Four One Acts: Quaddies, Static, Pluto, Dis Associates, and Woody Woodpecker's Dream Café

Douglas Engebretsen

Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations/3393

This Dissertation-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
FOUR ONE ACTS: QUADDIES, STATIC, PLUTO, DIS ASSOCIATES, AND WOODY WOODPECKER'S DREAM CAFÉ

by

Douglas Engebretsen

A Dissertation
Submitted to The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
April 2002
The plays in this collection are all examples of interrupted ritual. In Quaddies, a play set in a 1969 college dormitory, Margaret’s courtship conventions conflict with Terry’s Friday night bridge game with his pals, a ritual interrupted several times by other rites: an anti-war demonstration, a bout of arm wrestling, and a panty raid. Similarly, Static disturbs the ceremonies of taxi dispatching (answering the telephone, making and drinking coffee, taking bids and giving out orders) with a game of chess played between two of the principals—a highly ritualized struggle beginning with a wager and ending with chaos. In Pluto, Dis Associates, Nick Shadow’s rituals of soul procurement are ruined by the more quotidian rituals of dinner and email. And Woody Woodpecker’s Dream Café interrupts its own process throughout. Beginning with a desert scene that turns out to be a play written by a character named Roger within a play about a playwriting workshop, the playwriting workshop is further disclosed to be part of a larger play, the fictional brainchild of Cummins, who uses characters with the same names as the people in his own playwriting workshop. With every further interruption it becomes less clear what the truth is—and less certain that the most recent explanation of events is the final one.
Within the reality/fantasy continuum, *Quaddies* and *Static* are realistic plays, while *Pluto Dis Associates* and *Woodpecker's Dream Café* hold more in common with fantasy. *Woodpecker's Dream Café* revises the structure of the other three, since that play continues the fictive life of at least one character from each. Danny, the taxi-dispatcher in *Static*, is seen the year of his death, ten years later. Terry and Margaret, the student couple in *Quaddies*, are viewed three, then seven years farther on. Nick Shadow reappears.

Themes are similar throughout the collection, though they are sometimes presented ironically: the urgency of life's physical and moral struggles, the importance of culture, of family, of love.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QUADDIES</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATIC</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLUTO, DIS ASSOCIATES</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOODY WOODPECKER’S DREAM CAFÉ</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
QUADDIES
A One-Act Play
by
Douglas Engebretsen
CHARACTERS

CAVANAUGH, a pre-med student, twenty
MARGARET, CAVANAUGH'S girl, nineteen
SATWICZ, a history major, nineteen
METCALF, a pre-med student, twenty
BLISS, an engineering student, nineteen

SCENES

Scene One. SETTING: Cavanaugh's room, West Quadrangle, a men's dormitory of a large midwestern university. TIME: 8:30 PM, a Friday in the Winter Semester, 1970.
Setting: Cavanaugh’s room, West Quadrangle, a men’s dormitory at a large midwestern university. There is a chair and desk on which are beakers, distillation equipment and phone DR, a bed and a dresser UL, on which there is a large glass bowl with a screen on top. A few books, dirty clothes, empty pizza boxes and drink bottles. At C is a card table. A window DL, a door DR. A closet door, UL.
Time: 8:30 PM, a Friday in the Winter Semester, 1970.

Scene One

(As lights go up, CAVANAUGH, wearing goggles, lights a Zippo lighter, and heats a test tube over it with chopsticks.)

CAVANAUGH

Come on, turn pink.

(He drops the test tube, which spills on the desk.)

Dammit.

(He picks up a dustpan and wipes it clean with his fingers, then uses his lab notebook to direct the spilled liquid onto it. After smelling and turning over an empty beer bottle, he pours the liquid in. There is a knock at the door.)

Who’s there?

MARGARET
(Offstage.)

It’s me, Terry.
Aah.

Just a second.

(My darling. What are you doing here?)

CAVANAUGH
(Under breath.)

(Beat.)

(He takes pillowcase from pillow and slips it over bowl. He goes to door and lets in MARGARET, who enters. They embrace)

My darling. What are you doing here?

MARGARET

I snuck in. Nobody was at the desk, so I cut through the laundry room and ran up the back stairs.

(Wrinkles nose)

What's that godawful smell?

(Beat.)

