involved with these ballet dancers, and -

JERRY

(Throws up his hands.)

Stop! Don't tell me! I don't want to know! If you get started, I'll have to hear the whole plot, and who directed and starred in it, and who was the gaffer, and best boy, and - what are they, key grabber, or something.

They all laugh.

CAL

I never gave you credit, Bob. I never would have thought you had it in you.

BOB

You sound proud of me.

CAL

Almost. I guess I always equated deviousness with intelligence.

BERN

You would!

BOB

Any prize examples - ?

JERRY

Fess up, Cal. The ball's rolling. Your court.

Fifteen, luv. BOB

Your serve. JERRY

You guys know any shit I ever pulled. CAL

All of it? BERN

I think so. What, you want a complete journal, with times, dates and places? "Tuesday the fourteenth: fucked over Bern Pace. Stole his cribnotes for the biology test, and used them myself. Laughed, when Bern couldn't find them, and got his ass flunked." CAL

Something like that. BERN

Being sneaky was my stock in trade. What shit haven't I told you about, over the years? CAL

If we knew, it wouldn't be something you'd told us. How do we know what you haven't? JERRY

What about Noell? BERN

What about her? CAL

Why were you trying to get her, when you knew we were going together? BERN

We've been through all this. CAL

Let's go through it again. BERN

Let's not. CAL

Let's. BERN

A slight pause. Bern's tone has come out stronger than is quite friendly. Cal frowns, not sure how to take it.

CAL

All right. Noell - what would Bern not know about me and Noell? We knew each other, years before you ever met. She lived down the block from me, till her dad got a cushy pay increase, and moved uptown to Bob's and Ken's side of the tracks. We used to play house and toy trucks, together. We sang in the same church choir. She was like a sister to me. She stole a plastic alligator from me once, and hid it under her sofa cushion. I tied her cat by its tail to the clothesline. We were each other's excuse to get away from family functions. She used to cover my ass when I was nine, and I -

BERN

I know all that.

CAL

You know everything I can tell you. I'm just repeating it 'cause you're being a butt.

BERN

When did brotherly love decide to be more?

CAL

She confided in me, for God's sake. You've got it wrong, Bern.

BERN

Wrong, how?

CAL

I wasn't after her. She was after me.

BERN

Shit.

CAL

Bullshit. True.

BERN

You never could keep from trying to fuck any girl we were ever interested in.

CAL

Most of the time, yeah. You're right. I suppose I wanted to see what you were after. But I never chased her.

BERN

All those times she broke dates with me, she was seeing you.

CAL

By her request.

BERN

C'mon Cal. Come clean.

CAL

She called me up. Wanted to talk to me. Friend to friend.

BERN

And you made the moves on her.

CAL

Never once. I stopped her moves. Up until the last one.

BERN

You're lying.

CAL

(Sighs. Earnestly.)

I'm a liar, yeah. But not with you guys. And not for a long time with most other people, either. Bern, I've confessed worse stuff than this. Why would I lie now?

BERN

You wanted her, just to fuck her, like you wanted all the girls we dated.

JERRY

Hey, hey - keep cool.

BERN

Why? It's true!

Bob watches all this with sardonic amusement. He keeps his attention on Bern, who pointedly avoids his gaze.

BOB

We all knew it was true. He tried to pick up Lyn, not two weeks after she and I started getting together.

(Smiles.)

CAL

(Laughs.)

And you stopped me in the hall one day, and said, "Big deal, Cal. She's got your number!" As I was asking her for her phone number!

BOB

She did, too. She used to say to me, "Bob, I didn't know your friends were vampires."

CAL

(Laughs harder, remembering.)

And she started wearing a cross and waving garlic in my face, every time I talked to her! I mean, a real cross! She'd smile, give me a knowing look every time I tried hitting up on her, and pull out this crucified Christ from around her neck, and -

BERN

(Hard.)

What could she tell you, Cal that she couldn't tell me?

CAL

What?

BERN

You heard me.

CAL

(Laughter subsides.)

Well - she was confused. She wasn't sure if she loved you or not. You know, the usual stuff.

BERN

So, what'd you do? Tell her I was gay? Seems to be popular.

BOB

(To Bern, a quiet warning.)

Chill out, Bern.

CAL

Bern - damn it, what do you want?

JERRY

Ancient history, Bern. Come on.

CAL

I didn't rape her. I never fuckin' touched her.

BERN

She told me otherwise.

CAL

(Confused.)

That I raped her? A lot of things she might do, but she wouldn't lie. Not about me.

BERN

That you two had fucked.

CAL

Well, we had, I never kept that a secret from you, she practically raped me, for God's sake.

JERRY

(Trying to ease things.)

Hey, hey, hey - nothing new here, guys. Cool it. Ancient history.

Bob smokes quietly, eased back, relaxed,
studying Bern with a barely discernible disgust.

BERN

What are you trying to tell me, Cal? She was a frail little thing. She ripped your clothes off?

CAL

No! She did what women do.

BERN

What? I can't wait.

CAL

She cried.

BERN

Why ?

CAL

Damn, it, Bern, why don't you call her up and ask her, you're obviously not believing me.

BERN

Why?

CAL

(Half exploding.)

She thought you didn't love her!

(Small pause, silence.)

She was nuts about you. She thought you were the greatest thing since sliced bread. I was trying to help you out, you big fuckin' dick.

(Even his harsh words come out with an undertone of sincere affection.)

BERN

Hell of a way to do it.

CAL

(Calmed down, honest in tone.)

I swear to God, Bern, I never went after her. She was after me. I tried to stop her. I just couldn't.

BERN

Who's dragging God into the bedroom, now?

BOB

(Quietly, not heard.)

Yeah, who.

BERN

You could have said no. You could have kept your pants up.

CAL

She hugged me - the way we used to hug - and she cried. Buckets and buckets of tears. She soaked my shirt. I hurt for her. I positively hurt. She thought she wasn't- that you didn't want - do you really want to hear this?

BERN

You make it sound like I was abusing her. I bought her presents. Flowers. I bought her lots of things. I took care of her. I loved her.

CAL

No, you never abused her, Bern. Not in any way you were aware of. She felt cared for, but not -

BERN

What?

CAL

Loved.

(Slight pause, after which he quickly continues.) I mean, hell, Bern, you were great to her, you treated her like a queen. She thought enough of your treatment of her that she came back to you, two years later, and married you. She was in touch with me, that whole time. And don't get mad at me, you dumb prick, we never slept together again. That first time - the only time - she needed love. She needed to feel - desired, I guess. She looked up at me with those wet eyes, and my heart broke. Hers was already broken - or breaking. She wanted me to kiss her. She looked up at me and pleaded through her eyes for me to love her. Women rape, too. But they do it that way, the subtle way. And I couldn't refuse her. She still wanted you. You figured out what had happened. She told you, didn't she? And you hated me, for more than a year. You wouldn't listen to me. You wouldn't listen to her. You only heard you - your hurt, your anger - and nothing else seemed to matter. In that year, she went to college. Met other guys. Thought about marrying a couple of them. But she still loved you. She saw me - as a friend - several times, and I suggested she try talking to you, again. You forgave me enough to have me at the wedding, and pretty soon the slate was clear. We talked it out, and I thought it was done - until now.

A meditative silence falls over the group. Bob meditates on the glowing end of his cigarette.

BOB

Smouldering fires - out with the bad blood, in with the good. Undiscovered skeletons buried. And a few dug back up. I suppose all of us could dig a few smelly ones up -

(Looks at Bern, not shifting position.)
- or bury them more firmly. Bern.

BERN

(Slightly uncomfortable, with a glance to Bob.)
Yeah, I - I guess.

BOB

(Half serious, half joking.)
Unless you want to blame him for your divorce.

CAL

Hey, come on -

BERN

No. That wasn't any of you. That was - well, fuck it. I know you didn't mean anything, Cal. I knew it when I started. I don't know why -

CAL
Hey. Like, no sweat. You know?

BERN
Just - things. We's cool, man.

CAL
We's cool? We's a thing?

BERN
(Smiles, nods.)
We's a thing.

CAL
Hey.

BERN
Hey.

CAL
You're not going to rip me, for milk money?

BERN
(Laughs, hands him a beer - they clink cans.)
Ya putz!

JERRY
(Laughs uncomfortably, relieved.)
I'm not even going to ask, if there are any more hidden revelations!

BOB
Why not?

JERRY
Well - shit - even if there are, why dig up old corpses?

BOB
To lay the hungry ghosts to rest. I've got enough faith in this group to believe that nothing will ever break us up - not permanently.

JERRY
Death, maybe.

BOB
I doubt it.

CAL

I think people are basically shitty. Even with their friends. No -especially with their friends. Maybe they think it's easier to pull shit on friends, and get away with it.

BOB

What's your point?

CAL

Maybe - to stay friends with people - you have to keep a few secrets.

BOB

Don't you want - I don't know, the guilt removed, before you die?

CAL

(Laughs.)

Christ! That's a long way off, let's not rush things!

BOB

Yeah - a long way off.

JERRY

I hear that! There are things I know my dad never told my mom. He may someday. I don't know. But the way he figures it, they won't change things any. And he'd rather wait until he's about to die.

BOB

(Laughs, a little uncomfortably.)

Of course - the dead are easy to forgive. They don't hang around, where they can fuck things up all over again. You don't have to listen to their bullshit, or their self-pitying rationalizations.

CAL

(Laughs.)

Yeah.

BOB

Maybe that's why people only ask, at the end.

He shakes his head and becomes absorbed in thought. No one pays attention to him.

JERRY

Hey.

(Stretches.)

God, why am I so tired?

CAL

You worked all day, you've been drinking all night.

BERN

May have something to do with it.

JERRY

We have any coffee?

BERN

Nope. You drank the last, this morning.

JERRY

No, there was more.

BERN

Then I drank it.

JERRY

He always blames me, when we run out of food.

BERN

You always blame me!

JERRY

No, I don't!

BERN

Just yesterday: "Looks like somebody's eaten all the frosty cookies," with that knowing tone.

JERRY

Well, you had.

BERN

That's beside the point.

JERRY

And you drank all the coffee.

BERN

Only the last. Not all of it. You drank three quarters of it.

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JERRY

(Yawning.)

Why didn't you buy some more?

BERN

What?

JERRY

I said, you should have bought more. You knew we'd be here.

BERN

It's your turn.

JERRY

Oh.

Pause. Cal laughs.

BERN

What?

CAL

I was just thinking. We could lock ourselves into mortal combat over it, nine years from now.

(Dramatically.)

"It was your turn, you scum-bucket bastard!"

They laugh.

BERN

(To Jerry.)

Remember that night at Village Inn, you drank twelve pots of coffee?

JERRY

And they all came back, the way they'd gone. All night.

BERN

Why'd you do it, Rodney? Was it less filling? Did it have great taste?

JERRY

Tasted better leaving, than it had coming.

CAL

So, why'd you do it, Rodney?

Pause. Jerry laughs, silently. He decides to play along.

JERRY

You guys have got it all wrong - why I'm not even Rodney!
(Mimes pulling off a mask, with a slurping sound.)

CAL

Euch!

JERRY

(Reaches over, runs his hand over Cal's face.)
And you must be - Mickey Spillane!

BERN

(Titters - girlish voice.)

Oh, Mickey!

JERRY

(Turning with menace, to Bern.)
That must make you -

BERN

I am not Rodney. I am not Rodney.

Jerry and Cal suddenly pounce on him, rubbing their hands over his face.

JERRY

Wally Weston!! Aaaaugghh - !

BERN

I don't get no respect!

CAL

Wally! What are you doing, in a multi-million dollar national beer commercial?

BERN

Seeking revenge on Ken Lehman, who murdered my car! Where is he?

BOB

(Joining in.)

Passed out on the bathroom floor, exhausted from pursuing Bob Ruhl -

JERRY

Who murdered his bike!

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His favorite bike - CAL

JERRY
- as opposed to his other, less-favorite bike.

They laugh and drink. There is a pause. Cal suddenly begins singing, deliberately badly.

CAL
"How dry I am - "

ALL
(Joining in.)
"How wet I'll be, if I don't find the bathroom key!"

BOB
(Continuing, since the others have forgotten.)
"I found it lying on the floor, but - "

ALL
(Remembering.)
"I don't need it, anymore!"

JERRY
(Dramatically, slamming his empty can on the table.)
Set 'em up, Joe. Drinks all around. On me.

BERN
No can do.

CAL
No?

JERRY
No?

BERN
We killed 'em, sheriff. Shot the puds, then the backup Coors silver bullets.

JERRY
We shoot that Wild Turkey?

CAL
Thirty minutes ago.

Full of lead. BERN

No wonder I'm dying. JERRY

Dying - BOB

Not gonna make it, much longer. JERRY

Never to return - BOB

I'm fadin' - fadin' fast - JERRY

You want us to put you in the hospital chair, sheriff? BERN

Do it - do it - JERRY

Bern and Cal pick Jerry up, put him in his chair,
and pull a blanket up to his chin.

Okay, sheriff? BERN

I'll stay with you, long as I can, men. JERRY

We'll watch over you, sheriff. We'll remember you. BERN

You need to whiz, marshall? CAL

No, just - just die here. Give me a bullet, to bite on.
(Bern puts a crumpled Coors Lite can under his chin.)
Fadin' fast - JERRY

What you want your secret last song to be, Jer? BOB

JERRY
Uh - "Take Me Home, Country Roads."

BERN
That's mine, sheriff.

JERRY
Oh.

BERN
I'll shoot you for it.

JERRY
Then - "It's A Long Way To Tipperary."

BOB
(Almost a lullaby.)
"It's a long way, to Tipperary, it's a long way, I know -

BERN and CAL
(Joining in.)
"It's a long way to Tipperary - "

They don't know any more of this song.

CAL
(To the tune.)
"And I don't know any more of this song!"

BOB
"Neither do we, but we can fake it - "

BERN
"How does Tipperary go?"

ALL
"It's a long way, to Tipperary - "

BOB
"But the shortest way I know."
(Pause.)
Farewell, sweet prince.

BERN
Parting is such sweet sorrow.

CAL
So we'll just say goodnight to you - and wake your ass, tomorrow.

Night, Jer-boy. BERN

Night, Chet. BOB

Night, David. CAL

BOB
(As Alfred Hitchcock.)
Goot-eve-uh-ning.

BERN
(As Red Skelton.)
Good night, and may God bless!

CAL
(As Jimmy Durante.)
Good night, Mrs. Calabash, wherever you are!

BOB
(As Archie Bunker.)
And good night, noyce!
(Starts to sing.)
"I'm so glad we had this time together - " That's a good last
song, too. Jeeze, he's out already, isn't he?

CAL
Looks like.

BOB
What will your secret last song be, Cal?

CAL
(Thinks.)
"MacArthur Park."

BOB
(Laughs.)
I should have known. Why?

CAL
Because I hate the way Richard Harris butchers it.

They laugh.

BOB
Know what Ken wants us to do, when he dies?

CAL

What?

BOB

Play poker all night. Play James Bond soundtracks and dress up like old Wild West cowboys, phony six-shooters and all. After his mom's funeral, he told us. There was that horrible service, songs playing that no one knew the music to, anymore. And her - I remember her bringing us milk and cookies, and showing us what new pottery she'd made - lying there, like a wax dummy, like - well, anyway. And he said something like, "Guys, do just one thing for me, when it happens; anything but this." And he talked about the old poker games.

CAL

Best way to remember him.

BERN

Yeah, it really is.

BOB

Funeral's for the living, anyway. Not the dead. What I want - you get together, just like this. And smoke and toké and joke, and drink and carry on, just like tonight. Just like always. You leave this chair empty, put a drink in front of it. 'Cause I'll be with you, every time you're all together. And no schmaltzy flattery he-was-my-best-friend crap. You talk about all the shows we did, and the people we've known, and how I busted Ken's bike, and how he's the worst driver that ever was, and how I'm allergic -

BERN

Cats.

BOB

Pot. To pot, and you play Ken's tapes and listen to The Big Chill. Give me a wake, guys. No one else in this whole fuckin' world leaves any dignity to death, and I want that. You's my buds. You remember me that way. Cool?

BERN

I like it.

CAL

I like the poker thing, too.

BOB

Anything special for you, Cal? When the time comes?

CAL

(Pause. Laughs.)

Give me a military send-off. Put silver wings on my chest, and call me a Green Beret.

BOB

(Snaps a salute.)

Yes, sir!

CAL

Why not? I've never been much, alive. Might as well have a nice, dignified, showy death.

BERN

And a phony one.

BOB

Oh, you've been a lot, Cal. You've been our friend, you hopeless fuck-up. And I'll miss you. I'll miss you.

(Pulls up a piece of furniture, as a podium.)

He was a fuck-up. Just a fuck-up. But he was our fuck-up, by God, and he deserves the best send-off we can manage. He was a sex-maniac, a pervert, a drug pusher and an asshole. We all warned him his excesses would catch up with him, one day, and now he's here - here, in this final bier, this resting place, this sepulchre across the Stygian shore of eternal rest - this cheap pine box, that we got from a drunken Iowa farmer, for eight-ninety-nine. The four of you here today remember well and fondly what an ungodly jerk he was. He didn't bathe. He didn't brush his teeth. He called information for numbers he could easily have found in the book. And in memory of his sheer perversity, we sing this farewell song to him.

Cal and Bern have softly begun singing the theme of The Green Berets, through this.

BERN and CAL

"Put silver wings upon his chest/ Make him a man, America's best/ Men who mean just what they say/ He was a man - of the Green Beret!"

BOB

(Speaking, to the last verse.)

Put silver wings, upon his chest - he was a man, America's best - a man who knew not how to pray - He always wanted - to end this way.

CAL

(Laughs.)

Just don't read my eulogy, okay?

(197)

BOB

I won't. We'll leave that to Ken.

They all laugh.

CAL

I can just hear it: "Hey, man, like, he was a real dumb-fuck dip-shit no-good asshole, so fuck him. So long, moose-breath! Save us a seat on the Transexistence Express! Now - let's party!"

BERN

Would you want it any other way?

CAL

Fuck, no!

BERN

Well, there you have it.

BOB

I put it to you, and I leave it to you.

CAL

It comes, and it goes.

BERN

What goes around, comes around.

BOB

Slightly more used, and reduced in value.

CAL

A stitch in time, saves nine.

BERN

Hi-diddle-diddle, the cat and the fiddle.

BOB

Hickory-dickory-dock, three mice ran up the clock; the clock struck one, and the rest got away with minor injuries.

BERN

Yeah. Yeah. Life's like that.
(Sighs.)

CAL

Yup. So true, so true.

Pause.

(198)

BERN
Guess our bets are all fucked-up, huh?

CAL
Looks that way.

BERN
How you doin', Cal?

CAL
I'm wide awake. I'll outlast all of you. I'll be up for hours.

(Pause.)
Bob. Bob.

BOB
What. What.

CAL
Play a hand of poker with me.

BOB
Sure.

CAL
One hand. Old times' sake.

BOB
Five, or seven?

CAL
Five.

BOB
Bern - ?

BERN
You guys play.

Cal and Bob square off on the floor,
cross-legged. Bob deals. They assume
"too-cool-for-words" personas, and Western
accents.

BOB
Down - bullet, eight. Bullet bets.

CAL
Bullet doesn't even look. Bets - one beer can.

(199)

BOB

I see that can. Six, eight. Pair-eights say - two cans.

CAL

Bullet looks.

(Checks his down card.)

Bullet says, "Fat chance." See your cans.

BOB

Six, pair of bullets. Pair of bullets gun your one, blast your sixes. I bet - this ash tray.

CAL

You're bluffin'. I see that ash tray, and raise you - one potted plant.

BOB

Double-bluff, twice the fool. I got it, fool. See that potted plant - and raise you a dead sheriff's boots.

CAL

I tap light. I'm good for the boots.

BOB

(Cagey.)

Yeah - ?

CAL

Yeah - !

BOB

Last card to your grave, you son-of-a-bitch - five! Busted straight, busted boat, busted flush and busted bicycle. Ya ain't got no third six, 'cause I got one down. And I got-eight.

CAL

Busted everything folds. Can't beat it. Two pair! Shit. At least it's just like the old days! 'Course, this time, I only lost three cans, one ashtray, a potted plant and a pair of dead sheriff's boots - used to lose fifteen bucks!

BOB

(Absorbed, preoccupied - massages his brow.)

Aces. Eights. Pair each. Bullets. Bullets in the head. Head - got to use the head - Bern, you got Tylenol?

BERN

Medicine cabinet, in the bathroom.

Bob exits. Cal laughs, calling after him.

CAL

Cover your rear, Black Bob! That's a dead man's hand! Couldn't have been better. A little touch of melodrama, just like the old days. God, I miss those games. Did I ever win? Don't think so. Never could get a hand, to save my life. Why change things, now? Can't beat fate.

(Reclines, stretches.)

Don't know how I'll ever sleep. Wide awake. Everybody's dyin' off, and me wide awake. I'll never sleep, tonight.

Cal chuckles, closes his eyes a few moments. Soon, his mouth falls open, and he snores, quietly. Bern starts picking up, looking off where Bob exited, a little nervously. Bob returns.

BOB

(Pulls out a cigarette.)

Light?

(Bern lights it, looking anxious to get away.)

Ah. The children are all asleep.

BERN

Yeah. Cal just zonked.

(Stretches.)

I should hit the sack here, too, pretty quick.

BOB

And leave me alone, to smoke in the dark? Know how many Jewish mothers it takes, to screw in a lightbulb?

(Bern doesn't answer. Bob does, in a Jewish voice.)

None. "Don't vurry 'bout me, I just set all alone, here in de dark!" Have a cigarette with me, first.

BERN

I'm out.

BOB

(Shakes one out of his pack.)

Here.

BERN

(Takes it, hesitantly.)

I have to get up early - get us some coffee, for breakfast.

BOB

(Lights Bern's cigarette.)

No one'll stop you.

(Smiles.)

What's the matter? Don't like my face, no more?

(Sits, motions for Bern to be seated.)

You act like I got Cooties, or something. I don't bite.
Thought you might at least be curious.

BERN

(Playing dumb.)

Curious?

BOB

Why did you tell Jennie Buford that Jerry was gay?

BERN

I - never did anything like that. What are you talking about?

BOB

(Lightly.)

Word of honor, Bern?

(No answer.)

Told her I was, too. Found that interesting. Ken got the idea from Jennie. She's out in California too, you know. No, you probably didn't. But she is. They bumped into each other, laughed about it. Ken thought it was a useful idea to work into Lyn's graces, for some reason. Felt bad about it, later. Told me. Jennie never believed it, either. About Jer, or about me. She thought it was so silly, she never even told me. But she told Ken.

BERN

Ken's lying.

BOB

(Continuing, unruffled.)

Eventually, Jer would have found out about it, same as I did. I took that pressure off you, tonight. So you'd owe me.

BERN

It's not true. How can you believe that's -

BOB

Finally tell me why. I've puzzled and puzzled, over it. Couldn't figure out why you'd have done it. You weren't after Jennie. And I thought - gee, why is it that when I'm away from home, from my old friends, I do just fine with a woman, and when I'm around Bern, I don't - none of us do. And I wondered -

BERN

You're pissing me off, Bob.

BOB

- if maybe you hadn't done it, before. Now, why would you want to do that?

BERN

I'm not going to listen to this. You're drunk.

Bern starts to leave, but is stopped by the sharpness of Bob's voice.

BOB

Yes, you are, Bern. You owe me. Unless you'd prefer I get Ken to back me up, and tell Jer the truth.

BERN

You could both be lying.

BOB

I have Jennie's number. She's not capable of lying.

BERN

(Wheels, deathly calm.)

What do you want?

BOB

What you've never given any of us. The truth.

BERN

(Sits. Earnestly.)

I had my reasons.

BOB

They're not what I want. I think I know your reasons.

BERN

(Innocently.)

Oh?

BOB

Don't panic, Bern. If I were out to bury you, I'd have done it long before. You know what I'm after.

(Silence.)

All right. You're still toting that lie about Julie Freeman.

BERN

How dare you! I gave you my word of honor on that, and you know how much that means to me!

BOB

About what it means to anyone else: nothing. No one values their word more than a liar.

BERN

You - !

(Drags Bob up, by his lapel.)

BOB

(Intense, completely in control, not resisting.)

Go ahead, Bern - put my head through the wall - I'm dying, anyway!

(This stops Bern short.)

I have nothing to lose. Do it. Do it, or tell me. I won't leave you any other options.

BERN

No - you're just saying that, to -

BOB

Serve you right, if I was. Time's short, and I don't like playing games. Remember my aunt, my sister, my grandmother? The family curse? It's come to rest in me, now. My inheritance is coming early, and in spades. A blood vessel in my brain - right now, it's the size of my thumb - in six to eight months, it'll be the size of a small egg, and it will break, like a quiet bullet in my head. Bang! No more Bob - it's inoperable. I'll never make it to the ten year reunion. Now - we can either wake everyone up, and share our secrets, that would destroy the good humor - or I can take both our secrets to the grave.

(Bern is plainly dazed, off-balance; Bob presses.)

You're going to tell me the truth, about why you did that horrible thing to Julie that you did. After your divorce, I helped set you two up. I went to great pains. You wanted me to. You begged me. You dangled her on a string for a year, like a pet monkey.

BERN

(Retreating.)

You tried to force us together.

BOB

You begged me, Bern! You played her up and down like a yo-yo for a year, finally gave her a ring, finally slept with her, after holding out that long as if you were some goddamn monk -

BERN

I never should have slept with her! It's what ruined me with Noell! I should have waited until we were married -

BOB

Don't give me that religion shit! Cal was right, about you. God only comes into your life when you think about the bedroom. You only become religious when it suits your needs.

BERN

My religion is very important to me, and - very private.

BOB

So private, God doesn't even know about it.

BERN

Stop - Bob - you're not dying -

BOB

She was a friend of mine, Bern, a very good friend. You just upped-and-away from her life, after that night -

BERN

I - I found out we just wouldn't make it.

BOB

So why didn't you drop her? She'd have accepted that. She wanted to have you or not have you, not be fucked-over, back and forth, played for a fool.

BERN

It just - I couldn't just - there was - you know I need time to make decisions!

BOB

No shit! A whole year, to say, "Marry me," then sleep with her, bound off like a cad, and have Jer's office call her up and tell her she had the clap. After your swearing she was the only one -

BERN

She gave it to me!

BOB

I wouldn't have given a shit, it wasn't my business in the first place!

BERN

That's right - this isn't your business.

BOB

Until you turned your little peccadilloe into a mammoth lie, assassinated her character - it wasn't bad enough you had to treat her like a whore, you had to call her one, too.

BERN

It wasn't a lie! She gave it to me!

BOB

Is that why you ran and hid from her?

BERN

I never wanted to see her again. She lied to me. She'd been with someone else. She told me it was only me she'd ever love, and -

BOB

(Seething, building in intense and frightening fury.)

That was the worst of all, Bern, you let the world believe that, you screamed it from the mountaintops and made yourself out a wronged man, you made her out a Jezebel to anyone who'd listen, you swore to one of your closest friends on your oh-so-sacred word of hypocritical honor it was the truth, you fucked up her life, all because you wouldn't admit one wrong, in private, to someone who loved you, you did all that, and it was a lie!

BERN

No! I swear to God, it was the tru -

BOB

I saw her doctor's report, Bern!

(Stunned silence. Bob begins to calm down, disgusted.)

Before and after. She was clean as a newborn babe. Not only did she not give it to you - you didn't give it to her.

Bern collapses, in quiet sobs.

BOB (Cont.)

Good God, Bern - all you had to do was call and tell her, yourself. Own up to what you'd done. She'd have forgiven you. You know that. The whole circus of character defamation that followed could have been avoided, if you'd just told her.

BERN

(Crying, shaking his head.)

She'd never have forgiven me.

BOB

She'd have yelled at you, yeah. Then she'd have forgiven you. Instead, you preferred to make her out a slut - a lie you're still living - and not clear it up. Come on, Bern! What were you thinking? It's taken me months to help her put her reputation back together again, and it wasn't easy.

BERN

I never meant - for that to happen. But I couldn't have told her - I just couldn't -

BOB

Why?

BERN

I'm gay - you son of a bitch!

Long pause. Bern's sobs subside. Finally:

BOB

Don't try to disarm me, Bern. Tell me.

BERN

(Looks Bob dead in the eye.)

I'm gay.

BOB

(Uncomfortably laughs, disbelieving.)

Bern!

(Bern's expression doesn't change.)

Bern - ? Bern - !

(The truth of it hits him.)

No -

BERN

I - really did love her. I really did. I didn't want to hurt her. She needed - needed someone more than me, if you - understand me. I couldn't do that to her. I had no idea it would get so out of hand. But she came to you, after we had - been together, and you pressed me, and I, I felt cornered. It was all I could think of to say. I couldn't tell you the real reason. So I lied. And it got - oh, God, I never meant to hurt her, like that.

BOB

(This is very difficult for him.)

Then - why did you - want her, so badly?

BERN

You know how badly I've always wanted a family, kids. She was smarter than Noell. One day, she would have figured it out. And then you'd all know.

(Earnestly.)

Bob, remember how I pleaded with you not to press me, to just trust I had my reasons for staying silent, remember? But you - well, hell, you were just being the same to her as you always had to us - a good friend. I don't know what I expected. I thought you'd take my word of honor, and drop it, and I felt worse than I ever had in my life, lying to you - and to her. But I just didn't know what else to do.

BOB

Noell - even when you were married, you were always leaving her alone, going out with us. She found someone else to sleep with, because you didn't - why you were so upset about Cal - Bern, you owed it to them to tell them.

BERN

And have you guys find out?

BOB

We would have understood, we're your friends. When we all thought Ken might be - it didn't make a difference.

BERN

And you guys still laughed about it.

BOB

You preferred all you did?

BERN

Why didn't you tell us? That you were - that you're -

BOB

It's not the same, Bern. You divorced Noell for adultery. What did you expect her to do? You wouldn't be a man for her. Then you blamed her, for your own -

BERN

I didn't know. I wasn't sure myself, for a long time. About the time I was with Julie. I hoped maybe she'd prove me wrong. The night we slept together, it was her idea. She seduced me. I didn't want to. There was a kid at the warehouse, a blond guy, about nineteen. We became friends. Had a lot in common. Right about that same time - well - it was only two nights before Julie seduced me, that - I hadn't straightened it all out in my mind, yet. He and I had just become - gotten close, and I didn't know what to do. I'd just given Julie the ring. Two weeks later, the kid, the blond - he told me he'd been to Jer's office, and found he'd been with someone who'd had a dose. He was bi. I thought I might be, too - but -

BOB

Then, Jer -

BERN

No! He doesn't know. Don't tell him, Bob, don't tell the guys.

BOB

I - no, of course I won't. If you don't want me to.

BERN

I don't. Jer told him to call all his sexual contacts, and have them drop by the office. I never did. I sweated it out. I was sweating blood. Had I given it to her? How would I explain it? I had Jer call Julie, and tell her she might be infected, just in case.

BOB

What did you tell Jer?

BERN

That I got it from a girl at work, who'd already been treated.
(Long pause.)

Please don't hate me, Bob. I meant to tell you, someday. And her. Someday when you'd understand. Not like this - not like -

BOB

(Weary.)

I don't hate you, Bern. I never hated you. I wouldn't know how to hate you. In any event, I just don't have time, for hate.

BERN

Bob - it was just a ploy, wasn't it? You're not really - tell me you're not really - you were getting back at me, weren't you? You're going to be a movie star, just like we always thought. And you'll - you'll end up asking Jackie to marry you. We'll all be there. We'll all be your Best Man. You - can't, Bob - you can't - can't really be -

BOB

(Tired.)

It's not so bad, most of the time. No pain. Just - a few headaches. And I "phase out," now and then. That's what started me going in for tests. It interfered with my work. It's infrequent. They have a name for it - seizures, some kind of - petit mal seizures. Seventy-five percent chance of fatality, if they operated. Twenty percent, that I'd be an imbecile for the rest of my life. Only a five percent chance of success.

(Pause.)

I'm home to roost, Bern. To gather a few last flowers, before I do. That's why I didn't tell anyone. Or maybe I did - but not in any way they'll hear, until it's happened. Then they'll understand.

BERN

You're - not going to tell the guys?

BOB

About me? No.

BERN

About - ?

BOB

No, Bern. Your secret's safe. You couldn't have a better confessional, than a corpse. Just grant the condemned one last request - tell them yourself. Not for me. I'm past caring. For yourself. For everybody. Grow up, Bern. Deal with it. Deal with it before you destroy anyone else. You've been a good person too, Bern. Bring that good person back. Because I won't - be here, anymore, to ride your ass, when you're a son-of-a-bitch - goddamnit!

He is crying. Bern cries, too. He puts his arms around Bob, and they let the tears silently flow out of them. Bob returns the embrace. They finally pull apart.

BERN

We'll - go to the ball games, and catch a few movies - won't we?

BOB

We'd better. All of us. Or I'll kill you.

(They laugh.)

Go to bed. You son-of-a-bitch.

BERN

Asshole!

BOB

Putz!

BERN

Pot!

BOB

Cats!

BERN

Don't you - want to talk about it?

BOB

Later. Dying boys need their sleep.

Bern starts to say something. Bob stops him, before he can say it. Bob reclines on the sofa, and Bern puts a blanket on him. Bern puts out all the lights, except the one on the table by Bob's head. He starts out - stops, turns around.

BERN

Bob? You're a good friend.

BOB

(Flip, points to Bern's cigarette.)

Those are bad for your health, you know.

(Takes a long luxurious drag of his own, and puts it out.)

Bern smiles, and exits. Bob looks at Jerry's and Cal's sleeping forms, around him, and smiles sadly. Suddenly, he smiles, and sings the first line of "Green Acres," softly. Then he reaches up and turns out the light.

BLACKOUT

END OF ACT II.

END OF THE PLAY

VII. The Manuscript Text of The Grave Affair, As Produced
at Kansas State University

i

THE GRAVE AFFAIR

(A Drama in Four Acts)

*

Story Synopsis:

January, 1871: Paris is in economic and political chaos, rapidly succumbing to the German Siege, and facing the inevitability of a third rise of the Communards, as Louis Napoleon's Republic falls. As the Siege takes its toll on the living city of Paris, its most famous cemetery - Pere Lachaise - is besieged by a bizarre criminal, who violates, consumes, and demolishes the corpses of women. Frustrated to the breaking point with their inability to beat back the Germans, the Parisians focus their outrage on these atrocities and are blood-maddened to catch the perpetrator.

The Surete, unable to catch the culprit, surrender the job to the already overworked military. Captain Regardez, in charge of apprehending the loup-garoux - "the werewolf," or ghoul, as he has popularly (and superstitiously) been nicknamed - devises a plan involving traps and flashpots to catch him. With the assistance of two privates, Demonde and Labosche, the Captain's plan partly succeeds - the man is not caught, but is sorely wounded, leaving part of his uniform behind: sergeant's stripes. Regardez and his men immediately take off, in pursuit.

Pierre Grave, the wounded sergeant, returns to the tavern that is his barracks. Mrs. Beaufort, the proprietor, and Ilse, a German serving girl, know he is in some criminal trouble - but they like him, and want to help. Grave revives

from unconsciousness after Mrs. Beaufort has gone to fetch Doctor Giroux. In her absence, Ilse and Grave discover that they are in love. Grave tries to tell her who he is, but is unable to - she agrees to let him keep his secret, so long as they can be lovers. Learning that a doctor has been sent for, Grave urges that they must immediately flee. Ilse plans to escort him to the front, getting them safely to Germany by virtue of her heritage - but the doctor arrives, detaining them too long. Regardez and his men soon follow, and arrest Grave. Discovering who he is, Ilse recoils in horror, and Grave, dejected, is led off.

Regardez serves on the court-martial Tribunal, assisted by Major Delacorte and presided over by Colonel Montmartre. Montmartre has been urged by President Thiers to inflict a severe penalty on Grave, in order to quell the mob gathered in the streets who desire to lynch him. The most serious penalty on the books for Grave's offense is no more than a year in prison, however, and Montmartre refuses to bend the law. To pacify the people, Henri Compaignon, a journalist, and Cardinal Coldert, a leading Monarchist and legal mind (who controls the bloodthirsty mob outside), are allowed to observe the proceedings. Coldert, also a lawyer, has orders from President Thiers, and commandeers prosecution of the case. Using information he has obtained from the confessional, he tricks Ilse - who still loves Grave - into betraying the sergeant's plan to desert, and forces the penalty of death, for desertion in time of war. Legally victorious, Coldert is caught off-guard by an aggressive move from Grave, and accidentally falls to his death. The mob, enraged, assault the building, wounding Regardez - and are stopped only by a resumed bombardment from the Germans.

Whatever his crimes, Grave is a sterling soldier, and a self-sacrificing man. Unwilling to accept that he is a traitor, the Tribunal conspires to assist his escape with Ilse, as previously planned. Grave, concerned for the safety and reputation of his family, instead surprises them by committing suicide. Compaignon concocts a story to make Grave out a hero, and Ilse concludes, sadly, that perhaps it was the only way, resolving forever to visit his grave at Pere Lachaise.

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THE GRAVE AFFAIR can be performed in two acts, with an intermission between Act II and Act III.

The play can also be performed in three acts, with the first intermission between Act II and Act III, and the second occurring after Ilse takes the witness stand in Act III.

A shorter, two-act version, can be performed by omitting Act I entirely, and placing the intermission either in the same place as in the three-act version, or slightly earlier, with Coldert's line in Act III: "I simply have not chosen to exercise it, for many years," adding as a curtain line the words, "I am in charge of this trial, now."

It can also be performed as two one-act plays, of two scenes each, under the suggested following titles:

Acts I & II: "The Ghoul of Pere Lachaise"

Acts III & IV: "The Court-Martial of Sergeant Grave"

Lastly, it can be performed as four separate one-acts, under the suggested following titles:

Act I: "Whistling in the Dark"

Act II: "The Grave Affair"

Act III: "The Red Fox"

Act IV: "Turn Back the Clock"

[]

DRAMATIS PERSONAE (in order of appearance)

DEMONDE (day-MAHND), a young private
 LABOSCHE (la-BOSH), another private, slightly younger
 REGARDER (ray-gar-DAY), a captain
 PIERRE GRAVE (gruh-VAY), a sergeant, mid-twenties
 MRS. BEAUFORT (BOW-fort), a widow, in her forties
 ILSE KARNSTEIN (KARN-shtein), a serving girl, about
 twenty

GIRAUX (jheer-ROW), a doctor
 DELACORTE (DEL-luh-court), a major
 MONTMARTRE (moant-MART), a colonel
 CAMPAIGNON (comb-pain-YOAN), a journalist
 COLDERT (coal-DAIR), a cardinal, in his eighties
 A corporal, a guard, a lieutenant, and offstage crowd

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Setting: Paris, during the Franco-Prussian War

Time: The third week of January, 1871 (the 18th week of the Siege)

[] [] []

ACT I

Inside a wall of Pere Lachaise cemetery, night.

Pere Lachaise is the archetypal spectral cemetery. Built by order of Frochot in 1804, it contains not only the newly-dead, but centuries worth of bodies from the defunct Cimitiere des Innocents. There are several cemeteries in Paris, but Pere Lachaise is by far the most prestigious. The majority of the population comes to rest here, rich and poor alike. It is a microcosm of Paris, a miniature city of ornate tombs. We are inside the north wall, toward the west end of the cemetery, where the land is flat, unobstructed by tombs - this is where the common lots are. Bodies are buried seven-deep, in this area. Recent German shelling has disturbed much of the ground here, exposing in places some of the contents beneath. The dank atmospheric conditions and miasma of jostled bodies has combined, to create a strangely colorful mist, close to the ground. There is a light frost of snow, reflecting the moonlight eerily into the mist. The wall itself is perhaps ten feet high, cracked and crumbling in places from the concussion of German cannons. Lichen, moss, weeds, vines, and insects are in the cracks. It sweats, with the accumulation of the graveyard's vapors. The corner of one or two tombs might be partially seen, to one side - if so, they are sepulchres of unearthly beauty, more than likely with some kind of iron railing surrounding them.

AT RISE: Two soldiers are at the wall - privates - in full uniform. They are well-wrapped against the bitter cold. Their uniforms show much evidence of disrepair. Their gloves - perhaps even their boots - have holes in them. The uniforms are wrinkled, and not completely clean. Buttons are missing from their overcoats. Braid, where any remains, is loose in several places. Both men have light field provision sacks and rifles. One, Labosche, is leaning back against the wall,

eyes closed. Even in a catnap, he looks semi at-attention. He is young, maybe as young as his teens, wide-eyed and insecure-looking. His partner, Demonde, is slightly older, more worldly and weaselly-looking. He is alert, but bored. He looks about, casually. He puffs out his cheeks, drumming his fingers on his rifle butt. Finding a rhythm, he taps it out, quietly humming a tune, but quickly becomes disinterested and stops. He yawns, and immediately regrets having done so - halfway through it, he stops, grimacing distastefully and fanning the air, as he tastes the vapor about him. He shudders, and leans back against the wall again, as he was before. Noticing Labosche asleep, he smiles, and taps him on the opposite shoulder. Labosche groggily stirs. Demonde calls his name, gently. Labosche's eyes flicker open, and he looks toward his tapped shoulder, away from Demonde.

DEMONDE

(Quietly.)

Bob.

Labosche jumps, yelping, and almost falls. Demonde puts his hand over his mouth to quiet him, and helps him regain his balance.

DEMONDE

Quiet, you fool! What if the Captain heard you? Or saw you sleeping?

LABOSCHE

(Quiet, angry, scared.)

God, Demonde, don't do that! You scared me to death!

DEMONDE

(Chuckling.)

Not a pleasant prospect! We're closer to it here than on the battlefield, aren't we?

LABOSCHE

This place! I was dreaming. I thought you were -

DEMONDE

And if I had been, you'd be one of them, eh?

(Indicates graves.)

Not to worry. The man we're after wants them already dead - and female, so you're safe. If Regardez had seen you napping like that, it would have been worse.

LABOSCHE

(Sarcastic.)

Like hell! What could he do to me? Strip me of rank?

DEMONDE

He could assign you here, for the rest of your life.

LABOSCHE

Oh, stop being silly. The army's so fallen to hell, I wouldn't even get a reprimand.

DEMONDE

You have me, there. Didn't used to be like that. If my old man had fallen asleep on guard duty, he'd have spent a week in the stockade.

LABOSCHE

I wish I could be sent there. I'd eat, regular.

DEMONDE

(Takes a wrapped sandwich from his overcoat.)

Want some? I snuck it, when no one was looking.

LABOSCHE

Are you kidding? How can you eat, with that smell around? God forbid!

DEMONDE

He has. Lots of things. But they happen, all the same. If they didn't, we wouldn't be here.

LABOSCHE

(Shudders, swoons.)

Don't remind me! This job - I tell you, it's not our responsibility. The Church should be dealing with this thing, not the military!

DEMONDE

(Snorts.)

Nonsense! Who's being silly, now? Ghosts don't dig up graves. It's no phantom, doing these things. There's a man, or men, behind it.

LABOSCHE

But what kind of man? What's been done to the bodies - not the work of ghosts, no, but not of a man, either. If they're going to put us out here like this, they could at least give us the right weapons, to defend ourselves!

DEMONDE

What are you saying? Our guns will stop him, sure enough.

LABOSCHE

(Pointedly.)

How can they? Our bullets aren't silver.

DEMONDE

You're still on about that, are you?

LABOSCHE

Oh, yes, laugh if you want to - but look at what's been done. I mean, look! Have you seen any of the bodies? I have. That's why they assigned me here, to keep me from talking too much, from spreading panic. If the living had been so brutally mauled, it would be a simple case of murder. Bloody, grotesque, yes. But at least something human. This thing - I won't call it a man - what motive can it have? It's not killing anyone. It's -

(Has trouble, even saying the words.)

- it's doing these things - to corpses. Like an animal. Like a dog - or - come on, deny it! This is the sort of thing wolves do!

(Demente starts a denial, but Labosche cuts him off.)

It leaves prints, like a man. It has the strength and agility of a man. An animal, alone, couldn't do all it's done. It walks upright, like a man. But it behaves like a wolf. It eats the dead mangles them, violates them, in a way no animal could - or would. You know it too, don't you? Yes, I see you do. I was there, when the army doctor reported what he'd found, in the womb of one of the mutilated dead women - that it was living seed.

(Disgusted, nauseated.)

It had barely grown cold. What man - or normal animal - would do that? And then tear the bodies, so? Even - even -

(Demente takes a bite of his sandwich, and Labosche turns away, trembling.)

Mon Dieux - !

Demente washes the sandwich down with wine from his pouch. Some of it dribbles, red, out the corners of his mouth. Labosche cannot stand to look at him, fighting down his gorge.

DEMONDE

(Talking with his mouth partly full.)
It's gruesome, all right - I give you that. And it's not normal. But it ain't nothing supernatural, either. Just criminal. Sick, perverse. But still the work of a man.

LABOSCHE

My grandparents know of such things.

DEMONDE

Your grandparents are superstitious fools.

LABOSCHE

(Coloring slightly.)
They lived in an age when the teachings of the Church were still believed!

DEMONDE

They lived in an age when the Church maintained power by scaring the people with fairy-tales.

LABOSCHE

You believe the Republic knows all?

DEMONDE

I believe the Republic at least governs men with the common understanding of men - not the habitual teachings of mythical gods.

LABOSCHE

(Under his breath.)
Atheist!

DEMONDE

(Unruffled.)
Maybe. I'd rather live in the real world, though, thank you. A civilized government deals with the needs of the body, not the soul. That stench off the Seine is the product of your Church Age - if we'd dealt with the sewage problem back then, it wouldn't be so impossible, now.

LABOSCHE

A day will come, you'll see. A day when the spirit is again better tended. The people will want it - they do now. There'll be fewer wars like we're going through, then.

DEMONDE

(Laughs.)
Fewer wars? Not very educated, are you?

LABOSCHE

What if I'm not? My folks are good people - farming people.

DEMONDE

"Good people."

(Grunts.)

Good people, this country doesn't need. Smart people, we need. Listen, Labosche - you're not such a bad guy, you know? But you go around saying things like this, and I feel I'm back in the Middle Ages. Don't let it get to you, man. You don't like the government? Don't worry - it's due to change hands again, any day now. Who's in charge, now? Thiers?

LABOSCHE

And you think I'm dumb! Louis Napoleon.

DEMONDE

Yeah. If you call a man who's been in Germany since the beginning of the war "in charge," yeah.

LABOSCHE

He's working on a peace treaty!

DEMONDE

Sure, right - from the Kaiser's deepest dungeons. The day I see a stable government in this country - ah, then I'll know I've died, and found real heaven! I just hope we don't all kill each other off - not in a war, but just among ourselves - before we find it.

LABOSCHE

I still say no man could have done what's been done. How has he eluded all the sentries, for so long? The walls don't stop him. The dogs don't stop him, or even bark at him. He seems to appear from nowhere, and vanish into thin air. It's as if - stop eating, can't you? You're making me sick!

DEMONDE

You're making yourself sick, with your own imagination. Have to eat, sometime. If I stopped eating, every time something unpleasant went on around me, I'd be starved dead inside six weeks - which may happen anyway, since we've begun bread rationing. Out on the battlefield - there's barely enough food to go around, and so many wounded and dead. We patch their wounds, cart off their bodies - days, sometimes, cleaning up the carnage, when the shooting's been let up, for a while. But in the midst of all that, when there is food to be had, by God, we eat! We gulp the scraps down, while stitching-up the screaming. Our graveyard ghoul, your loup-garoux? You ask me, he's just some peasant, starved to the point of insanity, out for whatever he can find.

LABOSCHE

Revolting!

DEMONDE

Most peasants are. I hope this carrion-crawler shows up, tonight. I don't know how much longer I can stand this. It's cold. And of all the posts to give us. This wall? It just looks over flat earth - poor people's graves. I've got a plot here, for when the time comes. Cost me plenty. Thanks to Buonaparte, once you've got a plot here, you've got it forever. (Chuckles, uncomfortably.)

Unless the ghoul digs you up, of course! If you were a filthy murderer, the government would still honor your deed here, though, and bury you next to the saints. That's Paris, for you. Why did they station us here?

LABOSCHE

They think maybe we'll see him coming over the opposite walls, I guess.

DEMONDE

How? I can't see the opposite walls! All I see is all this damned vapor. Can't see anything through it, it's so thick.

LABOSCHE

My mother used to tell me it was the dreams of the dead - hovering over them, until the resurrection.

DEMONDE

Pretty poetry! Know what it is?

LABOSCHE

What?

DEMONDE

Them.

(Points to the ground.)

Their bodies, not their souls. Rotting away. Turning to gases. Mixing with the moisture of the air. That would be a precious miracle: them, rising up to the horn of Gabriel, when all that's left of them is that noxious gas, blowing gradually away -

LABOSCHE

(Disbelieving.)

No!

DEMONDE

I tell you it is. Don't believe me. Ask the doctors. Or are they too "atheistic" for you?

LABOSCHE

(Kind of fascinated.)

Really?

DEMONDE

No - really, they're ghosts, come for a drink of my wine.
Yes, really!

LABOSCHE

But - well, even if that's so - I mean, this isn't the old Cimetiere des Innocents, they bury them in coffins, now.

DEMONDE

It was only ninety years ago, they cleaned that place out - after it burst its walls, from the centuries of corpses piled into it. And still, Paris wasn't smart enough to find some proper way to dispose of them. They just moved them here. Coffins or not, how many boxes can you cram into the earth, before it happens all over again? That's a lot of bodies, under our feet. Growing more, every day. With the war, more still. Year after year, century after century - all ending up here.

LABOSCHE

There are other large cemeteries, in Paris! And this one - it's gigantic!

DEMONDE

Sure, big enough now, maybe - but for how long? Who knows how deep they're buried, one on top of another? We could be standing over two - or two hundred. They'll run out of room, down there, just like Paris. To bury the new, your spade can't help but turn over the old. They crowd down there - pushed, shoved, jostled about, pressed, until they start bursting out of the ground, breaking out, contaminating the water, contaminating the air. We drink them, we breathe them, every day - along with our own filth, that grows to match it, and that ends up in the river, when they finally get around to sluicing out the gutters. What's the difference, I sometimes wonder - what's the difference if one madman takes it one step further, and starts to actually eat them, when he can't find food? Or make love to them, planting his seed where at least it won't grow into more fodder for this place?

(Pause - then quietly, with passion.)

We should burn them - burn them where they fall, and let their smoke ascend to God!

LABOSCHE

(Shocked.)

Blasphemy - !

DEMONDE

Then let God damn me for it - but take them away, out of this world completely, and stop cramming our lives with their deaths!

(Throws the last bite of his sandwich, in disgust, at the graves.)

Something for the dogs - to keep them from digging the damned things up, for their food.

The soldiers resume their watch, each in his own thoughts. Captain Regardez enters. He is tall, authoritative, immaculately groomed. He, too, seems slightly bored, but remains alert. His eyes are a little haggard, but his bearing is strong. He wears a uniform in better condition than the soldiers', and a night-cloak. Labosche straightens up, soberly, at his appearance. Demonde seems more nonchalant, uncaring.

REGARDEZ

Anything here?

LABOSCHE

No, sir.

DEMONDE

What would be here? Is the ghou! a flying bird, to land in our midst?

REGARDEZ

(Seriously.)

At this point, it wouldn't surprise me if he was.

(Sees the wine skin, becomes informal.)

May I?

(Demonde hands it to him - he drinks.)

Soldier.

(Nods his health, returns the skin.)

Two weeks.

(Sighs.)

Two weeks, and two more violations - right under our noses. How does he do it? Does he become invisible? Walk through walls? Swing through the trees and over the wall like a gorilla, or tunnel up, a burrowing mole? With the exception of the Barraux girl, he's left the tombs alone. Probably knows he'd make too much noise, opening them. He strikes out here, where the bodies are buried, harder to get at, the terrain wide open - somehow scuttling beneath the mist where he can't be seen, a carrion-consuming crab.

(Pause, as he contemplates the men.)

What do you think?

DEMONDE

(After a moment, surprised he is being asked.)

Sir - ?

REGARDEZ

(Waiving the formality.)

Rank. Forget rank. No one pays much attention to it anymore, anyway. Though I must admit, it's nice when a soldier occasionally remembers there's a difference. When your army is winning, you never have trouble gaining respect. When they're not - ah, well. I'm asking you. As a man who's stumped, talking to two men working on the same case - as it were. You're out here every night, same as me. What do you think? How does he do it?

Labosche fidgets. He is confused, uncomfortable, not used to superiors talking to him as equals. He clears his throat.

LABOSCHE

Well, I, uh - sir -

DEMONDE

I think he comes over the wall.

REGARDEZ

Not through it? Through a hole, I mean? Some might be big enough to admit a smaller man. They admit the passage of dogs. We can't patch all the Germans' damage, every day.

DEMONDE

I don't think so, Captain. Like you say, most of the violations are in this area. He'd have to be pretty strong, to dig them up alone, and silently. And so quickly. Strength denotes size.

REGARDEZ

He does seem to work fast, doesn't he?

(Thinks - continues casually, almost impressed.)
You know - last week, he did it in under an hour. Under an hour! The dogs were heaviest, there. Not one barked. No growl, no whimper. The sentry passed, on his round. Everything normal. An hour later, he passed back. Three, four feet of ground dug up. Coffin open, a woman's corpse dismembered, parts missing - and the rest. All without a sound, nothing seen. Just a few, misshapen human footprints nearby, that faded away, past the tombs - and us, throwing our hands up and fighting our dinner down.

DEMONDE

Where did the footprints lead?

REGARDEZ

They appeared over there, just inside the wall - no prints outside the wall - as if he appeared from nowhere. Disappeared among the tombs. A good place to hide - the entire German army could hide among them. He could have hidden among them, maybe slept among them, then simply walked away during the day with other visitors. But I doubt it. Too much risk of being seen. Or scaled one of the taller monuments, and climbed out on an overhanging tree branch.

DEMONDE

(Shaking his head.)

Too flimsy, this far in. They wouldn't support his weight.

REGARDEZ

That's what I say, too.

DEMONDE

Why not a rope?

REGARDEZ

Secured to what? The wall is flat.

DEMONDE

He must be - an incredible climber. Or find something to give him a boost, over.

REGARDEZ

Still unlikely, though. Might get him in - but out? Again, too great a risk of visibility. We have nothing. Nothing but footprints, that materialize and dematerialize, like fog.

LABOSCHE

(After a pause, quiet, spooked.)

I'd heard stories, about that. Some of the citizens. I thought -

REGARDEZ

They were true. This time, anyway. They think it's the ghost of a vengeful soldier, killed in the war - maybe a nobleman, not buried in honor according to his station. But, then - you know the sort of things "they" say.

(To himself, preoccupied.)

Wish I could do something about security, around here. The people hear too much.

(Back to the men, still conversational.)

If the populace had never gotten wind of this, I would never have gotten involved. Some sick soul - wandering about, doing his perverse deeds - what do I care what happens to the dead? I'd as soon not know about it, unless it's a crime against the living. Who knows how many graves he's opened? Any number from this side, if found, would be attributed to dogs any other time, with none the wiser. But this ghoul - he had to draw attention to himself by violating M. Barraux's daughter. He has influence. Monied people always do. He goes to the press, the police. The press make a carnival out of it, stirring up the people, and the police drop it in our laps after the graverobber eludes them twice - like he has us - claiming they don't have the manpower - as if we do, in a time of war! The real reason is they just don't want the responsibility - neither do I. We can't afford to lose face, right now. Four graves, that we know about - who knows how many more? And now that it's in our laps, every desecrated grave desecrates us, until he's caught. And the public becomes outraged, more upset than if a murderer were in their midst.

(Shakes his head, absently.)

DEMONDE

I don't suppose -

REGARDEZ

What?

DEMONDE

The dogs never bark. No footprints outside. Could it be - ?

REGARDEZ

One of us, you mean?

(Stops Demonde's protest, before he can voice it.)
I considered that. My superiors, I should say. No. Too many problems. Men are paired, and rotated. The Surete doesn't think so - and this was going on before either they or we were involved.

There is a thoughtful pause. Labosche seems quietly terrified, showing signs of paranoia, at the thought that a French soldier could even possibly be the culprit. Regardez and Demonde merely think. After a moment, just before it looks like Regardez is about to move, Demonde speaks.

DEMONDE

Sir -

REGARDEZ

Yes?

DEMONDE

Has anyone thought - well -

REGARDEZ

It's all right, soldier, I've told you you can speak freely.

DEMONDE

Around you, sir, yes. But it seems to me that higher-ups don't much like soldiers with ideas. You're a danger to them, if you show any intelligence. They prefer soldiers strong and stupid. Not that I'd pose any competition to them. I haven't even got rank. But -

REGARDEZ

(Amused.)

I understand. Anything you say can be kept between us, if it will make you rest easier.

DEMONDE

Thank you, Captain, it would. I wouldn't want to hurt whatever small chances I might ever have for advancement, in this man's army.

REGARDEZ

Very well. You were about to say - ?

DEMONDE

Well. It's this invisibility thing that's had me thinking, for some time. We can't see him, in this place. He's stealthy. Sneaks around, real quiet like. Okay, so he's quieter than we are. But if we can't see him through this gassy mess and the forest of tombs - how can he see us? We'd have to be right on top of each other.

REGARDEZ

(Intrigued.)

I'm listening. What's your point?

DEMONDE

(Becoming more animated.)

Just this: he's been exploiting that, using it against us. There are a bunch of us, and only one of him - so if we see movement close by, we think it's just our own men. Always has been, so far. But if he sees it, he knows to hide. All he has to do is drop to the ground, be covered in the mist - or duck between the tombs.

REGARDEZ

And - you have an idea - ?

DEMONDE

Why not turn the tables on him?

LABOSCHE

(Draws in, becoming intrigued.)

How? That's what the dogs are for, isn't it? To find with their noses what we can't with our eyes?

REGARDEZ

Yes, of course. But he's obviously found a way to render them ineffective.

DEMONDE

But there's something that doesn't need senses, to catch a man. Something that would turn his blindness against him, that can't be deceived, and that we could make work for us: a trap.

LABOSCHE

(Excited.)

A trap! Why not several? We could avoid them, knowing where they were - but he -

DEMONDE

Precisely! And if he stepped in one, he'd immediately betray his location, by crying out. We wouldn't have to fire a shot. Even if he escaped it, how far could he get away, on a wounded leg?

REGARDEZ

(Levelly - pleased, impressed.)

Congratulations -

(Looks for Demonde's nametag.)

DEMONDE

Demonde, sir.

REGARDEZ

Demonde. That's precisely what we're doing. Half the solution, at any rate. I haven't told everyone. Only given orders to stay out of certain areas. I didn't need to warn you two, because you're not near them. It's unlikely he'll enter here.

DEMONDE

If you'll pardon my asking, sir - I have wondered - why did you station us here? It's the deadest area in this whole dead place.

REGARDEZ

You're marksmen. The two best I've got, I don't mind telling you. I wanted you where you'd have a clear shot at the opposing walls, if we can't detain him.

LABOSCHE

(Puffing up.)

The best! Merci, mon Capitain!

DEMONDE

(Deflated.)

Thanks for the confidence, sir. But still, we have the same problem.

REGARDEZ

Demonde - ?

DEMONDE

Visibility. I've been terrified, since this whole thing started, of all of us firing in the dark. Hitting each other in blindness and panic, shooting at the shadows of marauding dogs.

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REGARDEZ

Don't worry about it. You'll see him, when the time comes, should it come to that.