Oh my God, you let one.

CAVANAUGH

Sulfur dioxide. The rest of it is an organic molecule--butyric acid maybe, or putricine.

MARGARET

Smells like fart-erine to me.

(Beat.)

Are you sure you didn't let one? Boys just pass gas whenever they feel like it. Doesn't make any difference.

CAVANAUGH
(Opens window.)

It's no fart, Margaret. It's the byproduct of the acid-base reaction on page 156. Of my lab manual. Anyway, the girl who sits ahead of me in Physics lays real paint-peelers.

MARGARET

I don't believe you.

CAVANAUGH

Girl farts melt into the chair. The silent killers. Boys at least use the early warning system when they drop the bomb.
MARGARET
I did not come over to be grossed-out, love.
(Beat.)
We’re supposed to do something together tonight, remember.

CAVANAUGH
I said I’d call you if and when it worked out.

MARGARET
It’s eight-thirty already. And date night.

CAVANAUGH
Satwicz is freaking out about his draft physical. I told him and the guys they could come over to play cards and drink.

MARGARET
Great. What am I supposed to do? Study?
(Beat.)
Maybe I should find something fun to do. That Women’s Lib thing.
(Beat.)
Robin Morgan is speaking at Hill.

CAVANAUGH
(Coughing.)
What women’s lib thing?

MARGARET
Consciousness-raising. The teach-in starts at nine.

CAVANAUGH
Well I don’t get too turned on by chicks with leg-hair sticking out through their nylons, myself.

MARGARET
You don’t like body hair? Some people think it’s sexy.
(Beat.)
I’d much rather go to the movies.
(Beat.)
Cinema Guild is showing Women in Love tonight. I love Alan Bates. Come with me?

CAVANAUGH
You can stick around.
MARGARET
With your room smelling like this? Besides, It's clear to me that your friends do not have sufficient respect for women.

CAVANAUGH
Suit yourself. We'll be done by eleven. I'll call you.

Just a second. Who is it?

(He kisses her. There is a knock.)

SATWICZ
C'est moi, Dave.

(CAVANAUGH lets SATWICZ in. He wears an ascot.)

I'm dead. C'est la vie. C'est la guerre.

Margaret. I didn't see a tie on the door.

(Beat.)

Pew. Defense d'ordures. What stinks?

(Beat.)

MARGARET
You do, mister Satwicz. What does defense d'ordures mean?

SATWICZ
No dumping of shit.

MARGARET
Please, Dave..

SATWICZ
I'm doing the immersion section of French.

CAVANAUGH
You're in up to your knees already.

MARGARET
You didn't see a tie on the door because there's no open visiting for Terry and me. He's still on social probation since you guys, got him involved in your little plot to steal a Christmas tree from the Ann Arbor Bank. I was just leaving.

(She kisses CAVANAUGH. A loud knock.)

VOICE OFFSTAGE
Room check coming down. Hide the brews.
Better hide in the closet.

MARGARET
(Whispers.)

I’m not going in there.

(CAVANAUGH escorts MARGARET to closet. They kiss, and she goes inside.)

Just a minute.

CAVANAUGH
(SATWICZ opens the door and METCALF enters. He is better dressed than CAVANAUGH.)

What’s the haps, Quad-buds?

METCALF

Come out, Margaret, it’s just Metcalf.

SATWICZ

I wish you wouldn’t do stuff like that, Bill.

CAVANAUGH
(Takes METCALF’S coat.)

METCALF

Well, I heard a girl’s voice. Did you put her in the closet, like all the other babes you have up here?

MARGARET
(Comes out of closet.)

Very funny, you--I can’t even think of a good word.

Scum-sucking pig?

METCALF

You’re not Marlon Brando

MARGARET
(Beat.)
I’m leaving.

CAVANAUGH

I’ll walk you out, honey.

(They exit.)

METCALF

Pee-yew. What’s Cavanaugh doing with all the beakers?

SATWICZ

Where’s the smell coming from? Over here?

(SATWICZ sniffs, walks over to fishbowl. METCALF walks over to lab equipment, smells test tube.)

METCALF

Whew. There is something rotten in Denmark

SATWICZ

(Looks under pillowcase.)

Oh my God, look at this.

METCALF

At what?

SATWICZ

(Pulls off pillowcase.)

Bugs.

METCALF

(Walks over to fishbowl.)

What?

SATWICZ

Bugs. I don’t know what they are. Lots of ‘em.

METCALF

(Stares into bowl.)

You can’t keep pets in the dorm.

(Beat.)

I hope that screen’s on tight.
His biology project. It’s natural selection or something.

Doesn’t look very natural to me. Take a look at this thing. Look at the size of him. We should take them out.

They’re not hurting anything.

I bet Margaret doesn’t know about them, though.

I wonder where he got them?

Winchell sucks! Winchell sucks. Winchell suuuuucks.

And Cooley bites the big one!

The neighbors are restless. Where’s Bliss?

Getting beer.

(He takes out a pack of cards. CAVANAUGH and MARGARET enter R.)

Back so soon?

Mrs. Anderson’s room has about twenty guys outside watching “Rat Patrol.”

Go through Cooley.

Why don’t you take her? It’s your house, disgusting hole that it is.
SATWICZ

I’d love to. Zees way, ma Cherie.

(They exit.)

METCALF

You trust her with that Polak?

CAVANAUGH

Of course. Dave’s a bud. You on the other hand, would be a different story. I wouldn’t trust you the length of my--

METCALF

Yeah, yeah. And we would need to be careful of the significant figures for that.

(Beat.)

What’s with the creepy-crawles on your dresser, Buddy? Satwicz nearly peed his pants.

CAVANAUGH

It’s my Zo two-fifty-two irradiation experiment. Twenty points extra credit. They’re seventh generation cockroaches.

METCALF

Where’d you get them?

CAVANAUGH

I caught a few of them down in the pantry. The females lay fifty eggs.

METCALF

Remember in Cool Hand Luke where Paul Newman says “I can eat fifty eggs?”

CAVANAUGH

--Didn’t see it. Steve McQueen ate cockroaches in Papillon, though.

METCALF

A man, a plan a canal--Papillion. That’s where he kept the plans, as I remember..
Sings. “I got a mule and her name is Sal, fifteen years on the Anal Canal.”

CAVANAUGH

You’re weird.

(Sits down at the table.)

The German cockroach: Phylum arthropoda, class insecta, order orthoptera, family blattidae.

(Beat.)
They found cockroaches in the pyramids, you know. Haven’t speciated since King Tut.

(CAVANAUGH shuffles and deals solitaire. METCALF picks up Playboy from desk, crosses to chair, sits and flips through it.)

METCALF


CAVANAUGH

I don’t read skin mags, myself.

METCALF

I’ll bet.

(Beat.)

Playboy isn’t a skin mag. It’s like G. Q., only cooler. The articles have a certain sophistication—a philosophy of life for a suave man of the sixties. A publication for a men who enjoy the finer things.

CAVANAUGH

(Dealing solitaire)

Like what?

METCALF

C’mon Terry. You’re not in Quincy Michigan any more. You got it made here. We’re not rich or poor here. We’re just quaddies.

CAVANAUGH

My mom just called me from the pay phone at the Dairy Queen, where she works, to tell me she’s sending me a ten-dollar money order. Your mom do that?

(Beat.)

But I guess it’s not your fault the old man’s rich, is it, Bill.

(Turns over several cards)

There’s the ace.

(Beat.)

Forget it.

(SATWICZ and Margaret enter, excitedly.)
The resident director. Someone was smoking dope on my floor. We had to hide.

What a bunch of Cooley fireflies..

You hippies suck!

I think somebody's gonna get kicked out of the dorm.

I had to hide in the men's bathroom--in a stall. It was really gross. Who could write that kind of stuff?

It was a guy's john, Margaret.

"Buffalo Bill sat up on a hill and wiped his--"

--Ass--

--With a ten-dollar bill. The grass was so high that it tickled his--

--Balls--

--And he--

--Pissed--

--All over his overalls." There was a lot about farting. That's all guys think about, except for sex. There was a lot about that, too. And gross drawings. Really gross drawings.
METCALF
(Beat.)
Don’t worry, little lady. We’ll get you out in a laundry cart, like in “Escape from Alcatraz.”

MARGARET
Smuggled out in dirty sheets? How gross. How stupid. Anyway if I get caught, I get put on social probation too. I’d never get to see my sweetie.