DEMONDE

But how?

REGARDEZ

Leave that to me, Demonde. Unlike many other officers, as you've noted, I value intelligence in my men. But give me credit for having one or two brilliant ideas, myself.

DEMONDE

I still don't see -

REGARDEZ

You will. Trust me. If you can't do that, take it as an order. You're bright enough. You'll know what to do, should you have to. But please remember, both of you, I want him alive. Shoot only if you must. I've got the Surete and my superiors breathing down my neck, for a live suspect. The people that aren't outraged or indignant are being terrified by the Church, which is spreading superstitious fears about our criminal being a werewolf, a loup-garoux. Some of them are even creating informal lynch-mobs, burning-parties. I want to show them all that this is not devilry, but simple criminology. The culprit's corpse might stop the crimes, but not the furor. Dead men don't confess. And until the papers have a confession printed, and we have our man safely behind bars, this whole affair will never end. You'd think the people would be more concerned with the activities of the Germans, wouldn't you? But they're not. They're angry and frustrated and unable to alleviate their fears. So, they focus on this - something they can turn their rage against - and until they see he's no fearsome, terrifying spectre, but just some sad, sick man, that rage will only continue to grow, instead of easing off.

(Sadly.)

In many ways, it might be better for him if we do have to kill him.

(Pause - then, more formal.)

I have other stations to check. Thank you for talking with me. It's so damned dull, out here. Most of the other men, they - well. If we don't catch him tonight, I may summon you again, Demonde.

DEMONDE

Be honored, sir.

Regardez gives a purely perfunctory salute, which Demonde returns, absently. Labosche snaps off a crisp salute, smiling, and calls after Regardez.

LABOSCHE

And my name's Labosche, sir! Andre Labosche! You can call on me too, if you like!

(Relaxes, still beaming.)

His best marksmen. Imagine that! His best marksmen. Me and you. I wouldn't be surprised, if he has me in mind for promotion - us, I mean. We could become corporals - maybe even sergeants!

DEMONDE

(Preoccupied thinking, barely paying attention.)
Sergeants are shot as easy as privates.

LABOSCHE

But, think - they get more respect!

(Deconde gets a laugh, out of that one.)

Anyway, they give more orders than they take. Get more women, too. Who wants to be seen with a private? But a sergeant!

DEMONDE

(Absently.)

Sergeants' stripes make better targets.

LABOSCHE

I've seen the sergeants at the quarters, in the taverns. The barmaids love them. Spend more time with them. Don't get upset, if they don't leave a tip - hoping they'll get a little better tip -

DEMONDE

(Thinking, to himself.)

Wonder what he meant? The other men's torches, maybe? Light them, when he's spotted?

LABOSCHE

(Continuing - neither man much notices the other.)
Sergeants' uniforms are so dashing - not like these plain things. Maybe that's why. They smile more, around them - contrive to lift their skirts, a little - later, a lot -

DEMONDE

Still wouldn't be enough light, though -
(Shakes his head.)

LABOSCHE

Do they sleep on cots, like we do? Upstairs, in the pubs? Or do they have their own quarters, somewhere? I've heard some of them live in wealthy people's homes. Some of those homes must have wealthy daughters - wouldn't that be something? Marry rich, and be taken care of, after we beat back the Germans? Oh, yes - lovely! I wonder how long it takes to become a Lieutenant, from a sergeant? A month? Two? Maybe only a few weeks, for men as bright as we are! Captain Regardez likes us - he called us his two best men! If he puts in a good word for us - maybe only a week or two!

Demonde, through the latter half of this, has paused long enough to stare at Labosche - who doesn't even notice - incredulously. Finally:

DEMONDE

What are you on, about? The Captain passes two minutes with us, and already you're a Lieutenant, before the man is caught!

LABOSCHE

(Settling down, a bit miffed.)

I was just thinking.

DEMONDE

Dreaming, more like. Shut up and pay attention, why don't you. (Labosche continues, and Demonde looks away, rolling his eyes, ignoring him.)

LABOSCHE

Well, and where's the harm in it? eh? I mean, it's not so unrealistic, is it? The Captain obviously likes us, doesn't he? You heard him - his two best - !

Demonde cuts him off, whipping around so suddenly that he causes Labosche to jump back a step. Demonde is listening intently to something offstage, alert. He motions for quiet, sharply.

DEMONDE

Sssh - !

LABOSCHE

What? You scared -

DEMONDE

(Motions more sharply - then, hushed.)

You hear it?

LABOSCHE

Hear what?

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DEMONDE

(After a brief pause.)

There - again! Like leaves - rustling.

LABOSCHE

No - no, I -

A sound like rustling leaves is heard, faintly. Demonde points immediately, alertly, to the sound's direction. He has dropped to a crouch, rifle halfway up. His finger still pointing, he looks inquiringly at Labosche, who gulps, nods, then moves discreetly behind Demonde. Demonde cautiously edges toward the sound. Labosche imitates his motions, awkwardly. Demonde pauses, once, twice - cocks his head, listening - then continues. Suddenly hearing something, Demonde halts, raises his hand - it hits Labosche's rifle. Simultaneously, Labosche bumps into Demonde - from having followed too closely, nearly knocking them both over. Demonde glowers at him.

DEMONDE

(Points sharply at Labosche's weapon.)

Idiot! Do you want to kill us both? It's stopped. Twenty, thirty feet. About -

(Stops, hearing something.)

Again. Ten yards more. Padding - swift, silent - like a dog. Can't quite make it out - can't see anything.

LABOSCHE

(Becoming quietly delirious.)

Like a dog - ! It is, it is a loup-garoux! Can't see it - a ghost - ! Oh, God! Mon Dieux - !

(Falls to his knees.)

DEMONDE

(Wheels on him, deathly calm, grabs his throat.)

I'll send you to your God, I swear, I'll strangle you quiet, if you don't shut up.

Labosche nods, swiftly, terrified. He has dropped his rifle. Demonde turns back in the direction of the sounds, listening and watching. Labosche fumbles a crucifix out from around his neck, and holds it between his clasped hands, muttering silently.

DEMONDE

Stopped again - like he can't make up his mind, which way to go.

(Pause.)

Closer - no, further again - thirty, thirty-five.

(Frustrated.)

I hear you, you bastard, why can't I see you?

(Pause.)

Not on the ground - the vanishing footprints - he's walking the wall - !

Demonde looks up, further down the wall. He peers carefully - and sees his target. He cocks his rifle, and takes aim. Just before he can fire, there is a quiet, muffled plop, from offstage - something dropping down, off the wall. Demonde lowers and gently uncocks his rifle, saying "merde," beneath his breath. He frowns, irritated, and continues scanning on ground level. Once or twice, he starts to take aim, seeing movement - each time, he only lowers his rifle again, shaking his head, unable to maintain his target. He quickly returns to Labosche.

DEMONDE

Put that thing away, and pick up your rifle. He's over the wall, somewhere over there. I saw him. Keep your eyes trained, over there. I'm going to move down, along the wall, flush him out. I'll try to sandwich him, between us - so don't shoot, unless he's open field.

(Exits.)

LABOSCHE

(Still holding the crucifix, muttering.)

Won't do any good, I tell you - only silver bullets - "Our Father, who art in Heaven - " " - Holy Mary, Mother of God - now, and at the hour of our death - "

(Hears a sound, off - picks up his rifle.)

Oh, God - oh, God -

REGARDEZ

(Quietly, from offstage.)

Demonde - ! Labosche - ?

LABOSCHE

(Regaining himself, taking firm hold of his gun.)

Here!

REGARDEZ

(Entering.)

Don't be so nervous. It's only me. I bumped into Demonde. He explained to me. I thought he said he was going to double-back, here. I saw our intruder, at the same time he did. I sent a man from the next post down, the other way. We'll close him in.

LABOSCHE

Excellent idea, Captain! I've been watching, carefully. He won't get past me. It's been harrowing, but thank God, I have nerves of steel. I saw him first, you know - good eyes.

REGARDEZ

(Doubtful, but not in a mood to argue.)

Good for you. Listen - tell Demonde, when he comes back, that I've moved down to the next post. He'll know what to do.

LABOSCHE

Yes, sir!

REGARDEZ

(Noticing.)

What's your crucifix doing out?

(Exits.)

LABOSCHE

(Annoyed, stuffs it back in his shirt.)

Insurance, that's all. Insurance.

(Suddenly wheels around, gun ready, full-voice.)

Who's there? Halt, you!

DEMONDE

(From offstage.)

It's me - Demonde!

(Enters.)

LABOSCHE

What do you always creep up on me for?

DEMONDE

We're trying to keep the element of surprise, idiot.

(Gestures to the gun.)

You'd better put that down. You're getting too jumpy.

LABOSCHE

I am not!

(Receives a chastening look.)

Well, anyway, you would be, too.

REGARDEZ

(Entering, behind Labosche - quietly.)

Who called out -

He is cut off by the deafening report of Labosche's rifle. It goes off as he is whirling around to face Regardez. The recoil, catching him by surprise, knocks him flat and startles him into crying out. Everyone now speaks normal-voiced.

DEMONDE

There goes the element of surprise!

REGARDEZ

(Ruffled, but calm.)

Nerves of steel. Your good eyes are slipping, private - I was about an inch more to your right.

DEMONDE

The call, sir, quickly.

REGARDEZ

(Gives a vocal, coded signal, through his hands.)

Thank you for reminding me, Demonde - wouldn't want other nervous fingers to be pulling shots in our direction, would we?

(Resuming authority - he and Demonde talk quietly.)

All right - keep watch, to your left.

(To Labosche - firm, but not unkind.)

You, reload your weapon, hurry. We might need it.

LABOSCHE

I - I didn't mean -

REGARDEZ

I know you didn't. There's no time, for that. Reload.

(To Demonde.)

Anything more, where you were?

DEMONDE

No, sir. I think he was moving aground, toward the west wall. Hard to tell. I thought I had him spotted for sure, but it was one of ours.

REGARDEZ

You recognized him?

DEMONDE

No, but he was in uniform. Couldn't see his face.

REGARDEZ

Could you have been following him, instead of our intruder?

DEMONDE

It's possible I lost him, and - got confused. Yes, sir.

REGARDEZ

(Sighs.)

Don't lose any sleep, over it. Near impossible to - wait a minute. The man you saw. Heading aground, did you say?

DEMONDE

Yes, sir. Toward the -

(Simultaneously, they lock eyes, grim-faced.)

Where none of our men -

DEMONDE and REGARDEZ

(Together.)

- are supposed to be!

REGARDEZ

Right. Did you see his rank? He was French?

DEMONDE

If he was German, we'd be talking over his corpse. No. Not his rank. He wasn't an officer, if that helps.

REGARDEZ

Anything helps, at this point. Could he have gotten back to this wall, after the shot was fired?

DEMONDE

I don't think so. He was pretty far advanced into the cemetery.

REGARDEZ

(A slight grin, a quiet note of triumph.)

Then we've got him.

(Becoming more excited, but still in control.)

Keep this wall covered. If he came over it, he might leave the same way. Be ready for him, if he does. Go back the way you just came, alert the next post. I'll go the other way. Oh -

(Stops Demonde, before he leaves.)

if you see a flash, Demonde, drop whatever you're doing and train your rifle in its direction. I might as well tell you, now - the walls are triggered with -

DEMONDE

(Smiles, realizing.)

Flashpots!

REGARDEZ

(Smiling, nods.)

And if the torches are lit, as they will be if -

A man cries out, offstage. They look in the cry's direction. Voices are heard, off: "Over here!" - "We've got him!" - "The torches, everyone, torches!" - "Do you see him, yet?" - "Not yet - over here somewhere - keep your eyes peeled!" - "Over here! I think he's over here!" The stage becomes brighter, glowing with orange, as offstage torches are lit. There is a loud grunt, and then an audible snap.

LABOSCHE

He stepped in a trap!

DEMONDE

We wouldn't hear it shut, unless he was out of it.

REGARDEZ

Do you see him?

DEMONDE

Not yet - wait - no.

REGARDEZ

(To Labosche.)

Is your gun loaded?

LABOSCHE

Just a second - yes.

REGARDEZ

Get ready to - there he is!

(Shouts.)

You! Halt, or we shoot! Halt!

(Normal voice, but tense with excitement.)

My God, he's already to the wall - on a wounded leg!

He's clearing it! Demonde!

There is a bright flash, off, and a cry of surprise. Soon after, a gunshot. Demonde takes aim in the flash's direction - fires. He lowers his weapon, squints, swears.

DEMONDE

Damn! Just off! Has he been hit? Did someone else get him?

REGARDEZ

No - he's leapt up - how, on that leg? He'll be over, any minute. The men aren't close enough.

(To Labosche, who is taking aim.)

Make it count, private.

Labosche doesn't answer. His face is no longer a boy's, but a man's, grimly eyeing his target. He takes his time - and fires. There is a cry, off.

REGARDEZ

Good shot, Labosche!

LABOSCHE

I didn't kill him, did I?

DEMONDE

Looks like you hit his shoulder. Winged him.

LABOSCHE

(Disappointed, shakes his head.)

I was aiming for his leg.

REGARDEZ

(Hand on his shoulder, coolly complimentary.) It doesn't matter, Labosche. You've redeemed yourself. He's wounded. But look at him. Slowed, but he's still - I don't believe it. He got over. Wounded leg, wounded arm - and he cleared the wall!

(Levelly, with reluctant admiration.)

Maybe he is a loup-garoux.
(calls out.)

You men! Fan out! He's outside the wall!

There is general hub-bub offstage, gradually calming. One voice calls back: "Already after him, Captain! He can't get far!" Regardez calls out again, seeing someone approaching.

REGARDEZ

No! Stay close to the wall!

(Warning.)

The traps!

VOICE

(Approaching, from offstage.)

I know where they are, sir. I set them.

The men watch his approach. A moment later, he appears onstage - a corporal, his rifle slung, carrying something in his hand. He seems quietly satisfied, reporting.

CORPORAL

He hit the trap nearest me. By a freshly dug mound - thought that's where he'd head. It didn't bite him very deep. Spring was weak. Bit in, anyway. There's blood on it. And this.
(Hands Regardez a bloodied, blue piece of cloth.)
Just a moment, sir.

The corporal has noticed someone else approaching. He calls out, heading offstage: "Stay where you are - the traps. Wait a minute - I'll come to you. What have you found?" He has exited, his voice becoming indistinct. Meanwhile, Regardez shows the cloth to Demonde and Labosche.

REGARDEZ

What do you make of it?

LABOSCHE

Looks almost like -

DEMONDE

(Comparing his sleeve to the cloth, nods.)

A uniform.

LABOSCHE

Police, or military? Hard to tell -

REGARDEZ

(To Demonde.)

Your non-officer.

DEMONDE

Must be. Military. How do you like that? He wasn't one of ours - but he is one of ours -

REGARDEZ

(Reluctantly agrees.)

Explains why the dogs didn't bark. They're trained to ignore French uniforms. Depending on his rank, it would have given him foreknowledge of all our defenses, too. I'm glad I kept the traps and flashpots secret.

CORPORAL

(Returning.)

I don't know that I'd call this especially good news, Captain, but you'll want to take a look at this.

(Hands him another bloodied cloth-piece, more colorful.)

One of the men found it embedded in the wall, with the bullet that hit our man. A little the worse for wear, but I think identifiable.

REGARDEZ

That was some shot, Labosche. You clipped his rank patch, right off his shoulder.

LABOSCHE

(Looks at it, eyes widening.)

Mother of God! They do make good targets - !

DEMONDE

(Takes the cloth, scrutinizes it.)

Sergeants' stripes?

REGARDEZ

(As corporal nods affirmation.)

That's what they look like, Demonde. This one's all but wrapped-up, men. All we have to do now, is round him up -

(Sighs heavily, anticipating the scandal.)
and turn him over to my superiors.

CORPORAL

The men are already in pursuit.

REGARDEZ

Good. Spread the word: we're looking for a sergeant with a bad leg, who's missing one of his shoulder patches. His arm is probably shot - can't tell if the bullet grazed, or hit him. He was strong enough still to vault the wall, so the trap didn't break his leg - but he'll be limping, you can count on that. Check all the enlisted men's quarters in Paris. Start with the nearest taverns and boarding-houses, and spread out. And if any of you know where the closest civilian doctors are, you'll want to check there, too. We don't know how badly hurt he is, but he'll have to get those wounds dressed, sometime.

CORPORAL

There's splashes of blood about the wall, sir - I think the bullet hit him.

REGARDEZ

All the better. Everything else failing, we'll have him at roll-call, tomorrow morning. But I want him - tonight. We've spent too much time here, already. Let's get after him while the trail's still hot!

All exit, Labosche last.

LABOSCHE

(As he goes, shuddering.)

I don't think I want to be a soldier, after all -
(Exits.)

FADE OUT

END ACT ONE

ACT II

A barracks-tavern, immediately following.

The windows of the tavern (except for the door's) are boarded, and there is some evidence of fire damage. Long tables are arranged much like an army barracks mess hall, which the tavern now is. To one side, stairs lead up to the mens' cots and sleeping area. To the other side is a storage area door, leading to the private room of Sgt. Grave. Opposite, tucked in by the stairs, is the counter, behind which is a door to the proprietor's room.

AT RISE: The scene is deserted. Pierre Grave stumbles in the front door, attempting to remain quiet, and failing. He is in his mid-twenties, powerful-looking: ordinarily, he is polished and charming, if a bit aloof; presently, he is pale and sweaty, trembling. The bloody shoulder of his seargeant's uniform is missing its rank patch, and his leg is bleeding. He is barefoot. He knocks over one or two chairs, as he weaves, staggering to his room. From the proprietor's room, a woman's voice calls "Who's there?" Groaning, Grave hurriedly gets into his room and shuts the door, just before the woman emerges. Mrs. Beaufort enters, hastily wrapped in a robe, which doesn't cover her very well. In her forties, she is still attractive, if a bit worn from the war and advancing years. She looks concerned, maybe even afraid, but able to handle whatever situation should arise. She advances cautiously into the tavern, a broomstick held ready as a weapon, a lantern in her other hand. From Grave's room is heard a heavy thump, and a groan. Mrs. Beaufort calls, quietly.

MRS. BEAUFORT

Sergeant Grave? Sergeant - ? Are you all right, in there?
(Receiving no answer, becomes bolder.)
We're armed in here, and ready! If you're an intruder, get out! Half the French army is upstairs, ready to fight you off!

GRAVE

(From behind the door, full-voiced, but weak.)
It's me, Mrs. Beaufort.

MRS. BEAUFORT

Sergeant? Are you all right, in there? What's going on?

GRAVE

I was walking in my sleep. I'm sorry - I've frightened you. Please, go back to bed.

MRS. BEAUFORT

(Solicitous.)
You sound terrible! Have you hurt yourself?

GRAVE

No - I - really - yes, yes I seem to have - but I'm all right, really - Mrs. Beaufort. Just need - to go back to sleep.

MRS. BEAUFORT

(Starts to open door.)
You're hurt! Let me see -

GRAVE

(Slams the door shut, before she can see him.)
No!

(Calmer.)
It's nothing. Please - I'm not dressed.

MRS. BEAUFORT

(Maternally.)
I only want to help.

GRAVE

I know. It's nothing. I can take care of it myself.

MRS. BEAUFORT

(Tenderly, a little vulnerable.)
Please, sergeant. You know, I - want to help. I - need to. I've lost one man, from under this roof - I don't want to lose another. Things haven't been the same, since my husband died. Please. Just - let me look at it. See that you're all right.

GRAVE

(Sighs defeatedly - after a pause.)
Very well, Mrs. Beaufort. Give me a moment to throw something on. You have always been very kind to me. Perhaps -

Ilse Karnstein, half dressed, has emerged from the proprietor's room. She is physically energetic, if frail of build - somewhat petite and wan-looking, but of healthy German stock. She is about twenty, and very pretty. Her personality is very shy, withdrawn and sensitive, the result of her being a German in a city that recently has hated Germans. Around Grave, she becomes more open, communicative - it is obvious she is very fond of him. She has a slight accent.

ILSE

The sergeant - ? He is all right?

MRS. BEAUFORT

I'm not sure, Ilse -

ILSE

I heard noise - I was afraid -

Grave's door opens just enough for him to be seen - he holds it shut against himself, barring any possible entrance. He is wrapped in a blanket, leaning against the door frame. Mrs. Beaufort holds the lantern toward his face. Grave is very pale. He trembles, but sounds composed - too composed.

GRAVE

As you can see, I'm quite all right.

MRS. BEAUFORT

Where did you hurt yourself?

GRAVE

I - barked my shin, is all. While sleepwalking.

MRS. BEAUFORT

You're trembling - !

(Reaches to touch his forehead - he recoils from her touch.)

GRAVE

A touch of flu, I think. I don't want you to catch it.

MRS. BEAUFORT

(Wistful, a bit sad.)

If only we could feed you better - you're losing color. You look positively white!

GRAVE

Influenza. Once I've slept it out, I'll be fine. I appreciate your concern, but as you can see, I'm fine.

(Tries to smile, but it looks more like a grimace - suddenly his eyes roll up, and he collapses.)

MRS. BEAUFORT

(Frightened, kneels by him.)

Sergeant! Sergeant Grave!

ILSE

(Has joined her - looking at the floor.)

On the floor - Mrs. Beaufort - blood!

MRS. BEAUFORT

(Pulls away the blanket, sees Grave's bloodied uniform - gasps, horrified.)

He's hurt! Oh, I knew something was wrong! Ilse, help me get him onto the table.

(They lay him on a table.)

What do you suppose happened? Maybe - maybe he was out on reconnaissance. Spying on the Germans. And got shot. Yes - yes, maybe that's what happened.

ILSE

Why wouldn't he tell us he was hurt?

MRS. BEAUFORT

(Faltering.)

A secret mission. Do you suppose? It - must have been, yes, it must have been.

ILSE

(Doesn't want to say it.)

He would have gone to a doctor - wouldn't he?

MRS. BEAUFORT

A doctor - oh, Lord! - we need a doctor! Ilse, run and fetch Doctor Giroux. I'll tend to him.

ILSE

Where is Doctor Giroux?

MRS. BEAUFORT

Oh, you know - no, I suppose you don't. You go down the street, and then -

(Realizes the directions will become complicated.)

- never mind. It will be easier, if I fetch him. You'll need some hot water, first - and some bandages. You're good with dressing wounds.

She hurries out. Ilse strokes Grave's face, lovingly. She sounds lonely, speaking softly to him.

ILSE

You are in trouble - yes? You are a nice man. Always so kind to me, even though I am German. Not like the others.

(Looks upstairs, where the men are sleeping.)

They - whatever you are in, I will help you. I have - always wanted - wanted to help you. You look at me so warmly, I wonder - often wonder, if you - might -

Mrs. Beaufort returns, with a pail of water and some linens.

MRS. BEAUFORT

There is warm water on the stove, in the back. And this, to clean him. We are almost out of antiseptic, but there is still some in the cupboard. Oh, Lord - shot. Gambling, that's what it was. He - he snuck out, to gamble with a bad crowd. He didn't want us to know, in case we'd think less of him. That's it. Of course, that's it. Oh! His pulse is so faint! I stand here gabbing, and - I'll be back soon.

(As she leaves.)

Oh, Lord - not him, too - don't let him die, too - !

(Exits.)

Ilse calmly goes about her business. She has tended many a wound, before. She gets a pan of hot water from the stove, offstage, and returns. Grave begins to come to, while she is off. He is groaning, eyes still closed, when she returns. Ilse tears off a linen strip, dips it in the water, and lays it across his forehead, gently. His eyes flicker open. He takes a moment to focus, disoriented.

GRAVE

Where - am I - ?

ILSE
Ssh - you are all right. I am here.

GRAVE
Ilse -
(Looks about.)
I thought I was there - still -

ILSE
Where?

GRAVE
I thought I was dead.

ILSE
(Smiles.)
If you were dead, how would you be thinking?

GRAVE
They dream, don't they? The dead dream - maybe they even feel - I don't know.

ILSE
You have strange ideas. You are a doctor of philosophy, aren't you?

GRAVE
(Looking at her, as if for the first time.)
How did you know that? I don't remember telling you -

ILSE
I know lots of things about you.
(He looks scared, for a moment - sensing she has said something wrong, she withdraws a bit.)
I mean - your men, they talk. I heard, that's all.
(She becomes uncomfortable.)

GRAVE
(Kindly, relaxing.)
That's all right. Yes - yes, I am. I studied at the seminary at Langres. I just hadn't realized that anyone ever bothered to find anything out about me. Or anyone else, for that matter. We've all become so closed off. Frightened. Terrified enough of knowing ourselves, let alone other people. So much suspicion, distrust - so widespread.
(Pauses.)
Understanding. No understanding. Only fear.

ILSE

War makes people fearful.

GRAVE

That's what I mean. Your country and mine. Our nations have always feared each other - and it trickles down to each of us, personally. Then further, until we become afraid not only of foreign people, but of our own neighbors. And then, sometimes - further still -

ILSE

(Gently.)

But it works in reverse too, ja? I mean - we, we get along, you and I. A Frenchman and a German. Maybe the nations make us fearful. But maybe - just as individual people - we reverse the process. Do you think?

GRAVE

(Chuckles lightly, touched by her innocence.)

Warum nicht? ("Why not?")

ILSE

(Pleased and surprised.)

Sie sprechen Deutsch? ("You speak German?")

GRAVE

Nur ein bisschen. Nicht zu viel - und nicht so gut.
("Just a little. Not too much - and not very well.")

ILSE

Nein, du musst nicht das sagen! Deine Sprache ist ausgezeichnet, fur ein Franzosischer. ("No, you mustn't say that! You speak it excellently, for a Frenchman." - Ilse has become friendlier still, switching from the formal address "Sie" to the informal "du.")

GRAVE

You speak French well, too, for a German. A slight accent, but -

(They laugh together, pleasantly.)

ILSE

Where did you learn it? I have been here so many years, and so young, your language was easy for me to learn.

GRAVE

At the seminary. And, of course, you learn some of the language of the enemy, always, when you -

He suddenly realizes what he has said, and looks neutrally off, regretting it. Ilse looks to the floor, sad. A moment passes. Ilse returns to bandaging him. She thinks seriously for a moment, before speaking.

ILSE

You can tell me, sergeant - you know my language - and you go out often, at night.

(He looks sharply at her.)

Yes, I know. I have heard you - seen you. A few times. And now this. You - you are a spy. Aren't you.

GRAVE

(After a thoughtful moment.)

No.

ILSE

You must be.

GRAVE

I went out for a walk. I cleaned my gun, and it went off, by accident.

ILSE

(Laughs, teasing.)

And that smart bullet, it hit you in the leg, then in the shoulder?

GRAVE

No. The leg wound - I stepped in a hole. There were vines, thorns. By the time I pulled it out -

ILSE

(Ironically, looking at his leg.)

Yes, the thorns - they tore you evenly, all around. They are smart, too.

(Levelly, without rancor, trying to spark friendship.)

You are not a spy either, are you? Germans do not fortify their boundaries with hunting traps, nor do the French. Or gamblers. You could have gotten that wound stumbling back through the fields, but somehow I don't think so. Were you poaching? But no, you wouldn't need to do that. The farmers give us all they can, they cooperate. You would not steal, from those who give to you, freely. You are in some trouble, some strange trouble - I wish you would tell me.

(Grave remains silent, made of stone.)

You are all talk, sergeant. You talk of trust, and understanding, but you will not give others the chance to trust, or understand. We must begin somewhere, mustn't we? Ja? Why not between you and me?

GRAVE

(After a long moment.)

Some things cannot be understood.

ILSE

That is not true.

GRAVE

Instinct. Instincts cannot be understood. What can't be explained, can't be understood.

ILSE

But they are! Perhaps instincts cannot be put into words, but they are understood, by all of us. Known, because we share them in common. They are natural. Love, for instance.

GRAVE

(Quiet, distant, intense - he talks more and more to himself.)

"Natural?" "Love - " No. The least conceivable, the least understandable of words. They have no common definition - no common understanding. We call a thing natural, that applies to the majority of any specie - does that make it so? And love! What is natural, in love? Listen to the soldiers. So many tastes, so many differences. I have met men who make love only with their mouths, or will only be loved by a woman's lips. Some who will only couple, finding everything else "unnatural." Some who despise the act, altogether. Men who will love only men, and women, women. Lovers of the lash. And some who love only the battlefield. Oh! How they come alive, these natural men! These, who have been dead - have been dormant - unknowing of their own instincts, until inevitably thrown into mortal conflict with their own kind, by nature. And their unknown instinct suddenly blooms brighter than the rose, as the blood flows, pricked by nature's thorns. Then - such passion, such life! - from these men, passion they never knew they had in them. That they can't explain. But they never have known their own "love," until it finds them, rising instinctively, from somewhere deep within. And others still - dear God, there must be others! - the very few, whose instincts drive them further. Beyond anything commonly known as "love."

(He winces slightly, as Ilse probes his leg, bandaging it.)

ILSE

You're wounded deeper than I thought - tell me. Let me try to understand.

GRAVE

Already, I see you couldn't.

ILSE

How can you say that? Try me.

GRAVE

I just did.

(Pause.)

Ilse -

ILSE

What?

GRAVE

Why did you stay? When war was declared? So many of your country fled - why didn't you? You sit here, in a foreign land, intermittently bombarded by your own countrymen. You bandage us, when we come in wounded, from killing them. They could be your brothers, your uncles. And you receive nothing for your pains but insults, as soon as the men you minister to hear your accent. They are less thankful for your help, than resentful of your heritage.

ILSE

Because some are not. You are not. Oh, yes - they call out to me, in pain. Pain knows no nationality, no heritage. It knows only need. Honest need. It needs care, and help and love. And in its moment, any woman's face is its savior. Then, when the pain has been loved away, the lack of it returns the senses - and some immediately forget. They hear my accent asking what more I can do for them not my voice or my words. It is the accent of the enemy, and those who do not curse me for it call me slut, and want to rape me - maybe because it is the only way they feel they can get back at my people, for raping their land. They are helpless and afraid, so sensitive of their own recent pain, and the fear of its return, that they are insensitive to the pain of others.