(She kisses CAVANAUGH.)

CAVANAUGH
We’ll just lay low for a while.

METCALF
“Then Br’er Rabbit, he lay low.” “Born and bred in de briar patch.”
(Beat.)
Should we groove some tunes while we wait for Bliss to get his butt over here? Janis Joplin?

SATWICZ
No. Maybe some of the Claudine Longet?
(Sings with French accent.)
Sunrise, sunset. Sunrise sunset--

CAVANAUGH
(Interrupting.)
My stereo is, as the French say, “merde”

METCALF
Cards then. Margaret, you sit in for Bliss. We need a fourth.

MARGARET
I don’t know how to play.

METCALF
You must know how to play.

CAVANAUGH
She hasn’t had time to learn properly. We’ve been busy.

METCALF
Doing what?
MARGARET
None of your needle-nosed. Actually he taught me a lot.

SATWICZ
I bet. Like what?

MARGARET
Points.

METCALF
Uh-hunh.

MARGARET
Aces are four, kings, three, queens, two, and jacks, one. Doubletons are one, singletons two, and nothings are three.

METCALF
A nothing is usually called--a void.

SATWICZ
Don’t say that word void. I had this dream the other night--

MARGARET
--I love dreams--

SATWICZ
--well, actually I dreamed I had died and—

METCALF
(Interrupting.)

MARGARET
You need about ten points to bid. And there are four suits--diamonds, hearts, spades and clovers.

METCALF
Clubs. Clovers are clubs.

MARGARET
And about tricks.
METCALF
There you go. You can be my partner.

MARGARET
You’ll never be my partner in anything, I most earnestly hope.

METCALF
No need to offend.

MARGARET
You offended all of us when you interrupted Dave.

(Beat.)

I wanted to hear his dream.

CAVANAUGH
Yeah, Dave. Go ahead.

SATWICZ
I had this dream I was dead because I put a finger on my neck and I couldn’t feel a pulse.

METCALF
Reasonable diagnosis. Then what?

(METCALF begins to shuffle.)

SATWICZ
I’m not sure-- I was thinking in French sometimes--But I was wearing a long black robe and carrying a sickle--What’s it called? A skythe?

METCALF
You’re sickle. You don’t pronounce the ‘c’.

SATWICZ
A scythe--like I was Death--only not really.

(Beat.)

I was just a temp.

CAVANAUGH
Amazingly heavy concept for you Satwicz. Like a department store Santa, only a department store Death. Then what?

SATWICZ
I went around touching people and they fell down. Mostly normal stuff. But then I went to Viet-Nam.
Did they speak French there, too?

SATWICZ

Yes, and Vietnamese. Everyone I touched in Viet-Nam disappeared into a red mist. I felt guilty, but I was afraid. Someone wanted to make me disappear. The real Death.

But you were dead.

SATWICZ

I was still Dave. I don’t think those people existed any more. And they weren’t ever going to again.

How could you know that?

MARGARET

Yeah, how?

CAVANAUGH

SATWICZ

I was yelling, “Listen to me, Dave Satwicz, the Ghost of the Christmas Past. You people are history.”

METCALF

What bullshit. Give me the cards. (Begins to deal.) Papist crap. You want to know about the real thing, I’ll tell you about it.

CAVANAUGH

I’m sure.

METCALF

I’ve been to a lot of funerals lately. Every day I go to one.

There is a knock. No one touches the cards. CAVANAUGH goes to the door. It is BLISS.)

CAVANAUGH

Where you been, buddy?

(CAVANAUGH returns to table.)
BLISS sits in chair, takes off army jacket, decorated with the buttons of many political causes.)

BLISS
I stopped by the library to get Feldman to buy some beer and State street’s wall to wall with hippies yelling “Hell No, we won’t go” and “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh.” It was wild.

(Beat.)
So thinking it was your basic non-violent demo, I go with them, but somehow all the windows in the Ann Arbor Bank get knocked in. You know the guy they call Moses?

METCALF
After the food fight last week, he’s kicked out anyway,. Go down Moses. We’re gonna let you people go.

Which Ann Arbor Bank?

CAVANAUGH
Our bank. The Christmas tree bank.

Like at Berkely last week.

SATWICZ

METCALF
Those hippies are nuts. They burned it to the ground.