(Pause.)

If I had returned to Germany, it would be much the same. I would tend our wounded, responding to their cries of pain, that remove all trace of accent. And when I was done, there would be no thanks, either. I would be only one more dutiful girl, doing what is expected of her, for her country's sake. Duty is a loveless thing - merely mechanical. I would rather bear the thousand jeers of a foreign tongue, to hear that one that would thank me, in honest love. Love is learned, by pain - for those patient and wise enough to know it. And I like to think that, for my presence here, two French women are tending to my fallen brothers - and beginning to bridge the chasm of war.

GRAVE

(Calmly, looking deep into her eyes - which are locked with his.)

You - do understand. If anyone could, ever, it would be you. You have lost much, haven't you?

ILSE

No one lives, who hasn't. Most merely fail to grow, from the experience.

GRAVE

Someone - close?

ILSE

(After a pause.)

My brother. Older than me, by ten years. He suggested I come to France. I would find it beautiful, he said. My brother was always right - and I loved him so!

(Laughs fondly, remembering.)

My Uncle Otto had a shop, here. My parents let me visit him, and I loved France so much, I never wanted to leave. Such fun people! So unrestrained! And Paris - I have never been so enchanted! I decided to stay, and found work. I - sort of "adopted" your country, whatever it may wish to think of me. I have even continued to love it in its pain - I don't know why. Perhaps because I can help make it heal. I loved it, even when -

(She sobers, her hand absently fingering between her breasts.)

My brother, Hans, dear Hans - I have gone out into the fields, sometimes, after the shooting is over. So much red on the uniforms, I can't tell one country from another. Those left there are beyond help. They have nothing left to do, but stare endlessly into the sky, after their departed souls. And I have helped close some of their cold eyes, under the warm blanket of the earth. So they won't have to sorrow anymore, for what they have lost. So that - if they do dream - they will at least dream comfortably. Every time, I prayed I would not see one face - his. God answered my prayer, but in cruel jest. I have never understood why He allowed cruelty, but He must love it - he permits so much of it.

(She pulls a ring out of her blouse, hanging by a string about her neck.)

I found his ring, Hans's ring, on the finger on which I had placed it, the last time I saw him. I could not even kiss him goodbye. God had taken his face away - and everything behind it. Strange, I did not even grieve much. I remembered his face, remembered it smiling, knew it would rebuke me, if I cursed the happiness of my adopted home, only for his inevitable death in

ILSE (Continued.)

an inevitable war. All things must die, sometime. We cannot love them less, for their leaving - or love our lives less. I will give his ring - to another, I hope - someday.

(She furtively glances at Grave, then, swallowing bashfully and nervously, tucks it back in her blouse.)

GRAVE

(After a respectful pause.)

I loved that deeply, once. I hadn't thought others could know a love as endless. I would tell you -

(He becomes choked, unable.)

No. Even you could not accept - believe - my love.

ILSE

(Taking his hand, gently.)

You know you mustn't fear me. You have always been kind to me, and I - I have always - cared for you. You remind me - very much - of Hans. There is nothing you could tell me, that would make me think less of you.

GRAVE

You say that, now. Would you still, I wonder, if -

ILSE

If - ? It was a woman, wasn't it? A lover - ?

GRAVE

Yes. You may remember her. She used to pass by here, now and then. A noble's daughter - she lived not far from me, and our families were friends. Jeannine, was her name. So beautiful! As beautiful to me as Paris must have been to you, when first you saw her. Petite - auburn haired - a complexion of alabaster - lips a red, red bow - a heart shaped face, her eyes big and brown and bright - I drowned in those eyes, whenever I beheld them. They held me, a moth to a flame. I wanted to fly up into those eyes, and be consumed in their fire - perish with her in the ashes, and blow forever free in the wind.

ILSE

She was - killed?

GRAVE

Not by bullets, but the war claimed her, all the same. She was never very healthy. She had pneumonia one year, pleurisy the next. And those eyes that held me so, it was as if they never beheld this world - even that which was beautiful in it - without sorrow. The painful things of life were amplified by her eyes, weakening her resistance to leave it. Each passing

GRAVE (Continued.)

year, a few pounds more fled her frame - her body became lighter, longing to fly away, and her beauty strangely deepened. Love was all that held her fragile form together - and that became inadequate to the task, in time. Once, I saw her often. Then less, with my school at Langres. By the time I returned, she had withdrawn from life, barely responsive anymore. The guns erupted between France and Germany, belching race hatred, the pus from old, festering wounds pouring forth. Her senses, reluctant as before, felt, smelled, tasted the bile of war, until - only weeks ago - her spirit overcame its clay, and floated out her eyes, leaving the last reminder of its beauty behind - to rot, unappreciated, in a lonely box beneath the cruder clay of the earth.

(Pause.)

Neither of us was able to - to consummate, while she lived. She wanted to - but the nightmares of life she felt so keenly never lightened sufficiently in her mystical eyes to give her the luxury of love. I longed to - but the world into which she stared was night, and would not permit it. We were meant to love, she and I. But not then. Not until - some later time. With her past all horror - in a place where she could embrace my own. Without fear. Or shame. Life - is ironic. Death, even more so. Why should not the two embrace, close as they are?

ILSE

(Remembering.)

Jeannine - Jeannine Barraux? Yes, of course - that haunted beauty - I remember her, looking in the window, smiling at you. And I saw her again, a drawing in the paper - it must have been her funeral notice. No - at Pere Lachaise. She -

Ilse realizes. She puts a hand over her mouth, uncomfortable. She does not want to raise a hurtful memory. Grave nods, sighing.

GRAVE

Yes - yes, I know. None, better than I, know. The papers - should not have published it. I'm sure it was not done to hurt the family. The act, I mean. But the papers, they, they print things that people are better off not knowing. They make profits. Publishing such things as that, which they can't possibly even understand - without realizing it, they make mobs out of men, creating a common enemy on their own streets.

ILSE

(Since he can talk about it.)

But what sort of man would do something like that?

GRAVE

(A soft laugh, sad.)

Even you - I don't know. I imagine he can't help himself. I like to think he saw the pain in her eyes, and wished somehow to take it away.

ILSE

What more could dead eyes see?

GRAVE

But perhaps they dream -

(A long pause, while they regard each other's eyes - motionless, speaking volumes - then, at length.)

You look so much like her.

ILSE

(Pleased, embarrassed, shy.)

I - ?

GRAVE

Oh, yes.

(Pause.)

Often, I have wondered - if anything in life could make me love it, more than -

(Another pause.)

It might have been me, Ilse. I may have been the one who killed your brother - who fired the shot that took away his face, that you so loved.

ILSE

Armies are the mobs of their nations. They are arms, obeying commands. Can the arm be faulted, for the brain's command?

(Pause.)

I may look like her - but I am not your Jeannine - the one whose haunted eyes you so longed to fly into.

GRAVE

I am not your brother, however much alike we may appear. Who ever weds the one they want? Dreams are kept alive, in the eyes of those who remind us of them. Love is found only in dreams - we have lost ours.

ILSE

(Tenderly.)

Then we have both lost too much.

She looks at him, hopeful, vulnerable. He leans toward her, and she leans in to him. She closes her eyes, catching her breath, her lips slightly parted, expectant. He hesitates, frowning. He wants to kiss her, but seems uneasy - finally, he does, tenderly. He starts to pull away, but she presses herself to him. He yields, giving way to passion. It is a long kiss. When it is finished, they embrace, tightly. She rests her head on his downstage shoulder - obscuring his face behind hers - being careful of the wound. She is smiling, happy. They are quiet, for a few moments.

ILSE

I loved you, from when your regiment first came here. There was something - different, about you. I still don't know what it is. Most of the soldiers, they are strutting, pompous popinjays. They boast and brag, they treat the day's casualties as losses in a game, as if the war were a costume party, thrown for the benefit of making them look wonderful. They are like the children in the streets, selling shell fragments and severed fingers as souvenirs. Their eyes reflect with a dull sparkle, doll's eyes, dolls that dance as marionettes to the sound of trumpets and rifles, once they know they are free from danger. To listen to them, you would think each one had personally fought the Kaiser, with duelling sabers. They fear the fight. But they love the dance of false victory. You - you are always so quiet. They respect you. And - fear you - in some way. You wear no airs, trumpet no triumphs. There is something in your eyes that gives them true sparkle. But alone - alone, they fear. I still don't know what. Your eyes are voracious, in so gentle a face. What do they seek to devour? It was your hungry eyes I first loved. Perhaps it was always me they sought.

GRAVE

(Pulls back to look in her eyes, still holding her.)

Not you - your spirit, perhaps. That wondrous gift you possess, for healing. You raise the dead, kissing the hunger in my eyes. Perhaps you even give them - and me - freedom.

ILSE

Such a beautiful word! "Freedom - " Will we ever be free?

GRAVE

From the war? Yes. That lady we love, Paris, she can't stand much more, before submitting. From ourselves - ? Already, the Communards mass, it is believed. They say they hate the Germans, but it's the French that the French despise. We never lost the monarchy - only changed its hands to the merchants', fanning old flames, old resentments, between rich and poor. I'm not afraid of the Germans. I'm afraid of France, when she will have no enemy to disguise her true hate, and be left staring into her own hostile gaze.

ILSE

Do you really think that will happen?

GRAVE

We fight among ourselves, even as we fight your people. It is the same as twenty years ago, and as it will be twenty years from now. France will forever hate her own reflection - Medusa, caught in her own coils, the serpents of her hair biting each other.

ILSE

We could leave - before that happens - leave, you and I. I would miss Paris. But Germany is a beautiful place, too.

GRAVE

Don't look now, but this might be Germany, in a few weeks.

ILSE

No, really! We could go back there, if things are as bad here as you say. After the war. I have family, there. They would treat you well - better than I am treated, here. Victors always show generosity to the vanquished - it is one of their trophies. And you are educated, you would do well, there.

(Pause.)

Do you - have another? I am being so foolish - I never stopped to think, that you might -

GRAVE

There have always been others, for me. They need not concern you. In you, I would hope to abandon them all, to find the love of - of life, that would bury them - bury them forever, where they belong.

ILSE

(Passionately.)

I would still have you, in spite of them all! None of them could love you, as I do!

GRAVE

No - none of them could -

ILSE

(Regaining her composure - almost ashamed.)

I don't - usually speak so. I only meant - that I hope you will - consider -

GRAVE

(Gently.)

I know what you meant. Shh - it's all right. There is no other woman in life I could love.

Ilse throws herself again into his embrace, smiling, her eyes wet. She is half laughing, half crying. She pulls back, looking in his eyes. Her tone is brighter, as they both speak, simultaneously.

ILSE

(Together.)

Feeling better?

GRAVE

(Together.)

Are you feeling better?

They laugh.

ILSE

Your wounds -

GRAVE

I haven't felt them.

ILSE

Have you eaten? You must be hungry.

GRAVE

As a matter of fact - I haven't eaten, tonight.

ILSE

(Joyfully busying herself at the stove.)

You didn't eat, at dinner. You almost never do. Don't you like my cooking?

GRAVE

It's not your cooking. I - thought the men needed it, more.

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ILSE

How noble! I have seen you on other nights, too. Passing dinner by, and rummaging scraps from the alley, or the garbage.

(Grave scrutinizes her carefully, tense concentration on his face.)

It isn't healthy, you know. Much of that food, however precious each scrap is to us, is spoiled. You could -

(Laughs, noticing.)

Why do you look at me, like that?

GRAVE

You wouldn't - tell anyone else you've seen me, would you?

ILSE

They would think you a hero!

(His gaze remains the same.)

Oh, very well. I haven't. I won't. Hans was like you, in that regard. Always self-sacrificing - always in silence.

GRAVE

It's not that. I - you're right.

ILSE

Of course I am! I'm a good judge of character. Do you like your eggs scrambled?

(Grave nods, weakly - he seems quietly upset.)

I like cooking, for you. You know - I don't think I've ever talked this much. I was never this happy! Something in you makes me glad to talk - perhaps because you like to listen.

GRAVE

(Troubled.)

Ilse -

ILSE

What?

GRAVE

You have seen only part of me. The French sergeant, the man who reminds you of your brother, the listener. Suppose - suppose you discovered - something different.

ILSE

You have told me you have other women. It may have been you who killed my brother. You come in, wounded, in the middle of the night - have I not shown you my love? I talk with you, watch you, read the soul in your eyes. You are a good man. And you love me. What else could I possibly discover, that could change my mind?

GRAVE

The reason for my wounds - you don't know -

ILSE

It doesn't matter. You matter. The man I am in love with matters.

GRAVE

How can you know? If I were - some kind of criminal -

ILSE

(Softly, speaking his name for the first time.)
 Pierre - tell me you have been sleeping with another man's wife, that you robbed a shop, that tonight you murdered someone - I would still love you. Love does not turn on, or off. It merely is. Tell me any of these things, and I would forget them, remembering only the man who eats rotten scraps for the sake of his men, the man who kissed me, the man whose eyes have told me that he loves me.

GRAVE

I can't have you love me - unless - But - but I can't tell you - if you only knew!

ILSE

I know. I know you.

(Light, reasonable.)

You committed some crime tonight, didn't you? Are you not a spy, but instead a traitor? The criminal I love. The traitor I love.

GRAVE

Those are things you can understand. Some things cannot be understood.

ILSE

If they truly cannot, they are not worth bothering with. Your talk earlier - is that it? You love differently, and are afraid to tell me. You love other men? But no - your kiss tells me otherwise. And even if you did, you would love me more. You would come back to me, always to me. Have your other lovers - men, women - I don't care, don't you understand? It would always be me you truly loved, and in the end, I would be the only one.

GRAVE

(Almost gasping.)

No - no -

ILSE

The whip spurs your passion, then. Say the word, and I will yield my flesh to its biting caress, even let my blood, if it will stir you to love me more. If you require its sting, then I will wield it, and none need ever know, but us. Take me as animals are taken, if you must - so long as you take me. You do love me - don't you?

GRAVE

I love you more than life, itself. You are life, for me - it is impossible for me to tell you!

ILSE

Then keep your secret, but give me your love - I require nothing more. I will trust you have your reasons, as you do for eating fouled meat, when there is fresh, for your taking.

GRAVE

You could live with a man - love with a man - who kept a secret from you?

ILSE

If I loved him - and I had to - and I do love you, Pierre!

GRAVE

(Becoming decisive.)

You could love a criminal, a traitor. You will have to love a deserter, Ilse. We must leave Paris - tonight.

ILSE

(Surprised.)

Tonight? But -

GRAVE

Now.

ILSE

But you are wounded! You must be seen to, first! Let the doctor look at you, and then we will leave. I promise. We will leave as soon as we can. When you are healthy again, we will leave in the night. I am German. They would let you past the front, if I were with you. They would protect us, and -

GRAVE

(Starting, suddenly very alert.)

Doctor - where's Mrs. Beaufort?

ILSE

Gone to get Doctor Giroux. You were so weak. You still -

GRAVE

(Up and urgent.)

Then we must leave - immediately! There is no time - hurry, grab what you need - we must hurry, hurry!

(Pushing her toward her room, falls on his hurt leg.)

ILSE

(Helping him up.)

All right, Pierre - all right. I will only be -

The door opens. Mrs. Beaufort enters, ushering in Doctor Giroux. He is a bit unkempt, and only half-dressed, carrying a bag.

MRS. BEAUFORT

Sergeant Grave! You shouldn't be up! You've lost too much blood!

ILSE

(Quickly.)

He fell. I was just helping him back up.

(She gives Grave a significant, conspiratorial look, as they help him onto the nearest table.)

GIRAUX

(Pulling up a chair.)

So, you're our wounded man. Looks like you got the worst of the fight. Did you win?

During the following, Ilse slips into her room, unnoticed. Mrs. Beaufort maternally hovers around Grave. Doctor Giroux is professionally detached, yawning from time to time. His manner is casual, pleasant, and partially scrutinizing.

GRAVE

No, I - that is, I'm not sure.

GIRAUX

(Leaning in, sniffing around Grave's face.)

Late night rendezvous, with a rough hooker? Husband come home too early?

GRAVE

Something like that.

GIRAUX

(Examining the leg - probing, touching, prodding.)

You haven't been drinking. Must have been a cheap date. Who did the bandaging?

GRAVE

Ilse. Uh - the girl, who was just -

(Doesn't want to call attention to her absence.)

- the serving girl, the barmaid.

GIRAUX

(No change of tone.)

Not up to anything subversive, were you? Don't know why you needed me - these bandages are well applied.

GRAVE

Subversive?

GIRAUX

Running information, maybe? Supplies? This looks like a man-trap wound. Not too many of those, in bedrooms. Leg's not broken -

GRAVE

No, nothing like that.

GIRAUX

Wound's a little swollen - only natural. Broke the skin. Not too bad. This hurt?

GRAVE

No.

GIRAUX

Now?

GRAVE

A little.

GIRAUX

(Turns the foot; Grave's leg involuntarily jumps, without any seeming pain.)

Abnormally high tolerance for pain, without drink. Huh. Tendon's bruised, might be a slight fracture in the ankle. You're lucky. Those things can snap a man's foot clean off, like a rat's head in a trap. Smells like it's been disinfected.

Giroux rewraps Grave's leg with a bandage from his bag, binding it tighter.

GRAVE

Yes. I've been tended, doctor, thank you. You must be tired. I'm afraid Mrs. Beaufort panics easily. You don't need to -

MRS. BEAUFORT

Now, you let him finish!

GIRAUX

You listen to the lady. Just want to make sure the wounds are properly dressed.

MRS. BEAUFORT

(To Giroux.)

He's like that. Typical man. Thinks he's made of iron.

GRAVE

I only -

MRS. BEAUFORT

(Kind, but firm.)

Shh - ! You'll thank me tomorrow.

GIRAUX

She's right, you know. This will be a little uncomfortable - tight - but relax. You'll need to wear it maybe a week, maybe two. You can walk on it, but don't use much pressure. And stay off it for a day or two. Let's have a look at that shoulder - already filling up with your blood - I'll get you a new dressing, help it heal faster. Those eggs I smell?

MRS. BEAUFORT

(Notices; runs to stove, tends to it.)

Goodness! Have to watch these things - Ilse know better - Where is - ?

ILSE

(Appearing, dressed and wrapped, hiding a small bag.)

Here, Mrs. Beaufort.

MRS. BEAUFORT

You know not to leave the stove on.

ILSE

I didn't forget. I was making eggs for Pie -
(Catches herself.)
- for the sergeant.

MRS. BEAUFORT

What are you dressed for?

ILSE

I'm cold.

MRS. BEAUFORT

(Offering the eggs.)
Would you like some, doctor?

GIRAUX

No - thank you.

(Has unwrapped the shoulder bandage.)
Bullet out? This is a gunshot wound?

GRAVE

Yes. To both.

GIRAUX

Took a piece of your arm. That hurt?

GRAVE

(Winces; slight gasp.)
A little more than the leg, yes.

GIRAUX

Ought to. If I'd been probed like I just did to you, I'd have leapt up, screaming. That's going to scar rather badly, I'm afraid. I could stitch it up. That'd minimize the scar. Way you handle pain, wouldn't even to swab it.

GRAVE

No. That's all right.

GIRAUX

Story to tell your grandkids, eh? And mighty bored they'll be.

(Chuckles.)

Try one out, on me. How'd you get that, sergeant?

There is a brief silence. Giroux looks levelly into Grave's eyes, which betray nothing. Mrs. Beaufort comes to the rescue, sensing Grave needs help.

MRS. BEAUFORT

The streets are so dangerous, at night! Especially with the Siege, and all. Might have been some criminal, surprised in the act, took a potshot at him.

ILSE

Or a German spy, surprised on his mission, trying to protect himself!

(Takes eggs to Grave.)

MRS. BEAUFORT

Maybe that terrible ghoul, the one they call the loup-garoux. He might be -

Mrs. Beaufort freezes, her eyes widening slightly as she looks at Grave. She becomes increasingly nervous, but no one notices. She is in turmoil, caught between wanting to help Grave, and facing what she is becoming more and more certain must be the terrible truth.

GIRAUX

(Chuckles, friendly, still eyeing Grave levelly.)

Yes, he's become Paris's prime scapegoat, hasn't he? Tears their bodies apart, and flings the pieces far and wide. I've heard he does other things, as well.

(Ilse begins feeding Grave, then gives him the plate and fork for himself - which he sets casually aside.)

The most beautiful city in the world, Paris, besieged by the Germans - and while they do that, the city of the dead is besieged by - what? Man? Demon? They never found the head of the Barraux girl - and pieces of the others, they were supposedly - terribly sorry, sergeant. Didn't mean to put you off your dinner.

ILSE

Enough to give anyone nightmares!

(Significantly, to Grave.)

I may be up all night - after everyone leaves. You'll go straight to bed, of course, sergeant, after all you've been through. You'll be needing your strength.

By this time Giroux has finished rebandaging Grave's shoulder.

GRAVE

(To Ilse, signifying he understands.)

Yes.

(To Giraux.)

You must forgive me, doctor - I'm suddenly very fatigued.
If it is important to you, we can talk in the morning.

GIRAUX

(A knowing grin, but disappointed.)

Not going to tell me, are you? Do you know how boring my job is? Every wound the same, these days. I know where each one came from. One look, and I can tell you when they were hurt, how, from what distance, how many bullets fired, and at what angles - Can't peg you. I'm not the Surete, you know. Just a jaded Parisian doctor. Entertain me. Tell me, and I won't charge you. We could all be dead, tomorrow. Give us a last good one, before we go.

ILSE

Tomorrow, doctor, please. Can't you see he's tired?

GIRAUX

And I never sleep, I suppose?

(Indicates his attire.)

I know how late it is. More than any of you, I know. He's been up all night, obviously. I was awakened out of a sound sleep -

(To Grave.)

You don't strike me as a black marketeer - no, or a spy, either -

(Almost excited.)

Are you - ?

MRS. BEAUFORT

I don't want to know!

GIRAUX

- a rebel, an anarchist? They say the Commune is rising, again - just like in 1793, and 1848. I treated an explosive wound, a few weeks ago - the man was civilian, so he had to be up to something like that. A bad cause, I'm afraid. If that's your line, I advise you to drop it. Another Commune would be squashed, before it could do much. Or -

MRS. BEAUFORT

Please - no -

ILSE

Doctor Giraux -

GRAVE

Really, doctor, I -

GIRAUX

(Not heeding the attempted interruptions.)
- you're really more the "lover" type. It was an affair,
wasn't it? Some rich man's daughter - and you were caught.
And shot.

GRAVE

Yes. Yes, that's what it was.

MRS. BEAUFORT

(Fearful.)

No - !

GIRAUX

I knew it! But the trap wound - how did you get that?

MRS. BEAUFORT

(No one pays attention to her except Ilse,
who is confused by her behavior.)
There could only have been -

GRAVE

The father was an eccentric hunter. You won't tell anyone,
will you?

MRS. BEAUFORT

(Continuing.)

- one way!

ILSE

(Quietly.)

Mrs. Beaufort - ?

(Extends her hand toward her - Mrs. Beaufort
turns away from everyone, covering her mouth,
eyes closed, looking ill.)

GIRAUX

(Pleased, happy, beaming.)
Oh, thank you, sergeant! I don't care if it's true or not -
it's the best story I've heard in awhile!

(Chortles.)

This will be one to tell the boys!

GRAVE

Please - not for a few weeks.

(Smiles.)

There are reputations. You know.

MRS. BEAUFORT

(Quietly, in great fear.)

I know!

(Ilse regards her, puzzled - then turns to look at Grave, the light beginning to dawn.)

GIRAUX

Oh - of course - I understand. Mum's the word!

(Starts out.)

Look - you'll need to be checked, again. I'll look in on you again, tomorrow. Free of charge. When I have a moment.

GRAVE

That's very kind of you. Tomorrow, then.

Grave gives a small smile to Ilse - which drops slowly, as she fails to return it, a thoughtful frown on her face, instead - and Grave's features slip into gradual sorrow, as he realizes what the women are thinking. Approaching voices and footsteps are heard, outside. Giraux has stopped at the door, looking out. His good humor has fled him.

GIRAUX

(Speaking strangely.)

Sergeant - that - daughter you fooled around with - it wasn't - uh - an officer's daughter, or - anything - like that - was it -?

(He has turned slowly, to face Grave - whose attention remains on Ilse.)

REGARDEZ

(From outside, knocks sharply on the door.)

Open up, in there! This is Captain Regardez, on official government business - open up!

Regardez knocks again. Mrs. Beaufort draws a sharp breath, and Ilse looks numb, shaking her head almost imperceptibly in disbelief. Giraux opens the door, admitting Regardez. Demonde and Labosche flank him, outside. Regardez's

eyes immediately take in Giraux's bag, then he turns to look at Grave.

REGARDEZ

(Once more looking at Giraux, calm but firm.)

You are the proprietor?

(Giraux dumbly shakes his head, pointing to Mrs. Beaufort, whose back is still turned; Regardez addresses her.)

This man's room -

(Pointing at Grave.)

- which one is it?

(Receives no answer; Mrs. Beaufort does not face him.)

Where is this sergeant's room?

GRAVE

(Softly, nods toward his room, and looks at the floor, resigned.)

In there.

Regardez gestures for Demonde to search the room. Demonde enters, and disappears where he has been told. Regardez approaches Grave, authoritatively. A few soldiers' voices, groggy, can be heard from upstairs, complaining about the noise. They quickly subside.

REGARDEZ

Your name, sergeant.

GRAVE

Pierre Grave. 74th Regiment.

REGARDEZ

(His gaze remains on Grave, holds up his hand - Labosche brings him the torn sergeants' stripes, which he matches with Grave's discarded coat, pinning him with a stern gaze.)

Your uniform is a disgrace, sergeant - you've lost your stripes!

From Grave's room is heard an audible gasp. Mrs. Beaufort turns to face it, in horror. Demonde - controlled, but pale - appears in the doorway. He tries to speak, but can't.

Finally, he holds out what he has found, by the hair: it is the severed head of Jeannine Barraux, placid-looking, strangely peaceful and calm, eyes open. It is livid, barely having begun decomposition, and bears a striking resemblance to Ilse. Mrs. Beaufort doubles over, eyes wide, one hand over her mouth, the other over her stomach. She staggers off to her room - a few moments later, she is heard retching. Regardez, concealing his disgust as best as possible, throws Grave's bloody coat to Demonde.

REGARDEZ

Cover it up!

(To Grave, quietly but firmly.)

I trust you will accompany us quietly, and without incident
- Grave.

(He says the name with a trace of palpable scorn.)

Grave rises. Regardez briskly leads the way out. Demonde and Labosche flank Grave, neither man touching him. Demonde holds the coat-wrapped head away from himself, uncomfortably. Grave pauses for a moment, at the door. He turns to Ilse, sadness on his face. He reaches gently toward her - she recoils a step, horrified. Grave turns sharply away from her, looking downcast. They exit, followed by Giroux, who seems catatonically pulled along, like an entranced zombie. When they are gone, Ilse - alone - walks slowly to center stage. Her head shakes, uncertainly at first, but grows more pronounced as she reaches center. Her body is pale, trembling. She stops, her head suddenly whipping violently, side to side, her hands flying up to cover her face. She falls to her knees, wailing like a lost soul, and collapses in painful sobs.

FADE OUT

END ACT TWO

ACT III

A military courtroom, day.

It is spare, simply furnished, efficient. There is a table back and to one side, with three chairs behind it, for the Tribunal. A smaller table is beside it, for the stenographer. There is a chair on the other side of the Tribunal table, for witnesses. A centrally-placed chair is center, for the defendant. Opposite the Tribunal is a small, railed area - possibly a jury box, in other circumstances - for observers. Large bay windows are upstage center, opening onto a railed verandah.

AT RISE: There is a din of crowd noise, outside. Captain Regardez, in full dress, is half seated on the Tribunal "desk," putting the last touches on his uniform - polishing buttons, straightening his sabre, tying his shoes. He looks tired. Major Delacorte, also in full regalia, looks out over the verandah. His hands are clasped behind his back, loosely. His tone is philosophical. He is looking at the crowd, below - their noise pervades, sometimes louder, sometimes subsiding.

DELACORTE

Insane - they're all insane. I haven't seen this many gather for the trial of a murderer. Or sound so clamorous for blood. You'd think they'd have their fill by now, wouldn't you? Of blood. They don't scream so loudly for the Germans' blood.

REGARDEZ

They're powerless to get German blood. So, they press for what they can get - their own. They act as if Grave is singlehandedly responsible for all their problems.

DELACORTE

He's a convenient scapegoat. Any other time, they'd ignore him. He'd be forgotten, ten minutes after his arrest. They'd make a few macabre jokes about him, laugh, and go on about their business. Now - they have no business.

REGARDEZ

(Nods, agreeing.)

Animals - they're all animals. In a feeding frenzy. Blood doesn't slake them - it enflames them. They're so maddened by it, by the fact that they can't bring down the invading German pack, that they turn to each other's throats. They smell the blood, and hunger. Their own pours in the streets, not satisfying them - not satisfying, because they didn't make it run. Dying of starvation, it's not the food of the kill they want - it's the conquest. And we're not going to have that, over the Germans.

DELACORTE

(Admiring the windows.)

Beautiful. Don't know why they replaced them.

REGARDEZ

Pardon?

DELACORTE

The windows. They were blown out, a month ago - concussion, from the first bombardment. Why replace them, before the war is over? It can't be much longer.

REGARDEZ

That's Paris, for you. Act as if nothing's wrong. That's why we have them, outside. They shrug their shoulders, as their neighbors' heads are blown off theirs. They do that, on the surface - beneath, their resentments swell, until they suddenly burst through the calm facade. As suddenly as it happens, their flare of temper is over - leaving their neighbors' corpses, in its wake.