CAVANAUGH
And all that poor money! Those stocks and bonds.

BLISS
They were trying to light fires with their draft cards. I walked along all the way downtown, until I saw this kid lob a beer at the pigs. They thought it was a Molotov cocktail. Boy were they pissed.

METCALF
Cops. Don’t call them pigs. They’re cops.

You okay, Ron?

MARGARET

BLISS
The tear gas never touched me. I got out over a fence. It was close.
SDS assholes.

Not them.

Who?

Students Against War and Fascism running with the Spartacist Youth League. They're Maoists. Must have been about five hundred. You could smell pot everywhere. Guys were tripping.

You didn't do anything did you?

There was FBI everywhere. I felt like burning my induction notice, though. I would, if I had it to do again.

Your what?

The induction notice I got three days ago. Here.

This I gotta see.

I know it by heart.

Greeting:

(Takes out letter.)

Who says "Greeting," instead of "Greetings"?

Maybe it's a misprint.
“From the President of the United States--

CAVANAUGH
(Interrupting.)

Our Great Helmsman, King Richard the slime-hearted.

METCALF

He’s better than Lyndon, I guess, not that that’s saying much.

BLISS

--Richard M. Nixon, to Ron Bliss. Having submitted yourself to a Local Board composed of your neighbors for the purpose of determining your eligibility for service in the Armed Forces of the United States, you are hereby ordered for induction into the Armed Forces of the United States,

(Beat.)

A little redundant, don’t you think?

MARGARET

Very redundant.

BLISS

“And to report at Fort Wayne Induction Center, 127 Fort Street, Detroit Michigan, on Friday March 13, 1970.”

(Beat.)

There’s a lot of fine print.

SATWICZ

Friday the thirteenth?

BLISS.

“If you have any physical or mental condition which in your opinion may disqualify you for service in the Armed Forces, bring a physician’s certificate--If found qualified, you will be inducted into the Armed Forces.”

(Beat.)

See? Now this time they just say Armed Forces, not the Armed Forces of the United States.

METCALF

What else could it be, Braniac? The Junior Woodchucks?

BLISS

“If found not qualified, return transportation and meals and lodging when necessary will be furnished.”
Right. We’ll take care of your every need.

CAVANAUGH

It’s signed, of course. Selective Service Form two-fifty-two.

BLISS

How impersonal.

MARGARET

How was Fort Wayne, Dave?

BLISS

(To Satwicz)

SATWICZ

It sucked. I passed the physical, too.

(Beat.)

Let’s play some cards, okay? I’d rather not talk about it.

SURE, LITTLE BUDDY. CUT FOR PARTNERS?

Metcalf

I guess.

BLISS

(They each pick a card.

Me and Metcalf. I deal.

(He pulls up chair beside Margaret, gathers cards together, shuffles.)

We playing for money?

METCALF

Pizza.

SATWICZ

Pizza. You’re on.

What about me? I was already playing, I mean I was going to.

(MARGARET)

(Beat.)

Actually I was leaving. I don’t really know how to play. I’ll go to the Women’s Lib meeting.

BLISS

Stay here. Help me bid.
One hand.

We dealt.

What should we do?

Pass. We pass.

A club.

Do you mean one club, Terry? Sometimes you bid one club?

You drive me crazy, Metcalf. Everybody says this. It's not some obscure form of cheating. One club. One.

Thank you. Two diamonds.

Two Diamonds? Not an ordinary, like, one diamond?

Two diamonds.

That's strong, right? You have a partnership understanding?

Generally human beings around here in the United States, which lets out Metcalf, play a minor-suit jump overcall as 17-19 points and a good suit, but those Hideous Hogs who want to play every hand are always making stuff up.

Pass.
What do you think?

I think two hearts.

Pass.

Two spades.

Double.

Hello, Hideous. But it's your style I guess.

I don't know what you mean.

He likes to play every hand.

Ron, could you please not table-talk all the time? I wouldn't accuse you of coffee-housing but I'm--

--We're not coffee-housing, Dave. Just talking among ourselves. Redouble. Partner, please take no inference from our comments about your proclivities.

None taken. I wouldn't.

Partner, what do you say?

Three clubs.
Double!

Redouble.

Oh pass.

Um. Three diamonds.

Doub-ble.