DELACORTE

(Quietly apprehensive.)

The Communards - you think they'll rise up again, like twenty years ago?

REGARDEZ

(Indicates outside.)

They already are.

(Fiddles with the hang of his jacket.)

Help me straighten this out, will you?

DELACORTE

(Helping.)

It's put together crookedly - that's the problem. It needs to be taken apart, put back together again, straight.

REGARDEZ

(Sighs.)

Everything's falling apart -

(Wistfully hopeful.)

I don't suppose the Germans might move in - ? Take over, completely? Govern us, straighten out our economy?

DELACORTE

You shouldn't talk like that. You're a French officer.

REGARDEZ

That's exactly why I'm talking like that. You know who will govern, don't you, after the war? We will. Louis Napoleon's Republic is nothing more than an animated corpse, now. Thiers uses us to keep it moving. And he will continue to. He'll stay in charge, whatever follows. That means we will too, of necessity.

(Bitterness showing.)

And I tell you - I don't like it. I don't want it. Thiers is the only one who can see us through this thing, but the final cost for France is going to be enormous.

DELACORTE

You speak as if we'd already lost.

REGARDEZ

Haven't we?

DELACORTE

You'll never get a promotion, with such talk.

REGARDEZ

(Snorts.)

Promotion! Rank means nothing, anymore - except in salary. And our economy is so depressed, salary means nothing anymore. It would be different, if the Germans would help put us back together, after we're through letting them blow us apart. But they won't. They'll rob us of what little money we have left, and the Alsace-Lorraine, then pack up their toys and go home. The Kaiser -

(Derisive.)

Kaiser! - will grow fat and sleek, and even more pompous than he already is - and Bismarck, that bastard, will find some other war to push him into, using what he steals from us to pay for it. We'll be left to fend for ourselves. Communards rising, as the Republic falls; the people swarming, the Monarchists manipulating; and we - the military - will be made to put them all down, for Thiers, until we somehow stabilize.

DELACORTE

I can't help but see your point. Thiers is already preparing for that eventuality. That - inevitability. Even the Church seems to be trying to stage a comeback. France crumbles, and everyone wants to be the mortar that cements its pieces back together, again.

REGARDEZ

Yes, now they do. Once they had power, they'd want nothing more than to hand it to someone else. Why not let Bismarck - excuse me, "The Kaiser" - take over? Then, we'd win the war. They'd overextend themselves, trying to govern our decomposed economy, and be ruined without our having to fire a shot.

DELACORTE

(Can't help but be amused.)

A novel approach, certainly! Let our economy - or lack of it - destroy them, instead of us!

REGARDEZ

(Morose.)

Won't happen, though. They'll probably take up residence inside Paris, and beef their own economy up, selling tickets to their own people, to come and watch us kill each other off. This Grave affair is only the prelude, to that.

DELACORTE

(Nods, seriously.)

It puts us in a bad light. You're right - we'll be in charge, Thiers leading us, until things settle. Something like this - it doesn't inspire confidence in the people. That's why that newspaperman, Compaignon, is being allowed to sit in on the court-martial.

REGARDEZ

(Disagreeably surprised.)

Compaignon? He started this mess - publishing all the sordid details of this damned thing! I understood this was to be a closed court!

DELACORTE

Thiers is allowing it, to pacify that mob outside.

REGARDEZ

It is a mistake - a grave mistake!

DELACORTE

Whether it is or isn't - it's a fact.

During this, Colonel Montmartre and his aide - a Lieutenant, the stenographer - have entered. The Lieutenant takes his place, and begins setting up. The Colonel, files in hand, approaches Delacorte and Regardez. Colonel Montmartre is tall, deep-voiced, authoritative. His manner is clipped, and brisk - no nonsense. He is a stable anchor, in the midst of chaos. This job is plainly not to his liking, but he is ready to tackle it. Expediency is the rule of his life - which is why Thiers picked him to head the Tribunal. He has a commanding presence, and assured air. He tends to look grim, and barely ever smiles. Occasionally, preoccupied, he has a nervous habit of massaging his brow.

MONTMARTRE

I'm afraid he's done worse than that, gentlemen.

DELACORTE and REGARDEZ

(Coming to attention.)

Colonel Montmartre!

MONTMARTRE

(Casually acknowledging and waiving their respect.)

Against my advice, M. Thiers is allowing someone else in here, as well. Cardinal Coldert is to be joining us, today.

REGARDEZ

He can't be serious!

DELACORTE

Colonel, Coldert is probably a Monarchist, in addition to being an old legal fox - surely Thiers must realize that he -

MONTMARTRE

Thiers wants to pacify everybody. He hasn't learned, yet, that that can't ever be done. My hands are tied.

REGARDEZ

Compaignon and Coldert! Why close the trial at all, if he feels that way? Between the two of them, they'll flap their jaws to all of Paris, and spur the mob on worse!

MONTMARTRE

I am not entirely without influence. I had to agree to the conditions - I had no choice - but I bargained a certain amount of control, out of it.

DELACORTE

How? Forgive me, Colonel - but Thiers seems to have removed all control from our hands, by permitting this.

MONTMARTRE

You will find out, presently.

(To a guard at the door.)

Show in Monsieur Compaignon and Cardinal Coldert.

(The guard exits.)

You've looked over the confession?

REGARDEZ

(Grunting, defeated.)

Seventeen pages of it. One for every corpse he says he's violated.

DELACORTE

It's hardly a case. All that remains is to pass sentence. This hearing is purely perfunctory.

REGARDEZ

Perfunctory? It's a joke! And we're its brunt! For the entertainment of Paris - the crucifixion of a ghoul, for the ghouls!

MONTMARTRE

I agree with you. This entire affair has "expediency" stamped all over it. Thiers wants it handled swiftly, efficiently, with a minimum of fuss and bother. He expects a severe verdict out of me, so that Compaignon will be able to tell the populace how just we are, and Coldert won't have the opportunity to succeed in a capital punishment bid.

DELACORTE

Capital punishment?

MONTMARTRE

Haven't you heard that mob, outside? Read their placards? That's Coldert's lunatic fringe, out there - and whoever else they've infected with their Middle Ages poison. They call Grave a sorcerer, a werewolf - they want him decapitated, his corpse cremated. They'd burn him alive, if they could.

REGARDEZ

(Disgusted beyond endurance.)

Thiers can't be that ill, that deluded, that - !

MONTMARTRE

No. But they are. And they have a powerful voice, for all their shortage in present numbers.

DELACORTE

I had to study the books, on this one - it doesn't come up, that often - the maximum sentence for this offense is one year in prison.

MONTMARTRE

Thiers is seeking a loophole. He wants that sentence - but one year for each separate violation.

REGARDEZ

Seventeen years - ! Has all of Paris gone mad?

MONTMARTRE

Yes. It has.

REGARDEZ

That's entirely disproportionate to the crime!

DELACORTE

You sympathize with this monster?

REGARDEZ

(Weary.)

I don't know. He disgusts me. Nauseates me. He must be evicted from the military, obviously. But this - this - I don't know what is worse, him, or us. This Tribunal has been literally slapped together, overnight, without even proper deference to protocol - because of "shortage of officers," they say, but they have different reasons. Whatever he may have done, Grave's record shows him to be an outstanding soldier. And after all, he is a man, not a demon, he ran me a tiring chase for two weeks, has caused me more headache than the Siege - but he must be dealt with, fairly. Not - not - manipulated, a pawn in some grotesque political game!

MONTMARTRE

And how do you feel, Major - ?

DELACORTE

(Not sure how to answer, decides on honesty.)

Well - Regardez is right. He needs help, not punishment. Help we may not be adequately equipped to prescribe, given the circumstances.

MONTMARTRE

(Pleased.)

Then we are in agreement, gentlemen. He shall not be dealt with more harshly than the law permits, regardless of circumstances - or pressure. It is my intention to soft-pedal Grave's confession - to make him out as a good soldier, which he is, whose mind snapped with the war, and with his fiancée Jeannine Barraux's death.

REGARDEZ

But his confession - he claims he has had these morbid fantasies for years. All his life. How do we - ?

MONTMARTRE

We'll try not to bring that up. The record verifies that he didn't begin his nocturnal necrophilia until after the Barraux girl's death.

REGARDEZ

And the mutilations?

MONTMARTRE

Battle fatigue. If we're lucky, we can hospitalize him until people forget, give him all the help he needs, and send him on his way. We can't sentence him to more than a year, as we all know - if we can commute that to the sanatorium, Dr. Epalaurd can supervise his rehabilitation and recovery. He's equipped to study and deal with this kind of thing.

DELACORTE

And Thiers? The populace?

MONTMARTRE

I don't know - Thiers is satisfied with having the named representatives here. The people? I fear they will not be satisfied, whatever we do.

DELACORTE

A sound approach, Colonel - but we must also ascertain that Dr. Epalaurd's evaluation of Grave is correct: that he has some sort of brain defect which makes him this way, and that his behavior is solely confined to the dead. There seems adequate proof - he's relatively insensitive to physical pain, appreciates music but cannot remember it, has a faulty sense of taste and smell, making him prefer spoiled meat to fresh - all of which Epalaurd says is standard in cases of necrophilia. But let us make sure he is no danger to the living, or we may have grounds for that harsher sentence Thiers wants.

Of course. MONTMARTRE

Well, then. REGARDEZ
(A heavy, resigned sigh.)

Yes. Well. DELACORTE

Sir - M. Compaignon, sir. GUARD
(Has been waiting, having returned.)

And the Cardinal? MONTMARTRE

Having difficulty with the steps. GUARD
He'll be a minute.

Show him in. MONTMARTRE

Montmartre puts his file on the desk. Regardez and Delacorte take their seats, flanking the middle one, and prepare. Compaignon enters. He is short, roundish, dapper and genial, quite well-dressed, sporting a handlebar moustache. He has a pad and pen with him, and is enjoying himself somewhat.

Quite a show, isn't it? Come one, come all, cheer on the freak show! You must be a Colonel Montmartre. COMPAGNON
(Extends his hand - Montmartre doesn't take it, nodding curtly, but courteously; Compaignon shrugs, not offended.)

M. Compaignon. Your articles started this "freak show," I believe. This trial is unduly prejudiced. MONTMARTRE

Don't be too harsh, Colonel. We all bow to pressure. In my case, to a man named Barraux, who pressured the editor, who pressured me. Life's funny, isn't it? And death is sometimes strangely funnier. I'd have thought Barraux would want the matter hushed, not paraded. But he huffed and "harumphed" and grew apoplectically red-in-the-face, screaming bloody murder. COMPAGNON
(Shrugs, helplessly.)

COMPAGNON (Continued.)

"Justice! Justice!" Well - justice is for the rich. Barraux sinks money into the paper - so do the Grave's. Ticklish, isn't it? Grave's mother and the girl's are embarrassed about the whole thing, and trying to work a settlement. Grave refuses to see them, despite their efforts - says he's caused them enough trouble - and the fathers are tearing my paper apart, for equal space. If Barraux had known his daughter was violated by a friend of the family's in the first place, he'd never have raised such a hue-and-cry. Now -

(Throws up his hands, amused but uncomfortable.)
- believe me, Colonel, the pressure is on both sides, now! I think you'll find me less antagonistic than you anticipate.

MONTMARTRE

(Warming, slightly.)
Perhaps. Be seated, Compaignon.
(Compaignon sits in the observer's section.)

GUARD

(Appearing.)
Cardinal Coldert, sir.

Before being asked to enter, Coldert calmly walks by the guard, who withdraws. He is in his eighties, white-haired and resplendent in his red robes. His bearing is supremely confident. His eyes are squinty, a trace of a superior smile always lingering about him. He is an experienced politician, intelligent, alert and cagey. He does not cross all the way to Montmartre, stopping center. Head erect, he smiles at the Colonel, pleasantly.

COLDERT

A rather barren room, but comfortable and quiet - a good room for playing chess in - I imagine.

MONTMARTRE

(Not budging, Coldert's equal; conversational, but cold.)
Coldert. You've been playing a lot recently, I can tell.

COLDERT

(A small, friendly chuckle.)
The game turns in my favor, as I grow older.

MONTMARTRE

Be careful - it has a way of suddenly reversing. Especially when one leaps on a temporary advantage, prematurely.

COLDERT

I have never had the misfortune of having to discover that.

MONTMARTRE

(As though placing the quote.)

Napoleon, wasn't it? To Wellington?

COLDERT

(A friendly, appreciative laugh.)

I see we must play, you and I.

MONTMARTRE

Another day, Coldert.

(More briskly, to the point.)

Understand me, both of you. This is a court-martial, a military Tribunal, not a trial by jury. I do not want either of you here. You have some liberty to ask questions - but you may not discuss the answers you receive, with anyone, until this trial has been concluded. Until a verdict has been reached, and sentence passed, you are bound to silence on anything you hear, regarding this case.

REGARDEZ

(Quietly, appreciatively, to Delacorte, who nods.)

Control.

MONTMARTRE

If either of you - Coldert, Compaignon - disregard that condition, I am empowered, and will not hesitate, to lock the both of you up. Do I make myself clear?

COMPAIGNON

(Pleasantly.)

I quite understand. Reasonable. Perfectly reasonable. You have my complete cooperation.

MONTMARTRE

Coldert?

Coldert has moved to the windows. He opens them, stepping out on the verandah. At his appearance, the crowd outside hushes. He takes a deep breath of air, smiling, and nods once - then turns back to Montmartre.

I understand.

COLDERT

(He has put only the slightest emphasis on the word, his grin looking somehow demonic. He crosses to his place, not closing the windows behind himself.)

REGARDEZ

(Irritated at Coldert, he closes the windows and resumes his place.)

MONTMARTRE

(Takes a sudden step to block Coldert's passage, who recoils a step, surprised, his smile dropping; the crowd noise outside is gradually resuming its previous volume. A quiet threat.)

And understand that I don't like you, Coldert - I don't like you at all.

COLDERT

(Eyes squinting, scrutinizes Montmartre, coldly; suddenly smiles, regaining himself, and makes the sign of the cross.)

I love you - my son.

(Continues, unruffled, to his place, as though he had received no interference.)

MONTMARTRE

(To the guard.)

Are the witnesses called and assembled?

GUARD

Oui, mon Colonel.

REGARDEZ

(To Delacorte, quietly.)

Not that we'll be needing them probably - but we must keep up appearances.

(Indicates Compaignon and Delacorte.)

MONTMARTRE

That crowd, outside - have a reserve ready, just in case. Send in the sergeant.

(Gives a look to Coldert, as he takes the center Tribunal chair; nods to the Lieutenant, as Grave enters.)

Record the time, date, persons present.

Montmartre sits, rapping his gavel on the desk. Grave enters; he is cleaned up, trimmed - and in a new uniform. His manner is courteous - subdued, but friendly. He is quite dashing. His appearance causes an electric silence in the courtroom, punctuating the crowd noise outside, which seems to grow slightly louder. He is regarded neutrally, by Regardez; sternly, by Delacorte; cordially and somewhat quizzically by Montmartre. Compaignon seems intrigued by him - he is reclined comfortably, but at alert, pad ready, eyes ever-watching. Coldert, throughout all, grins as blithely as a grandparent watching his children at play, surveying everything with a preternatural omniscience. Grave proceeds to the center chair, and stands by it. Montmartre breaks the silence; he is cordial, but not unfriendly.

MONTMARTRE

Sergeant Grave.

GRAVE

(A correct nod.)

Colonel Montmartre.

MONTMARTRE

(After a small silence, gestures.)

Please - be seated.

(Grave sits, erect, but comfortable.)

I trust you have been treated well.

GRAVE

Much better than I anticipated, in fact. After my arrest, I feared it would be much worse.

(Regardez stiffens, slightly.)

Captain Regardez cannot be blamed, of course - it must have been, well, a bit of a shock.

(Regardez seems ameliorated.)

This cannot be easy for any of us, I'm sure.

MONTMARTRE

You seem to have a realistic understanding of your position, sergeant. And ours.

GRAVE

I think so, sir. If the question was asked me for the record, or for the sake of observers, I assure everyone present that my answer was not coached. My cell is - well, a cell, but not bad, for all of that. They don't mistreat me. They are a little afraid of me, I think, which I suppose is natural - but it is sad. It makes conversation difficult. They stare at me, a lot. Once or twice, I've gotten someone to relax enough, but they soon remember why I'm here, and - it doesn't matter, really. But I have been treated well.

MONTMARTRE

Your parents have been to see you, you know.

GRAVE

(Simply.)

I'd as soon not see them, Colonel. Not for awhile. They'd feel obliged to feel sympathetic toward me. And we'd all be uncomfortable. We'd start out well enough, and then they'd - it would be the same. Later. Perhaps I'll see them - sometime later.

It can be noticed, throughout, that anyone who is in Grave's presence reacts as he has described. He does not act like a menace, but as a refined, cultured, dignified young man, with a pleasant personality. No one can help but feel comfortable around him, having been around him for a few minutes - but discomfort returns, when attention is brought to his crimes. Montmartre, impressed with Grave's intelligence and maturity, but needing to remain formal - a difficult thing, around Grave - momentarily dons spectacles and looks over his file.

MONTMARTRE

I have, in my hands, seventeen pages in your handwriting, signed by you.

(Holds it toward Grave, so he can plainly see it.)

Do you now affirm that this is, in fact, your personal confession?

GRAVE

It looks like it. Show me page twelve, please - and the last - yes, it is mine. I stained page twelve with my drink, and the signature is mine.

MONTMARTRE

If I may say so, sergeant, you've made our job exceptionally easy. Many of these - incidents - we didn't even ask you about.

GRAVE

If you'll investigate them, sir, you'll find them to be accurate. I wouldn't want someone else charged with something I did, in the future.

DELACORTE

No desire to magnify your infamy? Personal aggrandizement?

GRAVE

(Puzzled.)

Sir?

DELACORTE

For the attention? The crowd?

GRAVE

Crowd?

DELACORTE

Surely you hear them, out there.

GRAVE

(Honestly surprised.)

I thought they were tending wounded, or arming for another conflict with the Germans! They sound like the war.

COMPAIGNON

(Loud enough to be heard.)

They may be, sergeant.

GRAVE

If I may be permitted - who are these gentlemen?

COMPAIGNON

M. Henri Compaignon, sergeant. And Cardinal - "Chillblains" - is it?

MONTMARTRE

(Concealing amusement; Coldert, as always, is unaffected.)

"Coldert," M. Compaignon. My apologies, sergeant - I thought you knew them.

(Grave acknowledges each with a friendly nod.)

DELACORTE

If you would answer the question?

GRAVE

For notoriety, I presume? Begging the Major's pardon, I had no idea there was notoriety to be found, in my exploits. I am not a murderer. I would have thought my war record would bring more glory.

DELACORTE

(Admitting, gesturing to a medal on Grave's chest.)

Yes, you have done well, defending Paris. Your military record is spotless, and the men speak highly of your courage. It makes - it is very hard - your answer, sergeant?

GRAVE

No, sir, I did not.

DELACORTE

I would think you'd have been anxious to deny existing allegations, rather than confess to further ones.

GRAVE

What would be the point? I've been caught. The rest may as well be known.

DELACORTE

Yes - I suppose.

MONTMARTRE

About your record, sergeant - when the war broke out, you were entitled to a commission. You were not even required to join the military. But you did. Doctor of Philosophy from Langres - an honor student - noble family. You could be earning good money now, professionally, instead of standing trial. Since you decided to enlist, you should have been an officer - a Captain, at least - but you turned down your commission, and became a soldier. Why? To defend Paris more capably?

GRAVE

In part. Officers do so little active fighting. They stand in prominent places, make speeches and point the way. It's the soldiers who fight, and die.

REGARDEZ

Did you prefer to place yourself in peril, then - if what you say, well, suppose there's some truth to it -

MONTMARTRE

(Casually, to the Lieutenant.)

Strike that last.

REGARDEZ

- or did you want to kill? Given your - unusual propensities, might you not have desired to tear your victims apart? To see their blood flow, hear their screams?

GRAVE

Where my life was equally at risk?

REGARDEZ

You intend to make yourself out a patriot, then?

GRAVE

(Seriously.)

I am a patriot, sir. I am not an officer, to vote myself a medal.

MONTMARTRE

(Gently warning - though he is impressed with Grave's candor.)

May I remind you, sergeant - you are addressing officers. Of your Tribunal.

GRAVE

I meant no offense, Colonel. I meant that some officers' honors come "from the club," so to speak. Not all, but some. Mine came from helping hold down a position, under heavy fire, for forty-eight hours. I pulled an officer and two soldiers, bleeding, from open field to safety. Their screams gave me no pleasure. Their blood was my own, from wounds I hadn't felt. Had it been in my power to help a fallen enemy, I would have done that, also - not torn him to bits, as the Captain suggests.

(Staring off, a little self-absorbed, sad.)

I met another, who dealt with war in the same way. I had hoped, perhaps, that -

(Recovering.)

I am a patriot, sir.

MONTMARTRE

And that was why you joined? Why you chose to be a soldier, and not an officer?

GRAVE

Not entirely. I wanted to defend Paris, yes. Not out of hatred for the Germans, but to defend Paris. The reason I refused my commission was to retain anonymity. Officers have less freedom of movement. They are more visible, watched, required to stay in each other's company. They have so many entertainments and functions to attend. They are on parade, even at rest. As a soldier - better, as a sergeant - I had the anonymity of the enlisted man, and the freedom of movement to satisfy my desires. A sergeant has authority, and privacy. He may be as social or anti-social among his peers as he wishes, without incurring suspicion for a retiring personality. I saw the fields of so many, many dead, by day - which heightened my desires for the night. It was easy to slip out at night, to the fields of the dead - one body among many is not noticed, even if seen - and do whatever I wished with them. Who would ever know? One dismembered corpse among several is no novelty.

REGARDEZ

(Bothered.)

Do with them? You mean you - they must have all been male, surely.

GRAVE

(Offended - amusing Campaignon, Montmartre, and Delacorte.)

Certainly not! I am not a homosexual, Captain - and I have never slept with a married woman, either!

(Campaignon laughs, sobering as Grave continues.)

Only the women, I made love to - once they were dead. Male corpses, I simply hacked apart. If sex hadn't mattered, I would certainly never have risked getting caught at Pere Lachaise, with so many bodies available on the battlefield, would I?

REGARDEZ

(With difficulty.)

Appreciate, Grave, what we are going through, in an attempt to understand all this - what satisfaction can you have gotten from it? The women - it turns my stomach - at least I can almost understand your - well, lying with an attractive woman, dead or not, if you could divorce yourself from their natural state.

(Delacorte gives him a funny look.)

But then - with both the men and the women - you tear them apart. Why?

GRAVE

(Puzzled himself.)

I don't know. I have never understood it, myself. When I was young, I cut apart animal corpses - to see what they looked like, how they worked. I became fascinated by them. As I grew older, that fascination extended to the corpses of people - and I fell in love with the women. The dismemberment - I wondered, vaguely, if I could find their souls, and set them free. I never did - I don't think. I'm not sure - The dead, they attract me, in a way the living never have. I feel a sort of communion with them, a strange understanding.

REGARDEZ

What - that they, do they talk - do you hear them talk to you, or something?

(Mumbles, to himself.)

God, I hope not - this is too much, already.

GRAVE

No - not in words. It's more a knowledge, a shared wisdom, or secret, of some sort - like love. Dead people don't talk - you know that, sir.

REGARDEZ

Thank God for that, at least.

DELACORTE

Sergeant Grave - is it your common practice to rend apart those you feel you come to know, to understand?

GRAVE

Not among the living.

DELACORTE

Why a separate distinction?

GRAVE

I don't feel I've ever come to understand the living - or they, me.

DELACORTE

Then you could perform this mutilation on the living? If you fell in love, say?

(Looks significantly to the others.)

GRAVE

No - I don't think so. I have never desired to hurt anyone. There was a woman -

(Becomes sad again.)

- she loved me. I know she did. And - it had never happened to me before - I loved her, too. It happened so fast - yet it had always been there, just like I felt with the dead, the dead I had loved. But now - it is too late, now. She might have saved me.

MONTMARTRE

Saved?

GRAVE

Might have given me love, among the living. With the understanding of the dead.

MONTMARTRE

Your statement claims you have made love to living women, before.

GRAVE

They never satisfied me. I found with them, a sense of relative comfort - but no excitement.

REGARDEZ

How could a dead woman be more exciting than a living one? Talk sense, Grave!

GRAVE

(Frowns, troubled, trying to think of a way to explain to those he knows cannot understand. After a pause, while he tries to think how, he begins conversationally - but ends up virtually reliving the experience, working himself up to arousal, and excitement.)

Sense - what is sense, Captain? Major? Colonel, do you know? What is sensible about erotic attraction, or sensuality? Do you remember what first erotically stimulated you - or why it did? Was there any "sense" to it? As my playmates and I reached puberty, they became attracted to women - to their smells, their configurations, their flushing color, the way they moved - perhaps to their very life, or soul. It was as Nature seems to dictate, since almost all men do. Myself - their living forms held no excitement, for me. They were mere put-on appearances, covering something deeper, more profound. Somewhere, in them, in me, was that same profundity that had excited me when I first dissected the corpse of a cat - then a

GRAVE (Continued.)

dog - then, later still, human corpses. As life's mystery compelled them to fulfill orgasmic ecstasy with the women of life, so did death's mystery compel me to fulfillment with the dead. In death, the women's beauty was more pure, more perfect, more permanent. Always, it was only in death that they - excited me. They - aroused me. Their scent more powerful, their taste more pungent, their cool, peaceful stillness so inviting - their cold lips, longing to take my warmth. To enter them - oh God, the ecstasy - the excitement - the unparalleled passion! Life and Death, meeting at the brink, in the eternal womb of the earth! No purely living love could match it! The ultimate communion - with the infinite! They took from me, the warmth of life - and I consumed their sanctified, perfect flesh, completing the act, squeezing them, oozing, wet, between my fingers, my teeth - ! (He gives a sharp intake of breath, shuddering climactically, as he puts his squeezing hands to his mouth, his eyes closed in ecstasy; he begins to come back down, but retains his intensity.)

And I rent the remainder - that whatever soul might remain should take flight - and be free. The intensity, gentlemen, the intensity is greater than you can know. Nothing could prevent me, when the urge hit - and afterwards, I always slept with the peace of the dead - the violent troubles of life only a distant, removed dream.

(A long pause; he calms back to normal.)

Sense, Captain - there is no sense, in love.

The effect of his speech has been electric. Campaignon and the Tribunal have been morbidly fascinated. Coldert has shrunk back in his seat, unconsciously covering his mouth with the back of his hand, trembling. He tries to maintain his composure, but has been deeply disturbed, possibly frightened, by what he has heard. Even the Lieutenant has stopped transcribing, once or twice, to listen and has had to hastily catch up. Delacorte worriedly notices Coldert's reaction, and speaks quietly to Montmartre.

DELACORTE

I don't think we should have -

MONTMARTRE

(Recovering, waves his silence; to Grave.)

But you never - you never did anything about these - uh - urges, until you violated Jeannine Barraux's tomb?

GRAVE

No - I had not loved with the dead, yet.

(This seems to restore Montmartre's faith
in the trial until Grave continues.)

But I had wanted to. From adolescence, I had wanted to.

MONTMARTRE

"Wanting" is not "doing," however. You were in love with Jeannine Barraux, were you not? A normal, living, healthy love? You spoke of a woman, whose love might - "save" you.

GRAVE

Her love may have - I don't know. She died, before I could know.

MONTMARTRE

(Seizing subtly on this point.)

Yes, that must have caused you severe strain, on top of the war. So, you loved two women? Living women?

GRAVE

Yes. Both so much alike.

MONTMARTRE

Tell us about them.

GRAVE

My confession has already told you about Jeannine Barraux, and our relationship. The other was at my regiment's tavern, where we board - have boarded, for three weeks. The serving girl, Ilse. She loved me. Then she realized - who I was. And it was over. Over before it began.

MONTMARTRE

I find this significant - you began your "nocturnal career" following her death. And you feel this Ilse - a woman admittedly similar to Miss Barraux - would have saved you with her love. You probably would have stopped these unspeakable violations - wouldn't you - ? If your mutual love had blossomed.

GRAVE

I - don't -

MONTMARTRE

Your last attempt - it came before your declaration of love. You would not have made the attempt - would you - if she had already loved you?

GRAVE

It is - possible. But I cannot know. I doubt she would have satisfied me. No one living -

MONTMARTRE

But you think it possible - likely - that she would have.

GRAVE

(Getting the hint.)

It is - yes. Yes, I imagine so.

MONTMARTRE

(Satisfied - briskly, to the Tribunal.)

Well, gentlemen, it seems clear-cut, to me. Obviously, Sergeant Grave is a superior soldier. His mind, troubled by the death of his fiancée - Jeannine Barraux - and by the strain of the war, has been morbidly influenced. I have a statement here, by the examining doctor, M. Epalaurd, who declares the sergeant's problem to be at least nominally treatable, in hospital. For the sake of the people, we cannot take these crimes too lightly - but, given the superior record and cooperative spirit of the defendant, we should not be entirely without mercy, either. In keeping with the statutes of France, and the city of Paris, I propose he be given the maximum sentence of one year - but to be commuted from prison, to Doctor Epalaurd's sanatorium, for treatment. Do I hear a dissenting opinion? Major Delacorte?

DELACORTE

No.

MONTMARTRE

Captain Regardez?

REGARDEZ

No.

MONTMARTRE

Do we require retirement - to consider the sentence?

DELACORTE & REGARDEZ

No.

MONTMARTRE

(Lifts his gavel.)

So concluded, the prisoner will rise, and sentence shall be pronounced. Sergeant Pierre Grave -

COLDERT

(Quiet, but perfectly audible.)

Our questions, Colonel. We are permitted to question the accused - and witnesses. I know they are here. Why have they not been summoned?

MONTMARTRE

They are unnecessary, and shall be dismissed. The court finds no reason to call them forth.

COLDERT

The people will find differently.

MONTMARTRE

That is their own concern, not ours. Sergeant Pierre Grave, you will please ri -

COLDERT

You will not be shut of this, so easily.

MONTMARTRE

You are an observer, Coldert - not a public prosecutor. Those days are long behind you.

COLDERT

This case badly needs one.

(Rises, approaches Grave - but gives him a wide berth; it can be noticed that Coldert is nervous around Grave, though he conceals it well - especially of close physical proximity with him.)

Your confession has not been made public, Grave. I need something more from you, before you are contentedly led away. This learned Tribunal is attempting a hasty whitewashing. They would like to keep your sordid affair private. If they can do that, your confession will never be heard, by any but them - only the trial transcript would become a matter of public record.

(Dramatically, to the Tribunal.)

You will not cheat the people, gentlemen! I cannot affect your verdict, or sentence - perhaps - but I can see to it that all the facts are known. Legally!

COMPAIGNON

(Fraternally.)

They have covered the case sufficiently, to my thinking, Cardinal.

COLDERT

Have they? Well - not to mine.

MONTMARTRE

You have no authority here, Cardinal. Sit down. Like it or not, we are in charge of this trial, not you.

COLDERT

(Smiling, coldly.)

Are you so sure - ?

(Approaches the bench, handing a sealed document from his robe to Montmartre.)

Thiers anticipated you, Colonel.

MONTMARTRE

(Wary, caught off guard; reads it, coloring angrily.)

I refuse to accept this! It exceeds even the Republic's authority! It is not valid!

DELACORTE

What is it?

REGARDEZ

Let me see -

COLDERT

(Answers them calmly.)

Orders, from M. Thiers himself. Empowering me to serve as prosecutor of this case, should I consider the legal proceedings invalid.

COMPAIGNON

(Laughing heartily.)

A clever joke, Cardinal. Colonel Montmartre is right - even M. Thiers cannot bequeath you power of attorney, when that is beyond your personal competence.

COLDERT

(Cool.)

Not beyond my competence, M. Compaignon.

COMPAIGNON

Oh -?

COLDERT

I was a lawyer, long before becoming a priest. The taking of the vows never terminated my legal authority - I simply have not chosen to exercise it, for many years.

Instantly the Tribunal converse amongst themselves, heatedly and angrily.

DELACORTE

This is ridiculous!

REGARDEZ

What the hell does Thiers think he's doing?

DELACORTE

This is a mockery!

REGARDEZ

How can he do this? Why would he do this?

MONTMARTRE

I told you Thiers wanted severity. I wasn't prepared for the lengths to which he'd go, to get it.

REGARDEZ

Good God! Who is in charge, in this damned country?

DELACORTE

He's cutting all our throats!

MONTMARTRE

(Ending the consultation; to Coldert, hard, angry.)

It's pointless, Coldert. You'll win nothing. The verdict is still ours to decide - and not even a mandate from God can change that!

COLDERT

(Unruffled.)

Perhaps - but this trial will decide who is God - don't you think? No, I can't decide the verdict. But I can make public this case, by record. The people will know what has gone on, here. M. Thiers is a reasonable man, Colonel. He understands that the people need to be satisfied, to remain compliant. If they find your sentence wanting, well - I imagine you are a sensible man - all of you, sensible men. You won't wish to anger them, further -

(Indicates the windows.)

It would only harm us all.

MONTMARTRE

Even so, Coldert -

COLDERT

(Politely.)

Cardinal - please, Colonel.

MONTMARTRE

Coldert - you must know as well as I do that Grave cannot be sentenced to more than a year in prison.

COLDERT

Not for this crime, perhaps -

MONTMARTRE

What are you driving at, you bastard?

LIEUTENANT

(Exasperated, pauses in his stenography.)

Could you all please slow down? I'm not getting everything!

MONTMARTRE

Strike it all!

LIEUTENANT

From where, sir?

MONTMARTRE

You know damned good and well, from where! This court is in temporary recess!

LIEUTENANT

(Relieved, relaxes and begins striking.)

Thank you, sir.

MONTMARTRE

Stop this farce, Coldert! We're imposing the harshest sentence. I've been over the books - and there's no loophole for the penalty Thiers wants me to pronounce - I cannot sentence him for each individual count, do you understand? The people be hanged! I can't rewrite the law to satisfy them, whether they like that fact, or not!

COLDERT

You won't have to, Colonel - and it may be Grave, not the people, who will hang.

MONTMARTRE

The more you talk, the less sense you make.

COMPAIGNON

(Has approached the bench, fascinated.)
Colonel - can he do this? Can he prosecute, at a court-martial?

DELACORTE

(Finishes looking over the document,) Thiers has invoked a national emergency clause - and with France so badly in chaos - yes, I'm afraid he can.

REGARDEZ

(Hands thrown up, frustrated beyond endurance.)
God! God! How temporary, how tenuous power is! We are puppets! Nothing but puppets!

COMPAIGNON

May I quote you, Captain?

REGARDEZ

I pray to God you do, so Thiers will read it - and dismiss me from this mockery!

COLDERT

(Smooth as silk.)
Yes, Compaignon, you will report it all - as you were meant to. You will report the final verdict - when it is reached.

MONTMARTRE

(Backhanded admiration.)
You worked this out in advance, didn't you? Before we were selected - you, and Thiers? How could you have done it? What did you ply him with? Them? The crowd?

COLDERT

More than that, as you shall see - with certain information I have acquired, that bears heavily on this affair.

MONTMARTRE

If there were grounds for another case, he would have presented them to me, to prosecute.

COLDERT

Perhaps he was afraid of the reluctance of the military to conduct such an indelicate question, personally regarding it - such as you have so far shown.

COMPAIGNON

If the case is to be formally prosecuted, must it not be formally defended?

DELACORTE

We had foregone that, since Grave had already confessed. This was to be only a hearing, and sentencing.

COMPAIGNON

But now?

DELACORTE

Under the circumstances, the defendant would have to speak in his own defense.

COMPAIGNON

What about me?

COLDERT

(Quickly.)

Objection! M. Compaignon is not a lawyer!

COMPAIGNON

(As quickly.)

But I am permitted to ask questions.

COLDERT

His questions may not be entered on record - they are informal.

COMPAIGNON

But the answers - ?

MONTMARTRE

(Intrigued.)

Yes - yes, Compaignon, I see your point -

COLDERT

(Cagily appreciative.)

You have been underestimated, M. Compaignon -

(To Montmartre.)

But he cannot call witnesses.

MONTMARTRE

The defendant can, as he is his own defense attorney.

COMPAIGNON

(Going to Grave, enthusiastic.)

Yes - we could work together, sergeant - you and I. What do you say?

GRAVE

Why should you help me?

COMPAIGNON

I can't stand to see anyone ganged-up on, Grave - it appalls me more than anything you've done. I don't know that I can help you - but at least I can help even the odds.

GRAVE

I appreciate the gesture, but -

COMPAIGNON

Gesture?

(Makes a gentlemanly flipping-off motion at Coldert.)

That's a gesture - I'm offering you help.

GRAVE

(Brightens a little.)

Very well - yes. I accept your help.

COMPAIGNON

That's the spirit, Grave! You'll still end up in the sanatorium - but you'll be helped, as I feel you should be, not butchered to save a flagging Republic!

COLDERT

(Chuckles, regarding them, amused.)

What a brave sound you make, the both of you! None of it will help, however. It might, were I to call the witnesses you want - but I shall call only one. We have wasted enough time. Colonel - ?

(Gestures to the Lieutenant.)

MONTMARTRE

Grave - ? Compaignon - ?

GRAVE

(Looks to Compaignon, who radiates confidence.)

We're ready, Colonel.

MONTMARTRE

Recess is over, Lieutenant - resume recording. Court is back in session.

(The courtroom is charged with anticipation.)

Very well, Coldert - call your witness. I assume he's already here.

COLDERT

Yes. She is. I call Ilse Karnstein.

MONTMARTRE

(To guard.)

Bring Ilse Karnstein.

(The guard exits.)

REGARDEZ

(Softly, to the Tribunal, in the hushed silence.)

He only intends to use her to bring out the business of the head - it will make it public, but it can't increase the severity of Grave's sentence.

(He says this confidently, but his smile is weak, and is not returned by Delacorte or Montmartre; they keep their attention fixed on Coldert and Grave.)

Suddenly, a brick hurtles through the window with a loud crash, making everyone start. There is an upsurge of crowd noise. Closest to the brick, the Lieutenant picks it up and unwraps a message from it.

DELACORTE

What in the name of - ?

REGARDEZ

Are they armed, out there?

DELACORTE

So much for the new windows -

MONTMARTRE

Lieutenant - ?

(The Lieutenant hands him the message; he reads it, worriedly.)

Let the record report that the crowd became abusive, and displayed signs of violence. That they threw this into the courtroom, from the street below. Its message: "Burn the werewolf," with a rather crude and obscene drawing of Grave.

(The guard returns, with Ilse; Montmartre addresses him.)

What's going on, out there? What's the status on those reinforcements?

GUARD

Colonel Devon has been sent for, sir. More troops should be here, soon.

(Nervous about speaking openly.)

Sir, outside, they're -

MONTMARTRE

Spit it out, man.

GUARD

They're erecting a stake, in the street. The men report they've seen torches, passed around. Some think they've - think there are weapons. We're undermanned, sir.

MONTMARTRE

Arm every available man. Help them, down there - until Colonel Devon's men arrive. Warn them off. If they don't respond, fire warning shots.

GUARD

Sir - if they should advance - ?

MONTMARTRE

Then fire into the crowd.

GUARD

(Disturbed.)

I - sir, I - I know some of them, sir. A friend of mine is among them.

MONTMARTRE

Then convince him of the seriousness of the situation. You have your orders.

GUARD

(Uncertainly.)

Yes, sir -

(Exits.)

MONTMARTRE

Ilse Karnstein, please take the stand.

(Indicates the place.)

Ilse enters, nervous. She avoids any eye contact with Grave. Once she is seated, Coldert approaches her. Ilse looks to Montmartre, a bit confused and frightened. Montmartre speaks to her, gently.

MONTMARTRE

You have already been sworn in, Miss Karnstein. Please don't be nervous. You are only going to be asked questions concerning the sergeant. You are German?

ILSE

Y - yes -

MONTMARTRE

You are not on trial, remember. No one here is hostile toward you.

ILSE

I - yes. I understand.

(Relaxes some.)

It is not that. I am afraid - I don't want -

MONTMARTRE

(Understanding.)

Sergeant Grave is in custody, Miss Karnstein. He won't harm you.

ILSE

I can't imagine that he would.

MONTMARTRE

Oh?

ILSE

Whatever - whatever he has done, he is a gentle man. He would not harm anyone - I don't think. He would not harm me.

MONTMARTRE

(Surprised - touched, pleased.)

You want to help him.

COLDERT

(Moving in, kindly.)

She can do that best by merely answering the truth, if what she says is true - isn't that right, Colonel?

MONTMARTRE

(Suspicious.)

Yes - of course.

COLDERT

That is all we want, Miss Karnstein. The truth.

ILSE

I am not in the habit of lying.

COLDERT

(Laughs warmly; he exudes kindness, sympathy and paternal warmth, which Ilse responds to.)
No one means to suggest that you are, my child. Miss Karnstein - may I call you Ilse?

ILSE

Of course, Imminence.

COLDERT

(Pleased.)

You are Catholic?

ILSE

Yes. My whole family.

MONTMARTRE

(Making sure Ilse understands.)

Cardinal Coldert is the prosecuting attorney, Miss Karnstein.
(Ilse becomes a little more uncertain, again.)

COLDERT

(Smooth, gradually relaxing her, once more.)
I am merely trying to get at what will most help, my dear - the truth. We shall have only truth between us - yes? For instance, it is true that you find Sergeant Grave a gentle man?

ILSE

Why - yes. I have said so.

COLDERT

Yet you are aware, are you not, of what he has confessed to?

ILSE

(A pause; uncomfortable.)

Yes.

COLDERT

Do you consider that - gentle?

ILSE

I - I don't know.

COLDERT

He has desecrated the dead. You are Catholic - you believe in bodily resurrection?

COMPAGNON

Objection! Irrelevant to the case!

COLDERT

(Hard.)

You cannot object, Compaignon - you are not a proper counsel.

(To Montmartre, innocently.)

I am only trying to ascertain the witness's background - any possible prejudice she might possess.

REGARDEZ

(To Montmartre, quietly.)

What is he up to? This is a trick!

DELACORTE

Of course it is - let him use it, and hang himself.

MONTMARTRE

(Considers this logical.)

Proceed, Coldert.

COLDERT

(To Ilse.)

So - as a Catholic - you would consider that he has performed desecration? Profanation of the dead?

ILSE

I - I don't think he sees it that way.

COLDERT

I am asking you, Ilse.

ILSE

I -

(Looks at Montmartre, then makes up her own mind.)

I am not on trial here, you said.

COMPAGNON

(Laughs, warmly.)

Good for you, Ilse!

Coldert

Allow me to rephrase the question, so we shall all understand better. Despite Grave's confessed crimes - which must shock you, as a good Catholic - you still find the sergeant a gentle man. How do you reconcile this, in your mind?

ILSE

I don't understand him, Cardinal. What he has done - it - it frightens me.

COLDERT

(Gleaming.)

Ah - ?

ILSE

I don't know why he did it - does it - I don't know. He tried to tell me about it, and I did not understand. How does one understand something like this? But - he has always been good to me. And to Mrs. Beaufort, and the men - to everyone. They all speak well of him - even now. Many were afraid to say so, when asked to testify for him - because of the publicity. But I know it is so. I work around them. I hear them.

COLDERT

You were, in love with him. Weren't you?

ILSE

(Emotionally caught, troubled.)

I - he was - we -

(With quiet passion.)

Oh, yes! Yes, I loved him.

COLDERT

Do you believe he loved you?

ILSE

(Avoiding Grave's gaze; a long, tortured pause.)

Yes, I - you - you would have to - to ask him.

GRAVE

(With love.)

Oh, Ilse! How can you - ?

COLDERT

(Sharply.)

It is not your turn to speak!

(To Ilse, again gentle.)

Did he lead you to believe he loved you?

ILSE

Yes.

COLDERT

And you wanted his love?

ILSE

(Quiet, becoming choked.)

Yes.

COLDERT

(Quiet, cooing.)

And do you love him still - ?

(Ilse sobs quietly, eyes closed; after a moment.)

Do you still love him, Ilse?

ILSE

(Finally.)

One never stops loving, once one has begun to love.

COLDERT

And yet, you have not looked at him once, since you entered this room. Why is that? Do lovers avoid each other's gaze?

(Ilse does not answer or look at Grave; greatly distraught.)

Is it because you fear him? What makes you refuse him, if you love him so much?

ILSE

(Pouring forth with it, the dam bursting.)

It was the head, that girl's head - ! It horrified me!

REGARDEZ

(Quietly, to the Tribunal, with resignation.)

Well, there it is.

DELACORTE

But what can he do with it?

ILSE

They brought it out, the men, they held it out - it looked so much like me! He told me he loved me - he kissed me - and those same lips that touched mine, they had also kissed -

(She shudders, closing her eyes and covering her mouth; Grave becomes downcast, morose.)

COLDERT

(Pressing - and comforting.)

And you were afraid, weren't you, that if he preferred his first love dead, and cut off her head, of what his love might have meant - for you - ?

ILSE

(Eyes still closed, exploding with it.)

Yes! Yes!

COLDERT

You feared what he could do to living people - to you?

ILSE

Yes!

COLDERT

I repeat, Ilse: do you still love him?

ILSE

Oh, God, God! I -

(Turning to Montmartre, pleading.)

Please, sir, please! What this is doing to me! Must I answer this question? You can't know - it terrified me, yes, horrified me, repulsed me - but he did love me, I know he did - he would never have harmed me, he would not harm anyone! It was so sudden, then, that I was afraid - I hadn't had time to think about it to deal with it - I am only doing so for the first time now. Why he loves the dead, I do not know. In his way - he was still loving her - not harming her! He is not evil - he needs help. Oh, please, sir, help him, help him!

(She weeps.)

COMPAIGNON

Colonel Montmartre - I see no point in Coldert's torturing of this poor girl. She obviously has feelings for Grave, and considers him incapable of the kind of danger to living persons that he is so desperately trying to manipulate her into confessing. If anything, he has succeeded only in providing an excellent character witness for Grave, supporting your initial verdict.

MONTMARTRE

I have to agree, Coldert. This is the only witness you intend to call. If this line of questioning is all you have, I'll have to ask you to abandon it. This has gone quite far enough.

COLDERT

Yes, yes, of course. I assure you, I have not been "torturing" this girl - not intentionally. I am establishing her relationship with Grave.

MONTMARTRE

We know that, already.

COLDERT

There is perhaps more, that you do not know. Ilse - are you calm now? I had not planned to work you up, so. Anyone can see that you still care for the sergeant. Whether you still love him as you did is immaterial. Tell me - did he ask you to marry him?

ILSE

(Much calmer.)

He hadn't - really. Not yet. I felt he would.

COLDERT

You got that impression?

ILSE

Yes. Much passes between lovers, Cardinal, which perhaps you do not know.

COLDERT

How did he give you that impression? Did he ask you to live with him? You were already under the same roof.

ILSE

Well - yes. We would not have had much privacy, there.

COLDERT

I should think you would not have had privacy, anywhere. Sergeant Grave knew he was being pursued - that, once caught, he would stand trial. That matters would occur, in short, as they have. Did he ask you to wait until he had served his sentence?

ILSE

Oh, you know very well he couldn't have. I did not even know he was a - that this would happen.

COLDERT

But you knew he was in trouble.

ILSE

Yes.

COLDERT

Even desperate trouble?

ILSE

Yes.

COLDERT

You would have helped him, anyway?

ILSE

Is it a crime, to help a loved one? I am not on trial, you said.

COLDERT

No, you are not. How did he propose you live together, peacefully, when he knew he would soon be caught?

ILSE

We were to go away, together.

COLDERT

(Closing the trap.)

Where? Where, in all of France, could he have hidden? He would have been a fugitive. Wanted. Hunted. He would be sought out - in France.

ILSE

We - would have found somewhere.

COLDERT

Where, Ilse? Where did you propose to go?

(She is silent, afraid, realizing.)

Answer the question, Ilse. You could not have booked passage on ship. You could not have run for the borders. Only one border was close enough - and could easily have been brooked. If one was in the company of a German. You were going to flee to Germany, weren't you?

ILSE

I - you couldn't possibly - I have not said this - to anyone!

COLDERT

But it is true, isn't it? You had packed your bag, and were ready to go. Mrs. Beaufort can testify to that - and has, privately. Shall we call her in here - to verify it?

ILSE

I didn't tell her! I told no one! We - anywhere, it could have been anywhere we intended to go!

COLDERT

But it was Germany, wasn't it, Ilse? You intended to go to Germany! You told him you had family there, that would help you. That you could both cross the border, because you were German. In fact, he suggested it. He told you to pack, that he was going to desert, that you would be in love with a deserter - and you said that you would help him, love him, as a deserter!

ILSE

I - oh, my God! How could you know that? I told no one, no one!

(Looking at Grave for the first time, grieved.)

Oh, Pierre, I don't know how he found out! I swear, I told no one!

COLDERT

(Quiet, smiling, triumphant.)

You just did, Miss Karnstein. For the record.

(To Montmartre, summarily.)

I demand that Sergeant Pierre Grave be sentenced for high treason - desertion, in time of war. There is only one penalty.

GRAVE

Death -

(He is unnaturally calm - has been, since Ilse confessed her horror of him - little more than a staring, vacant mannequin.)

ILSE

No! No! He would never have betrayed France! He has risked his life, for France!

COLDERT

None of that matters now, Miss Karnstein.

COMPAIGNON

(Springing to Grave's side.)

Grave, deny it! Deny it, man!

GRAVE

(Resigned; more dead than alive.)

How can I?

COMPAIGNON

(Bounding to the Tribunal.)

There are extenuating circumstances.

COLDERT

There are never extenuating circumstances - for treason!

From the time Ilse let the confession slip, the Tribunal has unconsciously assumed the pose of "The Three Monkeys." Montmartre's eyes are shielded, by his hands; Delacorte's hands are over his mouth; Regardez's covers his ears.

MONTMARTRE

(Morose.)

I'm afraid Coldert's right, Compaignon. I wish he weren't.

COMPAIGNON

(Slams his hand on the desk, frustrated; turns to Ilse, urgently.)

Ilse - you say you told this to no one.

ILSE

I swear, I swear!

COMPAIGNON

Grave, I'm sure you didn't -
(He doesn't answer.)

Grave - ?

GRAVE

No.

COMPAIGNON

Then, how - ? Ilse, please, think - it's very important -

COLDERT

(Calmly.)

Pass sentence, Colonel.

COMPAIGNON

There has to have been someone - he couldn't have bluffed all that.

ILSE

Only God, monsieur, only God! I only -
(Horrificed, it hits her; she pins Coldert with a glance.)

The confessional - !

COMPAIGNON

(Angrily, to Coldert.)

Is that true, Coldert?

(Coldert only smiles.)

Colonel, this evidence is inadmissible - it came from a violation of this man's sacred office!

COLDERT

(Spreads hands, innocently, chuckling.)

Violation? I have not testified to anything!

Companion, speechless, walks like a zombie to his former place, and sits. The noise outside becomes louder, contrasting with the stunned silence of the courtroom. Coldert remains calm, self-possessed.

COLDERT

You may step down, Miss Karnstein. You are no longer needed.

Slowly, pained, Ilse steps down. She is too stricken to cry. Grave stares, seemingly uncomprehending, past her. Ilse walks uneasily toward him. She tries to speak - but can't - wants forgiveness, but can't ask for it. Beside him, she pauses, stretches out her hand. He does not respond. She continues to the door, fighting bitter, frustrated tears. As she does, a rifle volley is heard outside, which partly diminishes the crowd noise. A few voices can be heard yelling.

MONTMARTRE

(Absently.)

They've fired the warning shots -

GRAVE

(Softly, kindly, just before Ilse exits.)

Ilse -

(She pauses, but does not turn.)

You must return to Germany, tonight. That crowd - if they are this heated for their own blood -

(He turns to look at her. She turns to face him, eyes brimming. He rises, and she runs into his arms, sobbing. He soothes her. She tries to speak. He gently puts a hand to her mouth.)

Shh - I know. Now, go - quickly.

Ilse calms, nodding her head. She looks into his eyes one last time, a parting look of love - and hurriedly exits. Grave watches her go, sadly, his face and eyes registering terrible loss.

COLDERT

(Con conversationally.)

How touching. I thought you were unable to enjoy the embrace of the living, Grave. Soon, you will be with your true loved ones. You played a good game, all of you. It could only have ended this way, however. Be consoled - it was rigged. As it had to be. As it always is. Thiers maintains his authority, the crowd is satisfied - for now. They'll think they've won a victory. It will pacify them, for awhile. They'll get to gather around your body, as your head is separated from it, and then cheer, as you are publicly cremated - you no doubt will be. Ashes to ashes - who will rise from the ashes, when all this over? Who will be in charge?

(To Compaignon.)

The people? Oh, they'll think they are - they always do!

(Chuckles, turns to the Tribunal.)

You? You'll be as you are now, mere visible functionaries. Thiers? He'll be called "leader," but will only be a figurehead. No, gentlemen - true power has always been invisible - as invisible as the mind of God.

(Opens windows, steps out on the terrace - the crowd grows quieter, in respect; he smiles at them, and turns back to face the room.)

Wise men have always known that, and exploited it. Tell me, Grave - how does it feel, to be a mere pawn in the game? You don't even care, do you. No - you belong dead. Alive, you are dead. Dead, already. What kind of life could you realistically have lived? In death, you will become glorious. Alive -

(Sneers, smug, superiorly amused.)

What would you have been? Just a sick, disgusting pervert, gratifying his only normal desires on a pathetic German slut - !

Coldert has not seen Grave's face, through all this. Grave has been motionless, staring after Ilse, sorrow and impotent rage rising in him, making him tremble. Suddenly, he lets out a yell, his face transformed into a mask of twisted hate. The entire courtroom is startled

- especially Coldert, whose smile drops, replaced by fear. Grave whirls on him - he is not close enough to strike him, but Coldert, terrified, does not realize that. Grave's wheeling causes him to take an aggressive-looking step toward Coldert. Coldert, surprised, puts up his arms to repel what he takes to be Grave's advance, and recoils, reflexively. He loses his footing, over balances, and collides with the terrace railing behind him. It cracks, not supporting his weight, and he plummets below, screaming. The crowd also screams - almost ending together. There is a deafening silence, the courtroom as stunned as the mob.

GRAVE

(Recovering.)

It was an accident - I didn't touch him - I wasn't near him!

COMPAGNON

We know, sergeant - we know -

There is a sudden roar of hatred from the crowd. Regardez is the first to take action. He springs to the terrace, and fires a shot in the air from his pistol, to gain their attention.

REGARDEZ

(Calling out.)

Enough! Enough violence! Go to your homes - all of you - before more people are hurt!

A shot rings out from below, and Regardez spins about, his coat red, a look of surprise on his face. He falls to the floor. Everyone rushes to him. More shots are heard, the crowd growing worse.

GRAVE

Captain - !

MONTMARTRE

Regardez - !

REGARDEZ

Armed - some of them - armed. Animals. Mad animals - !

GUARD

(Running in.)

Colonel - !

MONTMARTRE

What's happening?

GUARD

(Out of breath.)

Reinforcements - just arriving.

MONTMARTRE

(To the Lieutenant.)

Go - take his place!

(The Lieutenant draws his pistol, runs out.)

Report, and get back to your post!

GUARD

They're - lighting torches - burning him in - effigy. They're trying - to break in. Some are throwing - torches at the - building.

MONTMARTRE

Get back to them - we'll be there, in a moment. Where's our medic?

GUARD

He's been - shot, sir!

MONTMARTRE

How long can we hold them off?

GUARD

Don't know. Must be - a hundred, hundred-and-twenty. A few armed. Maybe twenty of us.

MONTMARTRE

Get back to them, quickly. We'll be right down. Go!

(Guard exits.)

GRAVE

(Earnestly, gripping Montmartre's shoulder.)

It's me they want - let me go out to them.

MONTMARTRE

They'd burn you alive, Grave!

GRAVE

I don't feel pain, the way others do. My life is finished, anyway. You can't keep them out, forever.

MONTMARTRE

No, Grave - they won't harm you. Everything is collapsing around us, everything - but, by God, we're going to put it back in order again - at any cost!

GRAVE

So many lives, for one already over? It's not worth it, Colonel!

MONTMARTRE

Like hell it isn't!

COMPAIGNON

I can tend to the Captain. You'd better help, down there.

MONTMARTRE

(To Delacorte.)

Get Grave a gun, and both of you go down.

DELACORTE

Sir - how can we - ?

(Looking askance at Grave.)

MONTMARTRE

Forget the trial! It was a farce! This man's no more a traitor than you or I! We'll deal with it, later. Go - !

GUARD

(Entering. Terrified.)

Sir! They're breaking through the doors!

MONTMARTRE

(Draws his pistol, gets ready, sighs heavily.)

Well, gentlemen - it looks like we may all die, together.

There is a screaming whistle, and an explosion, close by.

DELACORTE

My God - they don't have bombs?

MONTMARTRE

No - they couldn't have -

Another explosion, closer. Screams, from outside.

DELACORTE

(Realizing.)

The Germans - they've resumed the bombardment!

MONTMARTRE

(Sees Compaignon springing to the terrace.)

Drop, Compaignon! Do you want to get yourself killed?

COMPAIGNON

(Looking over the terrace, ignoring him.)

They're breaking up - running for cover.

(In awe.)

They've gone mad - ants, running in circles - they're trampling each other!

Another explosion, closer still. Delacorte shakes his head, amazed.

DELACORTE

The Germans saved us - they're not killing us - they're keeping us from killing ourselves! My God - when will this madness end?

MONTMARTRE

(To himself.)

Worse - what will it become - ?

DELACORTE

Insane - insane - !

BLACKOUT

END ACT III

ACT IV

The same, that night.

A few hours later.

AT RISE: Montmartre sits behind the desk, tired, but composed and collected. Compaignon is draped casually in the juror's box, smoking, his sleeves rolled up and coat off. He drinks from an open wine bottle. He stares out the window. The Lieutenant enters, weary.

MONTMARTRE

(To the Lieutenant.)

Do we have a final tally, yet?

LIEUTENANT

(Nods.)

If you don't want it broken down - which were caused by us, which by the Germans.

MONTMARTRE

We're officers. We deal in numbers.

LIEUTENANT

One of our men dead, two wounded. Colonel Devon's men suffered two casualties, neither serious. And Captain Regardez.

MONTMARTRE

Will he pull through?

LIEUTENANT

Too early to tell, sir. He slips in and out. It's a bad wound.

MONTMARTRE

I've never seen a good one. And the civilians?

LIEUTENANT

Not sure of the numbers. Right now, it looks like five dead, twelve wounded. Cardinal Coldert's back was broken - they're not sure if it was the fall, or the crowd trampling over him. They're not sure yet if he's dead, or comatose. They're not sure -

MONTMARTRE

He was an old man. If he's still alive, he won't last the night. He's as good as dead. Are the fires out?

LIEUTENANT

Yes, sir. M. Compaignon helped us put the tavern fire out, down the street. It was the worst.

MONTMARTRE

Thank you, Compaignon.

(Compaignon shrugs, raises the bottle, takes a sip.)

Did the rioters start it?

COMPAIGNON

(Con conversationally, experienced.)

No. German shell. Blew open the wall. No one hurt, interestingly enough.

(Extends bottle.)

Wine?

MONTMARTRE

No, thanks.

COMPAIGNON

Don't drink?

MONTMARTRE

(Shakes his head.)

Wouldn't be able to hold it down.

(To Lieutenant.)