You doubling everything?

My suit? Diamonds?

You’re making it up. Three hearts.

Double.

Will all of you shut up?

This is for pizza. Cut the table talk.

Three French hens.

Well, of course I have to double that.
CAVANAUGH
And you say that I table-talk. Your partner will naturally infer something from the alacrity of that bid. Not to mention the “of course.”

METCALF
Then don’t mention it. You shouldn’t tell everyone to shut up, either, Terry. And three French hens isn’t sufficient till December. So I can double it with impunity. That’s the point, ne c’est pas?

Here’s my point.

Three no.

CAVANAUGH
(Gives METCALF the finger.)

(Beat.)

MARGARET
Please, Terry.

METCALF
(Shows teeth in obvious fake smile)

No what?

CAVANAUGH
No trouble from you, Sigmoid.

SATWICZ
Je proteste--

CAVANAUGH
(Interrupting.)

(Interrupting.)

Three no crump.

METCALF
Pass.

SATWICZ
Pass.

BLISS
I’m afraid we have to double that.

CAVANAUGH
Pass.
This is your I.Q. and sperm-count, Terry. You guys blow dead field mice at three no crump. I would redouble if I could. Pass.

Do I have to listen to this?

Clever bid Satwicz. Where did you come up with that?

Relax--this won’t hurt too much.

Not worse than anything else shoved up your--.

Terry!

Sorry.

So now you bid four clubs after I take out three doubled? It was bad then and now it’s good? You amaze me, Satwicz.

After three French hens? I thought you were offering encouragement. You’re so tense when you play bridge. You should try to enjoy it.

At first you might feel a little bit of discomfort, or pressure, but—

Pass, right?
Right.  
Pass  
Double.  
Pass.  
Pass.  
Pass.  
Four clubs doubled.  
I am to freshen my makeup. Excuse-moi.  
Take your time, Swish. Get me a pop.  
Margaret, you want to try getting out through Cooley again?  
Once is enough. Besides, I want to watch us win.  
Rat patrol’s over, if you want go to the bra-burning.  
No.  
Where’s the beer, Ron?  
I never found Feldman.
What you got?

Not much.

Well what?

Some old Chianti, a little Bacardi, half a bottle of Gallo Chablis, maybe.

How much rum?

About two fingers.

(Beat.)

But I need it for my final crystallization. My unknown won’t dissolve in acetone.

No beer? Maybe I’ll have some of the chablis.

It’s warm. How about some pop?

Margaret, would you like some coke?

Sure.

If you’re gonna get pops, get me one.

You got thirty-five cents?

It’s thirty cents.

It’s thirty-five cents. It’s been thirty-five for a month.
Make mine a Nugrape.

All right. But you have to sing the song.

C'mon.

Sing it.

I got yer Nugrape, nice and fine--

Falsetto.

I got yer Nugrape, nice and fine,
Three rings around the bottle is a genuine.
I got yer ice-cold Nugrape.

Second verse.

Screw you, Dave.

BLISS reaches in pocket for change.
SATWICZ takes it.)

BLISS
Nehi, please. Strawberry Nehi. Or Royal Crown, if that's all there is.

SATWICZ

I got yours, Terry. What do you want?

CAVANAUGH

SATWICZ tables the dummy, exits DL.

CAVANAUGH

Look at that heart suit. Is it biddable, or what?

METCALF

It’s biddable. Three to the king-nine is biddable. You wish.

CAVANAUGH

We’re dead.

METCALF leads a card, which holds the trick and then leads another card. BLISS takes the trick.

A five-one break?

(BLISS leads a card. The trick is taken by METCALF, who collects the three tricks in a pile.)

CAVANAUGH

METCALF

That’s defensive book.

(METCALF leads and collects the next trick.)

That’s down one.

(BLISS leads. METCALF collects trick.)

That’s down two. Then I draw the remaining trumps.

(METCALF leads and collects the next three tricks.)

Down five. Now I find my partner with the ace of diamonds.

(METCALF leads.)

BLISS

Right here, Mr. Metcalf.

(Exposes his hand.)

And my last four cards are good. Nice going, partner.

(BLISS and METCALF shake hands. SATWICZ enters with open drinks DL, sits down again.)