Where's Major Delacorte?

LIEUTENANT

He rode off, with Colonel Devon. He gave me a message, for you. He said he supports your decision.

MONTMARTRE

(Nods his head, slowly, appreciatively.)

The Karnstein girl - she's still here, isn't she?

LIEUTENANT

(Nods.)

Nursing the Captain.

MONTMARTRE

Bring her here, please. Oh - and send Grave up, too.

The Lieutenant exits.

COMPAIGNON

I don't suppose the trial record was destroyed - ?

MONTMARTRE

(Shakes his head.)

Too obvious. Thiers would find out, if I tried it.

COMPAIGNON

Do you think Thiers knows - what Coldert knew?

MONTMARTRE

Possibly. I won't be able to strike it from the record, if that's what you mean.

COMPAIGNON

We think alike.

MONTMARTRE

Thiers was a fool, to trust Coldert.

COMPAIGNON

If he did.

(Pause.)

What will you do with him, then? Grave?

MONTMARTRE

I'll have to sentence him.

COMPAIGNON

Death?

MONTMARTRE

My hands are tied.

COMPAIGNON

(Reflectively - hinting.)

Then I'll have to print it. Pity, it didn't work out. Grave's skipping the country with the girl, I mean. She's right - he wouldn't harm her. He's not a murderer, or a sadist. Not even with the dead, really, despite appearances. I think it's more of a religious thing, for him. Mystical, if macabre. She knows that. Maybe - she could save him. Epalaurd could have helped him, perhaps, at the sanatorium - it was a fair sentence. But that's impossible, now. If only they'd gotten away -

(Getting up.)

Well. I don't have time to talk. I should be helping with the wounded. And writing tomorrow's headline.

MONTMARTRE

What will it be?

COMPAIGNON

I was hoping you'd tell me - later. Sure you won't have some wine? Ah, well.

(Starts out, taking wine with him.)

MONTMARTRE

Companion -

(Companion stops, at the door.)

We do think alike.

COMPAIGNON

(A grin.)

I started this mess - remember?

(Exits.)

A moment passes. Montmartre thumbs through the trial record, shaking his head. Ilse enters.

ILSE

(Hesitant.)

You - wanted to see me, Colonel?

MONTMARTRE

(Friendly.)

Miss Karnstein - come in, sit down.

(She does.)

Grave is very concerned for you. So am I, after today. I've had some provisions packed for you - not much, I'm sorry to say, but the best we could manage. I suggest you cross the border - tonight. Mrs. Beaufort understands, and agrees. I am told you love our country, very much. Until it's settled and civilized a bit, though - you'd better stay in Germany, for a few years.

ILSE

(Downcast.)

I understand.

MONTMARTRE

(After a pause.)

You still love him don't you? In spite of all?

ILSE

Who can say why people love? Yes. I keep saying "if only," to myself. If only the doctor had not detained us. If only I hadn't seen the Barraux girl's head. If only I hadn't gone to confession, superstitiously frightened. If only the Cardinal had left well enough alone - but what is the point? What happens happens, and cannot be changed.

MONTMARTRE

Suppose it could be. Suppose, knowing everything you now do about Grave, you could turn back the clock - would you still run away with him?

ILSE

I have asked myself that question, since his arrest. I was so repulsed, when I saw the head - shocked, terrified. We had only just exchanged our love vows. I couldn't sleep, at all. I wanted never to see him again. To hear that he was in prison, or dead, so I would never have to look on him, again.
(Pause.)

But I didn't hate him. I would sooner have killed myself, than harm the one man who had been always so kind to me - who truly did love me. And when I saw him today, here, looked in his eyes, the love was still there. I suppose - it is strange, but true - that I have the Cardinal to thank, for that. If he hadn't tricked me, pressed me so, I would not have looked - and felt the love, again. I had to let him know I hadn't betrayed him. When I realized I had, I felt worse than when they arrested him. And all he had to say to me, as I was leaving the room like a whipped pup, was to express his concern for my safety. Himself, doomed, thinking only of me. And I knew that he loved me, that I had always loved him - and always will. A man that sensitive and considerate - no matter what else he has done - is more a man than I can ever hope to meet again. Yes. Yes, I would run away with him, knowing all I do about him.

MONTMARTRE

I know your love is genuine, and that he does not have it in him to betray France. But too many people know, now. He has been manipulated to an untimely and undeserved death, all to protect the power of a government too uncertainly poised on a tower of breaking glass. The law states clearly what I must do. But - I am more interested in justice, than in law.

ILSE

(Not daring to hope.)

What do you mean, Colonel - ?

MONTMARTRE

(Quiet and serious.)

Grave could have slipped away, in this afternoon's confusion. He could have found you, and hidden until it was dark. We could have missed him, until it was too late. It could happen, Ilse - if you're both careful.

ILSE

(Overjoyed.)

Oh, Colonel - !

MONTMARTRE

(Making sure she understands.)

You could never return to France again - either of you.

ILSE

(Dampened, but still bright.)

If I must lose my chosen country, to gain my love - then it must be. If he will still have me.

MONTMARTRE

Wait, downstairs. I will send him to you, soon, if he agrees.

Ilse embraces Montmartre, and hurriedly departs.
A moment later, Grave enters.

GRAVE

The crisis is under control, Colonel. I suppose I must be returned to my cell, now.

MONTMARTRE

(Con conversationally, philosophical.)

Amazing, that a mere technicality can hold such power, isn't it?

GRAVE

(Confused.)

Sir - ?

MONTMARTRE

That grandstand that Coldert pulled, today. You are a sad, strange young man, Grave - but not a bad one. You couldn't betray France, if you had to.

GRAVE

Still - it's a matter of record, now. And after the Cardinal's unfortunate accident, even the few supporters I've had will probably turn against me. I couldn't have struck him - I wasn't close enough - why did he recoil like that?

MONTMARTRE

Coldert was a brilliant man, if corrupt. In the arena of the mind, few could match him - we failed to, today. Even Thiers was taken, by him. He anticipated Coldert would find a way to lengthen your prison sentence, not have you executed. But Coldert was too clever for him. He served Thiers a surprise, as Thiers used him to surprise us. Such minds as Coldert's anticipate every move of logic, legality and reason - but are helpless against the moves they've forgotten, the most basic

MONTMARTRE (Continued.)

and elementary ones. His form of brutality was so intellectualized, that it had forgotten its origins. In his unmitigated crowing, he forgot that the players in his game were not pawns, but people. He hit a nerve - and was dealt the last surprise, confronted by what he had forgotten: an unplanned, purely human, move.

GRAVE

You would plead leniency for me, I know. If Coldert had not fallen - my life is over, now. You did your best for me, Colonel, all of you. I will not forget. Even in the grave, I will not forget.

MONTMARTRE

I don't intend for you to be executed, Grave.

GRAVE

The decision isn't even in your hands, sir. You merely carry it out.

MONTMARTRE

Thiers will not want you executed, either.

GRAVE

He must please the people. Coldert did it for his own ends. He is as good as dead, now - but what he set in motion continues.

MONTMARTRE

Oh, yes - the Church has had its head cut off, but a dozen more will grow to replace it. Thiers will know that, as well as I do. To allow your execution, only because the people clamor for it, would deprive him of power, and give it to them - whether Coldert manipulates that power, or some other, doesn't matter. Still, as things stand, his hands - like mine, like yours - will be tied, and the guillotine must be your end, fueling the fire for a people's revolution that may incinerate us all. Unless -

GRAVE

(Intrigued.)

Unless -

MONTMARTRE

(Becoming less philosophic, more animated.)

You offered yourself to the crowd, to save us all, Grave. You tended the hurt, when the rioting was over. A dozen times in the last hours, you could have escaped - and didn't, despite the fact that you know remaining here means your death. These are not the acts of a traitor.

GRAVE

(Shaking his head.)

No one else will see it that way.

MONTMARTRE

But the Tribunal does.

(Grave starts to speak - Montmartre cuts him off.)

Listen to me - Ilse sees it, too. She still loves you. Even with your - your problem, she loves you. You have noted that it is not safe for her to remain in France. Tonight, she returns to Germany. I want you to go with her.

GRAVE

(Shocked.)

Colonel - ! If it were found out, you would serve my sentence - you would be a traitor, along with anyone else involved!

MONTMARTRE

Men are made, in times of crisis. It is not war, or politics or laws, that govern us. We govern ourselves, somehow, despite them all. It is only crisis that teaches us that - the few wise enough, or willing enough, to learn. What is the law, when everything it governs has fallen apart? Right now, Grave, we are the law.

GRAVE

The Tribunal?

MONTMARTRE

You and I. You have been tried by your peers, and been granted a sentence not on the books. It amounts to exile, Grave. You pronounced it on yourself, before this charade of a trial began. Very well: the Tribunal finds the sentence satisfactory. You are not a danger to yourself, or others, so I don't feel guilty not locking you up.

GRAVE

Others - Colonel, you don't understand. What I am guilty of - I cannot help myself. I will do it again, and again. I don't know why I am - the way I am. But I don't think I can ever stop.

MONTMARTRE

Then let the dead try your crimes, for you haven't wronged the living.

GRAVE

The relatives of the dead feel differently.

MONTMARTRE

(Sighs, takes a different approach.)

Do you know why you were brought to trial, Grave - really? Not for violating dead bodies. For violating sacred notions. People haven't much to believe in, really. So, they deceive themselves, with lofty notions. They think they will beat the Germans. They will not. They believe they will have revenge. They will not. They believe their bodies will one day rise from graves. And your act throws the crude light of reason on that notion, showing it preposterous. You have called attention to something people don't like to think about, at a time when their tolerance for any annoyance is at its worst. At other cemeteries, your actions were unnoticed. By striking at Pere Lachaise, you violated perhaps the only true, sacred monument of Paris. Napoleon claimed it as a monument to himself, and the people adopted it as their own, believing themselves as great as he, by proxy. In life, they are forever threatened - in death, at Pere Lachaise, they believe they will attain the myth of permanent peace. You violated their last myth.

(Pause.)

Become a mortician, Grave. Or an undertaker. A gravedigger. You are - unusual, it must be admitted, but I'm sure not unique. Satisfy your desires as you must, but someplace where they won't be seen.

GRAVE

Suppose it had been your mother's body?

MONTMARTRE

(Uncomfortable.)

Dear God, Grave, I hand you your freedom, and still you try yourself! I - try not to think of such things, which is precisely my point. How do I know she hasn't been violated, in such a manner? And if she had been, is it any worse than what the embalmers have done to her, or the worms? I don't pretend to understand you - I can't. But, in many ways, I'd almost prefer you to have been her embalmer - however bizarre your method of showing it, I know you are somehow expressing love, which is more, I imagine, than most of them do. In any event, if I didn't know, I couldn't be upset. You say you'll never change. Very well, would my sentence change you? Would a year in prison change you? Would a year under Doctor Epalaurd's care change you? And still, when your sentence was over, you'd be back out on the street. Ilse is willing to try and understand you, and to help. And you love each other. Maybe you never will change, Grave, but of all your alternatives - and the court's - she is your best hope.

GRAVE

(A long pause, while he considers.)

How would you explain my disappearance?

MONTMARTRE

You disappeared in the confusion.

GRAVE

And the trial record?

MONTMARTRE

Would never become public. It would never properly have concluded. Compaignon will cooperate, help us pull the most favorable light out of all this.

GRAVE

The people - they would still be worked up. A threat.

MONTMARTRE

Without having you in custody, or your disgraced corpse to crow over, they will forget you inside of a week.

GRAVE

(Staring off, shaking his head, sadly.)

They will not forget the Cardinal -

MONTMARTRE

What?

GRAVE

His followers - mad as they are, they will keep my name alive - as a murderer.

MONTMARTRE

I tell you, without you in custody, their fire will burn itself out, unnoticed - the rest will return to worrying about our more real problems.

GRAVE

And my family? My father? Mother?

MONTMARTRE

What do you mean?

GRAVE

It will be assumed I ran to Germany. They would have to live with that.

MONTMARTRE

People assume what they will, as I've said.

GRAVE

They were always so good to me. It's not their fault, I'm the way I am. I just - always have been. The disgrace.

MONTMARTRE

They still love you, Grave. Your father has been ceaselessly at the press, defending you. Campaignon thinks he and Barraux will somehow work this matter out. The only reason your mother wasn't in court today was because you didn't want her to be. She and Mrs. Barraux have remained friends, I'm told. They'll work it out. You'll see.

GRAVE

It was wrong of me to try and desert, with Ilse. Yes, they may work out a settlement over what I've done, between them. It didn't occur to me that they could, when I decided to run. My desertion would harm them worse.

MONTMARTRE

To know their son is alive and well would gratify them more than your public execution, whatever they would have to face. You must believe that. No one will know you've deserted, Grave. We'll spread it around that you were killed, in this afternoon's riot.

GRAVE

Coldert's crowd would never believe it - they might displace their mindless wrath against my family. They would never believe it -

MONTMARTRE

(Persuasive.)

There will be problems, yes. They are not your fault, really, or mine, or even the crowd's. We're doing our best for all concerned out of this unfortunate mess. Trust me, Grave. We will help your family, if they are threatened. Ilse is waiting for you, and we haven't much time - will you go?

Grave has not been listening. He has been self-absorbed, staring thoughtfully out into space. Suddenly, he nods slowly, having reached an inner decision. He looks calm, at peace. Montmartre takes this as an answer to his question, smiles, pleased. He crosses to the desk, and removes a bag of Grave's belongings from behind it, along with his belt and pistol, which he sets on the desk. As he does so, Grave says quietly, unheard.

GRAVE

(Virtually a whisper.)

- without a body.

MONTMARTRE

(Brisk.)

I've already prepared your belongings. You'll need to get out of your uniform and into something less conspicuous. They haven't buried the people killed in the riot - their bodies are in the courtroom, unattended. Borrow something from them. And for the love of God, Grave, don't do anything else with them!

(Grave walks slowly, determinedly, to the table, while Montmartre paces, thinking.)

I'm having a guard escort Ilse to the border. Watch for them to leave, and follow behind them. Not too close - you don't want to be seen. Once the guard has left, Ilse will explain to the Germans who you are, so you can gain safe access. They'll suspect you're a spy, of course, and it will probably take awhile for you to convince them otherwise. But it shouldn't be long, before they realize -

Montmartre is cut off by the sound of a gunshot. Grave, facing upstage, spins around to face front. His belly is red. He falls, clutching at the wound, his other hand clutching the smoking pistol. A strange look is on his face - part pain, part surprise - and part ecstasy.

MONTMARTRE

(Shocked, sad.)

Grave - ! Why - ?

GRAVE

(Weak.)

- only way - solve all our problems! Tell Ilse -

(Winces, unable to finish; Montmartre nods understanding.)

- know soon, if - dream -

He shudders violently, and becomes still. Montmartre regards him, sadly. Sound of several running footsteps, approaching. The Lieutenant enters, pistol drawn.

LIEUTENANT

Sir - ?

MONTMARTRE

(Weary.)

Tell everyone - Grave is dead.

LIEUTENANT

(A bit sad, himself.)

Can I - ?

MONTMARTRE

No - thank you.

The Lieutenant starts out, colliding with Ilse.
He tries to prevent her seeing, but she breaks
past him. She sees Grave.

ILSE

No!

MONTMARTRE

(Standing, helpless.)

It - was an accident, Ilse. I'm sorry. He was putting -
putting the pistol in his belt, and -

ILSE

(Has run to him, angry.)

You gave him a pistol! Damn you! Didn't you know?
(She softens, and kneels, cradling Grave's
head in her lap.)

MONTMARTRE

(Quietly disgusted with himself.)

Perhaps I did -

ILSE

So much like Hans. I can't blame you, Colonel. Hans would
have done the same -

COMPAIGNON

(Enters, sees; his shoulders drop.)

I had hoped - I was wrong. I liked him.

(Sighs, heavily.)

How shall I report this?

MONTMARTRE

Report the truth - he was murdered, by a senseless mob.

LIEUTENANT

(Hopefully.)

Colonel - he could have been. This afternoon -

MONTMARTRE

(Nods, slowly.)

Yes - yes -

COMPAIGNON

(Brightens, as he catches on.)

When they forced their way in - Sergeant Grave, under orders of his superiors, helped defend himself and his endangered - no. The truth. He offered himself to the crowd, to save his compatriots - and died in the shooting. Yes - yes - !

(Starts to say something to Ilse, but knows nothing will be adequate.)

MONTMARTRE

(Softly.)

Thank you, M. Compaignon.

Compaignon smiles, with a little shrug, and exits with the Lieutenant.

ILSE

(Softly, with calm acceptance, rocking slowly and stroking Grave's face.)

Perhaps it was the only way. Such a kind man. If only -

(She takes the ring from around her neck, breaking the string, and places it on Grave's finger. She kisses her fingertips, and touches them gently to Grave's eyelids - closing them, if they are open - and entwines her fingers in his.)

I will return, Pierre, when the violence is done, and Paris is beautiful again. I will visit you at Pere Lachaise, and bring you red roses. Thorned - but beautiful. And I will remember. And understand.

(Looks off.)

He said the dead dream. Perhaps - I hope - he will sometimes dream of me.

SLOW FADE OUT

END ACT IV

END OF PLAY

VIII. The Manuscript Text of Cutthroat, As Originally
Submitted for Production at Tarkio
College, Missouri

1

CUTTHROAT

(A Play in One Act)

★

Cast of Characters:

Sybil
Policeman
Man

(NOTE: Actors playing Sybil and Man
should be of sufficiently similar
build so that they could be mistaken
for each other in shadowed light.)

Scene: A fortune-telling parlor, in a converted suburban
living room. Cozy, traditional. There are signs
indicating palmistry, tarot, and astrology.

AT RISE: It is raining slightly, in the late
evening time. Sybil, an attractive woman in
her early thirties, enters from the street.
She is in a hurry, seeming a bit nervous. She
shuts the door behind herself, and peers
cautiously out the window, then calms down
a little. She takes a cloth package from her
coat pocket, and sets it aside, then hangs up
her wet tan slicker and hat in a closet.
There is a knock at the door. Sybil tenses,
and turns to see who it is. Visible through

the window is a policeman. Sybil straightens herself, and goes to the door.

SYBIL

(Through the door. Her tone is slightly abrupt, but she seems pleasant, summoning a smile.)

I'm done for today. If it's a reading you want, come back later.

POLICEMAN

I'm here on business, Miss. Could I come in for a moment, please?

SYBIL

Could we talk through the door? I'm about to eat. I really don't have time to hassle over my license. It's registered. I took care of that a month ago, with - oh, whatever the hell that agency is that does those things. I'm on record. Just check it out in the files, and -

POLICEMAN

This doesn't concern your business, Miss -

(Checks the sign.)

- "Sybil"?

SYBIL

Yes, that's me.

POLICEMAN

It would be best if you just let me in, for a minute.

SYBIL

Am I in some kind of trouble?

POLICEMAN

No, ma'am.

SYBIL

Well, then -

POLICEMAN

I just need a few moments of your time. It could be very important.

SYBIL

(Hesitates, then opens the door.)

Well - all right. I'm - uh - is this some unpaid traffic ticket thing?

(337)

POLICEMAN

(Enters, casually walks about, looking things over.)

No. No - nothing like that. We're talking to everyone in the neighborhood. Just getting some information, and -

sybil

Uh - wipe your feet, please.

POLICEMAN

Hmm?

SYBIL

Your feet.

POLICEMAN

Oh - sorry. And checking on safety precautions.

SYBIL

Information?

POLICEMAN

Yes, ma'am. Have you been in the home long?

SYBIL

Well, about a month.

POLICEMAN

No, I mean today. Tonight.

SYBIL

Uh - well, I went out for a little while earlier.

POLICEMAN

When was that?

SYBIL

Oh, I don't know - an hour ago, maybe. I've been back maybe five, ten minutes. Why?

POLICEMAN

Was that you I saw come in here - just a couple minutes ago?

SYBIL

Well - I suppose so. I mean - I stepped out again for a minute. I was - unstopping the drain, the rain-gutter, you know. It had some blockage, and this rain - you know.

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POLICEMAN

Uh-huh.

(He is preoccupied with looking about and out the windows - sets his hat next to the cloth bundle.)

SYBIL

(Quickly scooping up the bundle.)

Oh - here - let me get that out of the way.

POLICEMAN

What is it? It's wet.

SYBIL

It was blocking the rain-gutter.

POLICEMAN

Oh - yeah.

SYBIL

Have to keep it clean. It gets blocked-up, sometimes. And then the rain spills over into the basement. They told me there was no leakage here. They were wrong.

POLICEMAN

Yeah, I have the same problem. Wife just called to get ours fixed, matter of fact. Got all bent, by some crazy kids. What is that? Funny looking thing to be in a gutter -

SYBIL

Just cloth. It was just jammed up in the spout. Like you say, crazy kids.

(Takes it offstage.)

POLICEMAN

While you were outside - ?

SYBIL

(From offstage.)

Can't hear you -

POLICEMAN

(Calls.)

Your name really "Sybil" - or is that put on?

SYBIL

Put on - ?

POLICEMAN

Like a stage name? I mean, I notice you're a fortune-teller.

SYBIL

Put on.

POLICEMAN

What?

SYBIL

(Reenters.)

Yes, it's "put on." That's all right, isn't it? I mean, it's not against the law, or anything.

POLICEMAN

As long as you're registered, you can call yourself "Godzilla," for all we care.

SYBIL

I was an actress for years. I've made a career of putting people on. I still do, sometimes.

POLICEMAN

The card-reading - it's an act, huh?

SYBIL

Oh, no - it's genuine. Call it a knack. It's basically a talent for drawing people out, getting them to talk about themselves, more than any kind of fortune-telling.

POLICEMAN

How much a crack?

SYBIL

You interested? Fifty dollars.

POLICEMAN

I'll stick to the neighborhood bartender, thanks.

SYBIL

Just as well. As I told you, I'm done for the day. I hate to be rude, but I really would like to take a shower and get my dinner on, and you haven't told me yet what this is all -

POLICEMAN

(Firm.)

There's been another straight-razor murder, Miss.

SYBIL

(Subdued.)

Oh -

POLICEMAN

Near here, at the shopette.

SYBIL

Oh -

POLICEMAN

There was an eyewitness, this time.

SYBIL

(Showing interest.)

Really - ? Then you - have some idea who you're looking for, now. I mean - before - there haven't been any - ?

POLICEMAN

No, there haven't. This is the first one. Got a good look, but not up close, and not close at the face.

SYBIL

I see - near here -

POLICEMAN

We were in the immediate area, and caught sight of the suspect pretty quick. He dodged us, though. Somewhere into the neighborhood, we think. We've been checking house to house for about twenty minutes, and you're the last one. While you were outside - did you see anyone? Anyone not from the neighborhood?

SYBIL

Oh, my God -

POLICEMAN

(More alert.)

Yes - ?

SYBIL

There was - earlier, awhile ago - what, about a half hour -

POLICEMAN

A half hour - ?

SYBIL

Yes. Standing on the sidewalk, pacing back and forth. He kept looking at my house. Kind of staring, then he walked away.

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POLICEMAN

(Takes out a pad and pen.)

What did he look like?

SYBIL

You're going to stand here and take notes? He might still be around!

POLICEMAN

He's being looked for. The more information I can get, the better our chances of finding him. If he was here about a half hour ago -

SYBIL

Yes, of course. He was - oh, about - about my height, I guess. Tan raincoat, or overcoat. I don't know which, really. In his thirties. Maybe forty.

POLICEMAN

(Writes, showing more interest.)

Uh-huh. Weight? Take a guess.

SYBIL

That sounds about right - ? I mean, like - like him, huh? I - uh, well I didn't really look at him well. I just noticed him once, while passing the window, then again, a couple minutes later. Pacing, like he couldn't make up his mind. Then he sort of just ambled away, and I didn't see him again. Weight - oh, hell, I never was any good at guessing weights. He was frail, slight. Lightweight, medium-weight. And I did see his face - !

POLICEMAN

Yes - ?

SYBIL

He looked gay. You know - effeminate. I couldn't describe his features, though. Rain hat - low brim, I couldn't really - oh, my God - was it him? Was that the guy?

POLICEMAN

Could very well have been, Miss. Your description tallies pretty well with that of our witness.

SYBIL

Maybe I should talk with him - your witness. Maybe we could remember, together. Is he here?

POLICEMAN

He's with another car, right now.

SYBIL

Well - later. If you don't catch him, I mean, we - could I have his phone number? I could call him up, and -

POLICEMAN

If we don't catch him tonight, we might have both of you over to the station tomorrow.

SYBIL

Oh -

POLICEMAN

Something wrong?

SYBIL

No - I just, I have appointments, clients, you know. I might lose business. I'd rather talk with him on my free time. If I could have his address, or - uh - phone number, or he could get in touch with me, I guess. It's just - he was out there. My God - I almost asked him in -

POLICEMAN

You wouldn't have been in danger, more than likely. Police psychologist thinks he's homosexual. He's only killed middle-aged males, that we know of. Some twisted complex about his father, probably. Who can tell, with these weirdo psycho killers? No, he wouldn't have posed you a threat. Unless you posed a threat to him, of course. If he thought you were on to him, say.

(An automobile horn is heard honking, from outside.)

Excuse me for a moment - I think my partner's signaling me.

(Exits.)

Sybil bites her nails, a little anxious. She paces, stealing glances out the window. Seeing the policeman returning, she sits back down and composes herself.

POLICEMAN

(Tired.)

Well - I'm afraid he's given us the slip. Dammit. We were just sure he was in the neighborhood.

SYBIL

(Laughs, uncomfortably.)

He must have "zigged" while you "zagged."

POLICEMAN

I'm afraid so. He's long gone by now, wherever he slipped us. Not good. Not good. But if he was around here earlier - maybe he'll be back. He might have been scoping out hiding places. His primary stomping ground isn't far from here, and he's been drifting this way, more and more. You've been very helpful. We're advising everyone in this area to be double-sure their doors are locked, and not to go out alone. He strikes people who are alone. So far, only men - but why take chances? If you should remember anything, anything at all, please call us at this number.

(Jots down a number, tears it from his pad.)

SYBIL

Why do you suppose he was here?

POLICEMAN

Well, if it was him - hell, I don't know. Hiding places, like I said. Or maybe he wanted to know if he was going to get caught, in the near future.

SYBIL

Or just someone to talk to -

POLICEMAN

(Grunts.)

Yeah, maybe. If I meet anyone who wants their cards read, I'll send them your way. 'Night, now.

SYBIL

Good night, officer.

POLICEMAN

Keep those doors and windows locked!

(Exits.)

Sybil forces a smile and waves to him as he leaves, locking the door behind him. She seems a little relieved, and at the same time a little scared. Noticing her sign has been left reading "Open," she flips it to the "Closed" side, giving a little laugh and shaking her head. She fixes herself a drink, muttering to herself, as if she is talking to the glass in her hand.

SYBIL

Not safe in the neighborhood, any more. Whoo - ! Can't stay safe anywhere - long - careful, be very, very careful - doors and windows. Ha! It's the streets, Mister Officer, the streets you have to watch out for. Not homes. Damn fool! No - razor murders - in homes.

(She puts some music on the stereo and sits down, propping her feet up. Closing her eyes, she massages her brow with the cold drink, sighing.)

No, no. I don't think -

(Gives a little chuckle.)

- "your man" strikes in homes.

(Looks again at the glass in her hand.)

"Your man." Keep him in your basement, do you? Is he housebroken? Does he have a name? Fido - ? Spot - ?

(Sardonically, miming a finger across her throat.)

"Stripe?" Your man. Your man.

(There is a faint sound, coming from beyond the basement door. She freezes. She turns the stereo down a notch, and listens. After a few moments.)

The door wasn't locked when I came back -

(Laughs softly, confidently, at ease.)

But I didn't lock it when I left. No, no, no - I know. I "bloody" well know that "The Gay Blade" is not in my basement. No, no, no. No, no, no, no.

(Sighs, listens to the music.)

After a few moments, Sybil's eyes light on something - something on the floor, near the table where the police officer had been standing. She gets up, goes over for a better look. Kneeling down, she dips her finger, and pulls it back up. There is blood on it. She stiffens, alarmed, and shoots a terrified glance at the door. There is a rag within quick grasp - and she scoops it up, swiping it across the small blood puddle, then staring at it in unbelieving terror. She gets up, looking like she is heading for the door, when the basement door opens, startling her into crying out and stumbling back a step. One hand flies to her chest, the other - holding the bloodied rag - she quickly hides behind her. There is a man in the basement doorway, looking as startled as she is. He is about Sybil's

height. He wears a tan overcoat; slight, frail of build; effeminate-looking; in his thirties or early forties. He seems kindly, probably soft-spoken, if a little nervous.

MAN

Oh, I'm terribly sorry! I didn't mean to startle you! Or - huh - me, for that matter!

SYBIL

(Summoning calm, but plainly anxious.)

Finding strange men in my basement does that to me, sometimes.

MAN

Really, I'm very, very sorry! I was told your customers sometimes let themselves in, that you didn't mind.

SYBIL

Who told you that?

MAN

A friend of my wife's. She says she comes to you, fairly often.

SYBIL

What's her name?

MAN

(A slight, apologetic laugh.)

I - uh - I don't really remember. She sees so many people, I just lose track.

SYBIL

Well - I - uh - I do tell my customers that. Sometimes. Your - uh - your wife, what's her name?

MAN

Oh, you wouldn't know her.

SYBIL

Try me.

MAN

She's never been here. She doesn't believe in any of this kind of thing. I'm not really sure I do, actually. I don't know - ! Can you - really read minds - ?

SYBIL

(Clears her throat.)

When did you come in?

MAN

(Peers at her, a little afraid.)

Oh, heavens - I'm not really sure. It - uh -

(Checks his watch, laughs.)

There you have it! Damn thing's stopped on me, again. I, you know, sometimes you forget to wind them. The wife keeps promising to get me one of those - what do you call them? - self-winding things, one of these Christmases. Only seem to - get neckties, though - sometimes a razor.

SYBIL

Uh -

MAN

There was no answer - when I knocked, I mean - and, you know, the sign said "Open," so just in I came.

SYBIL

Where's your ring?

MAN

Pardon?

SYBIL

Your wedding ring?

MAN

My - ? Oh! I'm having the stone reset. Damn thing came loose!

(Laughs.)

You pay so much for them, you figure that shouldn't happen, right?

SYBIL

Why didn't you come upstairs, when you heard me moving about?

MAN

Well, I'm afraid - I took a nap. Don't know how long - ! Watch, you know -

SYBIL

Yes. Broken, yes -

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MAN

And then I heard someone at the door - and conversation, and - I didn't want to interrupt. I was just about to come up and see, after your guest left, and then - well -

(Laughs, again.)

- I felt so silly! I didn't know what to say, it all sounded so -

SYBIL

Crazy.

MAN

(Laughs, again.)

Yes! Crazy. Just like - just like it does sound, doesn't it? I would have called out a "hello," but I couldn't find just the right moment, and I didn't want to - of course, I did - I startled you, which was - just what I didn't - want to do - I'm - uh - I'm afraid I gave you more of a start - by remaining silent! I am sorry!

(Extends his hand.)

My name is Harry. Harry Smith.

SYBIL

(Conscious of the rag in her hand, self-consciously ditches it, looking rather suspicious.)

I - sorry - I was cleaning.

(Quickly.)

Nothing really.

MAN

Excuse me?

SYBIL

I mean - I didn't see anything. You didn't see anything. There - uh - there's - nothing to see - is there?

(Laughs, inanely.)

Pleased to meet you, Mister - Smith.

(Takes his hand, uneasily.)

You came for - a reading?

MAN

Yes.

SYBIL

Well - I've already closed shop, Mister Smith. If you could - come back - ?

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MAN

(Earnest; an underlying intensity.)

Please. I've come a long way, and it took me long enough to work up my courage this time. I've never gone in much for this sort of thing before, but - everybody says you're very, very good. Maybe even psychic. And it doesn't take very long, does it? I'd pay you well. Call it curiosity, but - I just can't leave - until I find out what you might know about me.

SYBIL

You know my fee?

MAN

I'll give you ten dollars more.

SYBIL

(Glances at the door and back, thinking; finally.)

All right. Do you have a preference of decks?

MAN

Pardon?

SYBIL

Decks. Tarot decks? I have a variety of them. Rider, Crowley, Hermetic, Classic -

MAN

Oh - no. No special deck. Whatever serves you best.

SYBIL

I'll use my classic pack - the IJJ. They're - oh, where did I put those - ? I thought they were - yes, of course, I know where they are, I'll get them. Make yourself comfortable. Begin meditating on your question.

Sybil has been inspecting the table, to make sure there is no blood visible about it. Satisfied, she ushers the man to take a seat, and exits. A moment later, she reenters, carrying the bundle she carried off earlier. She is concealing the deck of cards behind it. She sits opposite the man, palming the cards into her lap, beneath the table. She holds the bundle up.

SYBIL

Silk. Preserves the vibrations of the cards.

Sybil places the bundle in her lap, and brings the cards up to the table, looking through them, then looking intently at the man. She appears interested - she is into her act now, and this is a game she knows how to control.

SYBIL

Let's see now - you look to me to be a water or earth sign.

MAN

Scorpio.

SYBIL

Ah-hah! I'd probably have guessed it, in a minute. Fixed water. Determined, purposeful, secretive. A calm, controlled exterior, masking turbulent emotions beneath. The King of Cups, in tarot.

(She holds the card up, so he can see it.)

MAN

"Roy-de-coop?" That's "King of Cups?"

SYBIL

(Pronouncing it correctly.)

Roi de Coupe. Yes -

MAN

Scorpio?

SYBIL

Mm-hmm. Each card represents a different sign, a different set of energies, polarities, personality characteristics. Scorpio has the widest range of good and evil in the Zodiac. They are more intense than any other sign - combative, quiet, powerful. They get a lot of bad press, but that's just because the bad ones are so bad. People don't read that much about the higher Scorpios, the great philosophers and determined scientists, the dedicated and successful detectives - the brilliant actors and actresses.

MAN

You sound like you know a lot about astrology.

SYBIL

I should - I'm a Scorpio, too. We're often drawn to the occult. To anything mysterious, or hidden. They say that a Scorpio can only be bested by another Scorpio, that's how strong their willpower is. Fortunately - there are more good

SYBIL (Continued)

Scorpions around than bad ones -

(Winks.)

- though that fact makes the bad ones worry, quite a bit. Scorpions are all paranoid.

MAN

(Laughs, lightly.)

Maybe we're the only ones with reason to be! I guess that makes us a sort of private club, doesn't it? Partners in crime, conspirators in the unsavory!

SYBIL

Good point! Scorpions are loathe to rat on their brothers, unless they're left with no choice. They like keeping things quiet - and will only lay all their cards on the table when backed into a corner. You know what to do?

(She hands him the deck, leaving the King of Cups face-up on the table.)

MAN

Not really. I've only heard a little about this. And what I see in the movies, of course.

SYBIL

Think of your question. Don't speak it out loud - just think. And shuffle.

(She speaks conversationally, but looks at the man intently; he doesn't notice, absorbed with shuffling.)

You say you came a long way? Where do you live?

MAN

Will it interrupt my concentration, if I talk?

SYBIL

No. It'll help free your mind up.

MAN

Newdale.

SYBIL

Peaceful place. Little crime. Wish this little suburb could stay the same.

MAN

You have a crime problem here?

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SYBIL

Haven't you heard? We've had four murders around here, recently. A slasher - !

MAN

Oh! That. My God - yes, yes, I have. I thought you meant burglary, or something. I hadn't realized that was this neighborhood - yes. Terrible, isn't it? I imagine the police have a lot of problems, trying to find some faceless psychopath that strikes seemingly without cause.

(Frowns.)

I thought there were only three - ?

SYBIL

(She swallows, leans partly back; her eyes flicker.)

There was another, tonight.

MAN

Oh, no! When?

SYBIL

Less than an hour ago.

(A beat.)

I heard it on the radio.

MAN

I had to have been - yes, I haven't been here that long. I remember, I heard the evening news on the interstate. Surprising I didn't hear. I always have the radio on. What station?

SYBIL

Uh - KIMN.

MAN

That's my station.

SYBIL

I think. I'm not sure.

MAN

I must have been daydreaming. Or maybe it was after I got out of the car.

SYBIL

(Quickly.)

It could have been on a different station.

MAN

That's awful fast news! How did they get hold of it, so quick?

SYBIL

(Squirming a little.)

I guess someone was nearby the crime scene, and - phoned the station. I guess. Apparently, this one was clumsier than the last three. The police were on it, fast.

MAN

They have an eyewitness, then?

SYBIL

(Concealing growing discomfort.)

Not exactly. I'm not sure.

MAN

They didn't say, on the radio?

SYBIL

They did - but I really don't remember.

MAN

(Stops a moment, looks at her oddly.)

I thought there were a lot of police cars around, for so early in the night -

(Suddenly brightens.)

You know, I - how did they describe him? Maybe I saw something that could help.

SYBIL

Just that he was about average size and build - but they're not even sure of that. You know how ten people see ten different things, entirely.

MAN

There were a lot of eyewitnesses, then?

SYBIL

I just pulled that number out of a hat. I really don't know. Details were sketchy. They said they'd have more at ten o'clock.

MAN

Maybe I'll talk to the police, when I'm done here.

SYBIL

You think you saw something?

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MAN

I don't know - but I might have. It couldn't hurt to talk to them - and let them decide, could it?

SYBIL

No, I guess not.

(Motions to the table.)

You about ready?

MAN

Just about.

(Lays down the deck of cards.)

There.

SYBIL

Cut the cards, three times to the left.

(He does so; she begins laying them out, in "Celtic Cross" form.)

MAN

(Looking at the first card.)

Death.

SYBIL

Not as frightening as it appears. Actually, it stands more for transformation, bittersweet change. It's also the Major Arcana card for Scorpio.

MAN

And it represents - ?

SYBIL

The question, itself. Something about an imminent change about to take place. A death and rebirth. Possibly a dangerous situation.

MAN

(Intrigued.)

Go on.

SYBIL

The Knight of Swords, across the Death card. There is a matter of grave importance immediately surrounding the question. This is literally a question of life and death.

MAN

(Eyes intent, nods head.)

Continue.

SYBIL

The Priestess, Juno, your goal - to fathom the mystery of a woman, to penetrate a secret and discover a hidden truth - In the past, The Tower - turbulence, trauma, violence, upheaval - Present influence, The Moon - deceptions, behind-the-scenes manipulations, hidden dangers - Soon to come - the three of swords, sorrow, a broken family.

MAN

(Looks chillingly into her eyes, for just a moment; then looks up, sighing.)
I was afraid of that. Family sorrows - through loss? A death, perhaps?

SYBIL

Perhaps.

MAN

In my life, or another's?

SYBIL

Impossible to say.

MAN

(Rests his head in his hands for a few moments; when he lifts it, his eyes are moist.)

They told me you were good. And honest. You do see things, don't you? Maybe - as my wife's friend said - you are genuinely psychic. I see a lot of death. I am - a mortician. So many griefs, so many sorrows. So much pain. Broken families. Deprived of loved ones, through violence, fate - ordinarily, it doesn't bother me much. You get used to it. But eventually, you know it will no longer be cold and impersonal and distant. Eventually, it has to double back on you. Strike your own. And then, you're powerless.

SYBIL

(Genuinely moved; softly.)

You - fear for your family. Don't you?

MAN

Yes.

SYBIL

There's more - do you want to hear it?

MAN

Yes.

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SYBIL

(Continuing to lay cards.)

The Knight of Cups. Pisces. Sensuality, indulgence, alcoholism - you're a homosexual. And afraid of what your wife will think. Is that it?

MAN

(Stricken.)

She wouldn't understand! Neither would my brother. We both dated my wife, we both wanted her. She aroused me, in a way no woman ever had before. I thought, maybe, with her I could be - normal. I still want kids, a home. I can't hide it much longer. The fact that I spend so much time away from home, at the office. That all the help I ever hire is young, and male. And that I spend more time with them.

SYBIL

You think - when they find out - they won't forgive you.

(He doesn't answer, gazing off; she continues.)

Two of swords - they already suspect. Right now, they like to think that you simply harmonize better with men. That you conduct business with them on a friendly basis, nothing more - Nine of swords. You fear discovery. You are probably - contemplating suicide.

MAN

(Nods, vaguely.)

Can they tell me what to do? How to save myself? What will happen?

SYBIL

Last card - ten of swords.

There is a long beat.

MAN

What does it mean?

SYBIL

(Thinks long and hard. She reaches an inner decision, then looks at him with quiet confidence, a supporting tone in her voice.)

There will be final peace. Release. An end to frustration and pain. Your brother and your wife will be free to marry - without guilt or any hatred toward you. They will pity you - and wonder for years to come why they didn't know, or

SYBIL (Continued)

couldn't understand. But they will still love you. Fate will grant you the perfect escape. You will have complete freedom - and free another with you. Stand - turn - look -

(The man stands up.)

Gaze at the wall - deeply - and you will see that my words are true.

The man looks at the wall, with hope and wonder, peering as if to find salvation in the wall, a tired, beaten man, clinging to a last thread of possible escape from his woes. Sybil quietly steps behind him, removing a bloody straight-razor from the bundle she has been carrying, and whipping it suddenly and violently across his throat. His hand flies to the wound, and he soundlessly collapses into death. Sybil calmly picks up the phone, dialing the number the policeman had given her. She waits patiently while the phone rings a few times.

SYBIL

(Finally; hysterically, as she wipes her own prints from the handle and presses the razor into the man's hand.)

Hold? No - ! What do you mean, hold? He's here - the slasher - he was in my house - my God, send someone over, please - he's, he's cut his own throat! Oh, God, it's - yes, yes - 1826 Charing. Oh - oh - my God, my God - !

(She continues making horrified noises until she has hung up the receiver, then is immediately calm again. She picks up her drink, raises it toward the man's corpse.)

To moving on, Mr. Smith - to freedom. The police were getting a little too close to me, here.

With a relieved sigh, she plops down in her chair and drinks, smiling.

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY

IX. Conclusion

What have I learned from the writing and productions of these three plays?

One always learns more and more from more and more writing. That's a given. And, certainly, I learned a great deal about playwriting -- a form I had never tried writing in before coming to Kansas State University.

As to what I learned from the productions of these plays, I must say: "Not much!" That is, not much I did not already know from my years as an actor. True, certain earlier opinions I held were corroborated, certain perceptions clarified, and certain convictions sharpened.

In this chapter, with which I bring this report to its conclusion, I'm going to give some additional thoughts on the issue of "creative control" in the theatre and my place (or lack of place, as the case may be) in it.

I've done Pippin twice, as an actor. From a director's (or playwright's or critic's) standpoint, I analyze the script, and it strikes me as a real dog, no matter how you slice it. The only thing that saves it is production, which can be directly attributed to Bob Fosse. It has a nice score, yes, but it's the "director's vision" that people come to see,

because that's what made the show. They want the glitzy "Tits and Ass" Fosse gave it.

In a case like this, I'm sure playwright Roger O. Hirson didn't mind Fosse's intervention, because Pippin was an acknowledged bomb until Fosse hit the scene. Dramatically, the script was not self-standing, so some other element -- in this case, production -- was required to save it. Fosse did not change Hirson's script -- but he did overlay a concept on it. This was acceptable. He had been asked to, approaching the script as a play-doctor.

I played Higgins in Loretto Heights' My Fair Lady, in which Gary Giem altered the script. Eliza did not return, and Higgins asked Mrs. Pearce to bring him his slippers. The idea was to "return to Shaw's concept," which Giem believed Alan Jay Lerner had no right to change. The question is academic, as it was actually Gabriel Pascal's change, not Lerner's; but in either event, I voiced objection to Giem's change. He was doing neither Lerner and Loewe's My Fair Lady nor Shaw's Pygmalion. He was doing Gary Giem's My Fair Lady. I followed orders, because I was an actor and that is my training. I also considered Giem unethical.

As a director, I might "change" My Fair Lady, too -- but not at all in the same way. I would cut the entire ballroom scene. Reason: the show is overlong as is, the set and costume budget can be cut by a quarter, and absolutely nothing happens in that scene that isn't later recounted in "You Did It" at the top of the second act. In other words, it's

practical, and it doesn't hurt the script in the slightest -- or change it in any way. It's a production change, not a script change.

Another case in point: Friederich Durrenmatt's The Physicists. I saw a production of it done slightly "campy," complete with James Bond music. The script was intact, however, and if there were cuts they were not noticed. I liked the play, except for its downcast ending. Rather than change the ending so that the protagonists win, however, I would simply not choose to direct that script! I would write my own, along with similar lines, with the ending I prefer. The Physicists is a self-standing script. Like it or not, it performs on its own, with no need for outside "meddling."

Any experienced professional with integrity could never and would never "harm" or "meddle" with someone else's script. They weigh their decisions as to what to do with it very carefully, putting themselves in the playwright's shoes and saying, "If this were my script, would this bother me, or please me?" And they are honest with themselves. That is what "integrity" is.

Students are generally quite young, and so apt to make rash mistakes. It shouldn't be held against them. They are still learning. It becomes incumbent upon their institutions, then, to watch and guide them. They can't keep them from making the mistakes, but they can be sure the mistakes have been learned from. And they help keep them from being too

embarrassing, not by interfering, but by way of sage advice.

My view of theater is a military disciplined one. I am a separatist. Acting, playwriting, directing, and producing are as separate as the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines. Separate, but cooperative. You have to let each do their job, and not interfere. The Air Force doesn't direct naval battles and Army grunts don't tell pilots how to fly their planes. Each branch may make respectful suggestions to the other on any combined operation, but to interfere is to weaken the whole plan.

The playwright's job should be all but done, once the script is optioned and a director is at its helm. The play shouldn't be sailed until it's seaworthy; to go sailing in a leaky ship is begging for trouble. The playwright, once the play is underway, is nothing but an advisor. He authorizes changes, should they prove necessary. He has devised the plan and the blueprints of the ship itself. The director has to build it, and sail it. They communicate, respecting each other's sovereignty. Both, after all, just want to get the ship sailed splendidly home. The actors are hand-picked by the director as crewmen ideal for their respective and crucial posts. They should be listened to, because they're out there doing what looks good on the drawing board, but may or may not be practical in action. They are functionaries, who do as they're told -- but they are also experienced specialists, not cattle. Each 'branch of the production unit has to respect the others, but also remember their place and function.

I believe in functional definition. If you're a singer, you sing. An actor, you act. A dancer dances. Where troubles occur are when singers insist they're also dancers, but they don't dance. The playwright doesn't direct the show, the director doesn't write it, and the actors don't do either -- they act it. It's that simple. If you cross the lines and are obstinate about it, you're insubordinate -- that's all.

A playwright can also direct or act, of course -- sometimes both -- but he'd "By-God!" better be able to figure out which branch of the service he's in at all times, and do only one at any given time. If the playwright is directing, then he takes off his playwright's hat once he thinks the play will sail, and puts on the director's hat. He doesn't wear both at the same time. And technically, he doesn't have to. When you're part Army and part Navy, they call you a "Marine." When you're a director of something you've also written, they call you an "auteur." Neither fish nor fowl, but a little of both. Patton and Rommel, after all, oversaw their own strategic campaigns from the thick of the fray. But you can bet they did those functions separately: they "planned," then they "executed." They could do so because they were both experienced and disciplined -- they knew which hat was which, and when to wear each.

This system cannot fail, if those involved are professionals, in the truest meaning of the word. As so often happens, though, money rears its ugly head, and

vulgarly presumes it can buy experience and authority. Plays are optioned that just aren't fit to sail; directors are hired who are frustrated writers or actors, or who are ambitious to the point of blindness; producers meddle with each branch, presuming the right by virtue of wealth.

It is this last that is the worst poison in the smooth operation of the creative process. A standard modus operandi has insinuated its way past this "old school" thinking, and usurped the throne. Ideally, a director chooses a show because he feels somehow simpatico with it, and sincerely wishes to "realize" on the stage what the playwright has said on paper. In practice, however, these days, a producer picks a show, and then lazily assigns it to a director who may or may not care for the script. Making matters worse, the director himself becomes nothing but an administrative functionary left to do the dirty work, because the producer will then force changes at the last minute, usurping the director's authority. The end product of such a bastardized process as this can only be dissatisfactory to all concerned, including the audience. It is arrogant, sloppy, and crude, not to mention vulgar and insulting to anyone involved in the creative process. Such producer presumption is simply unethical. [It seems appropriate at this point to remind ourselves that it was this sort of producer presumption, with its resultant mediocritization of the creative process, that caused Lord Byron to refuse to allow his plays -- Manfred, The Two Foscari, Sardanapalus, Heaven and Hell, etc. -- to

be produced (directed, performed) on the English stage of his time, insisting instead that they should be performed on the "stage of the mind," so to speak. Also, we should remember that Shakespeare's theater, Moliere's theater, and the classic theater of ancient Greece did not have such producer presumption (and/or directorial presumption) at work in them.]

If a producer wishes executive directorial authority, then he must also be the director, instead of slothfully assigning directing as a menial chore, only to commandeer the work as his own at the last minute. A producer produces. He doesn't direct. And if he does direct, then he had better direct.

Similarly, directors who appropriate works for the express purpose of altering them to their own ends are nothing short of being criminals. They are no different than kidnappers or hijackers! The profession cannot survive the likes of such people being deemed respectable, and such individuals are a detriment to us all. By allowing such producers and directors to proliferate, we have watered our artistic blood down to its present ludicrous level. We have passively signed the death warrant of a time-honored, noble profession. It is in critical condition at present, and if it dies, we have only ourselves to blame, for allowing unethical quacks such liberal license to practice. There is a difference between honest mistakes and criminal behavior, and we have too long turned a blind eye to the dividing line.

Perhaps blindest of all are the educational institutions which are theoretically "preparing" people for the world of theater. It seems most tragic to me that so-called educational theater is helping in the "authorization" of this unethical behavior. Educational theater seems intent on preparing students for the "business of theater," rather than on nurturing the artists, the creators of theater. I doubt that Edward Gordon Craig could have "made it" in most graduate programs in theater today.

Our real choice is simple: return to the basics, or die. The masturbatory self-destruction of theater is self-evident unless we stop it. It can only be changed by each of us, individually. I do my part to oppose it, in word and deed. But I am only one person. Every "only one person" has to take his/her respective stand, if it's ever going to count for anything.

Personally, I think it's a lost cause. Theater is already dead, and anything I've done, anything I'm doing, is nothing but the temporary resurrection of more glorious days, when men like Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams were there to look up to. But I'm as old-school as they were -- it's in my training, my background, and my personality and character -- and that means fighting even a lost cause, if that cause is a moral necessitude. There's only a ghost of a chance for change, but change will be impossible if individuals don't stand for it and pave its way. To "rage against the dying of the light" is a Quixotic exercise of attempted collective

effort that will more than likely result in nihilistic failure. But theater itself is the history of such plaintive "goat-songs," and if we don't sing them ourselves, no one else ever will.

It's what we're all about, isn't it?

I've lived many of these thoughts. It's ironic that I should so love film and so defend this archaic dinosaur it all came from -- we all came from -- theater. But theater adopts many orphans, and I'm one of them. Orphans tend to be grateful to those who give them succor and support, and I'm no exception. Anything I have, and am, is owed to that empty space that is as great and glorious as whatever is brought to it, a place for all potentials to become reality. It hurts me to see it raped by fools and charlatans, pimps out to make a profit for themselves at the very expense of what gave them life. They sterilize the very womb of theater, and more vultures flock around it, insuring that not only will no new life issue from it, but that even the corpse will be only a naked skeleton.

Where's Judge Roy Bean, when you need him? Harlan Ellison has sung the same song I do, lamenting Hollywood's rape and wasted potential as I do that of theater. Were I in Hollywood, we'd both be bleating the same goat's song, together. Close cousins, the stage and film chart parallel downward spirals, strangled by identical poisons that not

enough will oppose. Self-aggrandizing charlatans have made them their whores, and all attempts to return to them any of their former nobility only make them look all the more pathetically tragic.

I dropped a copy of The Grave Affair at the Denver Center recently. If it stands a chance anywhere, it's there. They might be like other producers and adjudicators who have read this play. But I don't think so -- I really don't think so. At least, it never harms anyone to keep on hoping.

The reaction of producers to The Grave Affair surprises me the least. Today's producers and I are just polar opposites, that's all. After all is said and done, I fault them only in not openly discussing why.

On the other hand, the reaction of Bela Kiralyfalvi surprised me the most. Speaking with him and reading his adjudication, he strikes me as having seen a completely different show than what I wrote. I feel as if I presented him (and through him, the ACTF) with Cyrano de Bergerac, and all he (and, as a result, the ACTF) could think to mention was that once or twice the meter wasn't perfect, and big noses are hardly a basis for tragedy. It was like, you know, the love letter you send your teacher, that is wordlessly returned with the spelling corrected.

My attitude that America crushes the excellent and exalts the mediocre is not arbitrary, or vituperative. It is borne of experience. Take for example the film Ice Castles.

Well, sex and blonde hair notwithstanding, I'm Lynn Holly-Johnson, in that movie: this phenomenal wunderkind that blitzes the hell out of the competition, just to be given the standard marks. That happens, and her mentor shakes her head and says, "They didn't believe their eyes." She consistently loses, and consistently gets the loudest cheers from the crowd. She's the best -- but the judges won't admit it. When she does her best, even her mentor says, "You're showing off -- don't do any more than I told you to do," in order to get her to win in the judges' eyes. And she just doesn't get it. Neither do I. What makes it doubly ironic is that in the case of The Grave Affair I give the judges what I have been told they want: a perfect "10" on form -- and they still snub it! The thing is a goddamn structural tour-de-force. One has to be blind not to say so!

At Loretto Heights College they gave me wings. They encouraged all that was exceptional in me. I was acknowledged to be the best competition auditioner who breathed. I got eighteen offers at the ACTF competition (URTA), and phenomenal feedback on my audition. And your peers, you know, they "salute" you in ways you recognize.

So, Wayne State University, le creme de la creme, so to speak, picks me up for their resident repertory theater company. And then the roof falls in, so to speak. They tell me the same thing Lynn Holly-Johnson is told: "You're showing off." My peers tell me, in all sincerity, when

everything's cast and I'm the only one with nothing better than Third Spear Carrier, that I'm too talented for them to know what to do with. So, a play called Wild Oats is railroaded into the ACTF as a contest entry, breaking a few rules, so that a couple "stars" can be showcased. The adjudicator gives The Three Ruffians -- bit parts, and I'm their chief -- the Irene Ryan nomination, in front of God and everybody! Tells us to decide amongst ourselves as to which two of the three should get the nominations. Then, later (as soon as the adjudicator is gone), the theatre faculty and their head give the nominations to the leads -- Mark Tymschynschyn (or whatever) and the clone of Elizabeth Taylor. And my name is mud -- for having been so good. Organizations and institutions (and the program heads within same) don't like it, when their chosen underlings outshine their chosen stars -- makes them look bad. And for being good, I suffer.

I do Pippin in 1982, in Denver, semi-professional, playing Charlemagne -- at 24 -- and it gets the Rocky Mountain News "Best Production of the Year" award. Does it get me anywhere? Hell, no! I'm 24! I can't possibly be playing 50-year-old men. It's a fluke! Besides, I'm not Equity!

Then The Grave Affair last year. It makes no sense. There's no logic to any of it, anywhere. I mean, "Go figure." You come up perplexed, no matter how it's sliced. How to figure it? The better I become, it seems the behinder I get.

"Do your best," they say. Fat chance! Excellence isn't rewarded in America. It's punished. It's despised. So what are you supposed to do? Be bad?

If you're good -- in this "business," at least -- you might as well hang up your spurs, because you'll never win, for losing -- or for winning, for that matter. Hey, you, the pretentious writer of worse-than-contemporary-junk, and as mediocre an actor as I've ever seen -- come here. Got a career for you. Get into theater, friend, you're exactly what is wanted.

But I'm beginning to sound too self-pitying here. I don't pity myself. And I am not angry. Nor am I discouraged. But I am confused.

Joel Climenhaga, who has worked with me through so many of the traumas and triumphs of the past couple years, is fond of quoting lines from William Saroyan's The Time of Your Life: "No foundation, no foundation -- all the way down the line." I don't blame him. Problem is, it's not me who needs to hear those lines. It's the people up top. Something has rotted their brains. The common guy on the street, he's not going to know a great play from a piece of paper flying down the street. But he can't really be blamed. On the other hand, when the Top Brass don't know, there's a serious problem!

H. P. Lovecraft was right: writing is a noble pursuit for the gentleman-at-leisure, a truly cultivated pursuit -- but as a business, it's despicable. If Lovecraft had been an actor or playwright, he'd have said the same thing Byron did.

I'm not bitter. I'm bewildered. You try your damndest to be the best, and you're disciplined and objective enough to know when you are and when you aren't -- but nobody else seems to know. So why bother? It's like telling the world's funniest joke to a room full of retards -- they'll laugh or not, but it'll be random, because they don't understand a word of what you're saying.

I'm "the total misfit," really. All I know is I've been squashed down every way to Sunday, whenever I do superior work. And when I "conform to the mediocre norm," I'm completely ignored. There's no winning, there's no beating the system, there's no logic to figure. There's just mediocrity that perpetuates itself, ignoring anything else.

So, The Denver Center now has a copy of The Grave Affair. What will they think of me? Of my work? If there were logic in the universe, I could tell you.

All I know is that they are my best hope at this time -- at least, as far as my writing of plays is concerned. (As to acting -- well, that, of course, is another matter, not within the provenance of this document.)

I've never trusted people with graduate degrees, and now I've all but got one. I know how the American system crushes you into its well-defined, controllable boxes, before stamping its approval on you. Only desperation could have ever driven me back to the Excellence-Smashing Machine. I beat it, I think, because I had some excellent allies -- particularly

during the last couple years at Kansas State University. But the cost is frustration and a higher octave of soul-fatigue. When I eventually die, it will be of simple weariness and confusion. One can bang brick walls with one's head only so long before succumbing to confusion.

And that's what I've learned from the productions of these three plays -- and from my life and "career" to this point.

Even so, there is also something else I know very very well -- and that is that I will go on acting. And I will go on writing -- plays, film scripts, short stories, novels, whatever.

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THE GRAVE AFFAIR AND OTHER GOTHIC ROMANCES

by

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B. A., Loretto Heights College, 1979

AN ABSTRACT OF A REPORT

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THE GRAVE AFFAIR AND OTHER GOTHIC ROMANCES contains an introduction to and complete texts of three of the author's plays, all written while a graduate student at Kansas State University. Also included are the author's commentaries on the creative process of each work, both in terms of writing and subsequent production of each play. The plays included are: The Late, Great Doctor Death (1986), a drama in two acts, about a television actor who uses the secret knowledge of his own imminent death to bring new life to his four oldest friends; The Grave Affair (1987), first annual Jerome D. Johanning Playwriting Award winning four-act drama, about the apprehension and court-martial of a necrophiliac French sergeant during the Franco-Prussian War, and his doomed love affair with a tragic young German barmaid; and Cutthroat, (1987), a black comedy in one act, about a suspenseful evening spent by a fortune-teller and a possible serial-murderer. These plays and commentaries on the creative process of each are preceded by a description of the writing of several earlier works which had influence on the subject matter of the plays. Works so described are: Boniface (1980), an original screenplay; Last Rites (1981), an original screenplay; The Prize Exhibit (1982), an original screenplay; Remembering Maggie (1982), a novella; and several short stories written during the same period of time. The report is concluded with a summarizing chapter concerning the author's opinion on the state of contemporary American theater.