METCALF

What can I do when he opens my suit?
Down ten. The damages are--one, three, five, seven, nine, eleven, thirteen, fifteen, seventeen, nineteen hundred points. Somebody order a pizza.

Strategic bid, Dave.

(He takes cards.)

It’s not over yet. We got a slam coming. I can feel it.

Right.

Thanks for the coke, Dave.

Yeah, thanks, Dave.

No problem.

Here’s to friendship.

(Holds up bottle.)

(Everyone drinks.)

You know, when I’m in ‘Nam getting blown away, I’ll think of you guys, and how great we had it here.

Sure you will. Dorm food. Eight o’clock classes. Screaming idiots everywhere, making it impossible to study.

(Crosses to Window.)

Cooley sucks!

(Returns.)

It beats the hell out of body bags.
The drugs are better over there, anyway.

Yeah. Drugs. The new frontier of warfare.

(Beat.)
The medics give Dexedrine to keep the troops awake, and morphine to kill the pain. Both together and you’ll shoot an M-16 with your leg off.

Pleasant.

You don’t have to worry.

Not any more.

Winchell sucks. Winchell sucks. Winchell Suuuucks

Eat it, Cooley.

So how did your academic probation go, Terry?

With my academic advisor, Norbert Bufka? He had his advising license hanging on the wall. The little creep.

His Suitness tells me I’m gonna get kicked out of school unless I get a three-point-two this semester. And I have to go to study skills. Like I have nothing to do.

This is not good considering my organic chemistry.

You were doing so well.

Well, because of the planning that went into our Christmas tree heist, I was a week behind. I had to do experiments number seven and number eight at the same time, and I boiled them over.
METCALF
I told you to leave that tree alone. It wouldn’t even stand up in your room.

CAVANAUGH
I still got one per cent yield on experiment seven. Most of it soaked into my pants, and I was able to recrystallize it later with plain house-hold vinegar. I’m still working on the other. I hope the fire extinguisher stuff didn’t change the pH.

METCALF
I’ve always admired your experimental technique.
(Beat.)

BLISS
Well, you could still drop the course.

CAVANAUGH
Except for my II-S.

BLISS
You still keep your student deferment.

CAVANAUGH
I’ll get drafted because I’m not making satisfactory progress toward a degree. I talked to the draft people.

SATWICZ
That sucks.

CAVANAUGH
I’m not getting into med school either. Every weenie in the world is applying.
(Beat.)

SATWICZ
Could we like play cards a little more and talk a little less?

BLISS
What about the panty-raid with our comrades at Cooley? Midnight, isn’t it?

METCALF
Joyous thought. I’ve never panty raided. It’s such a lost art in these barbarian days. Raiding whom?
The Virgin-Vault.

CAVANAUGH

We’d never get any pants from those girls.

SATWICZ

Stockwell? Winchell and Cooley are panty-raiding Stockwell?

MARGARET

(Beat.)

Laughing.

CAVANAUGH

You have to be kidding.

CAVANAUGH

No.

METCALF

Let’s play bridge. It’s still early.

CAVANAUGH

Unless you’d like to arm wrestle for the pizza.

SATWICZ

You’re on.

CAVANAUGH

Not me Dave. Them. We’re playing against them.

BLISS

Don’t get me into it.

CAVANAUGH

(To METCALF.)

How about you and me wrestle for it. Not arm wrestle. Wrestle for real.

MARGARET

Terry, I don’t think--

METCALF

(Interrupting.)

Thank you, but no.

CAVANAUGH

I didn’t think you would. Arm wrestle then.
METCALF
For championship of the universe I would consider it.

CAVANAUGH
For pizza and the championship of the universe.

METCALF
( Assumes arm-wrestling position. )

We’re playing bridge for the pizza. Left handed, no putting your body into it, and we lock hands at the wrist.

(Margaret crosses to telephone and dials. BLISS gets up and walks around. SATWICZ Takes shuffled cards and begins dealing.)

Can I talk to Cindy?

(Cavanaugh and Metcalf square off.)

BLISS

(Lifts up pillowcase. Puts it back)

What you got under the pillowcase, Terry? Cockroaches? Hope that screen is on tight.

CAVANAUGH
Don’t say anything to Margaret. It’s for my class.

Championship of the universe, wimp.

METCALF

CAVANAUGH
Let’s go, weenie.

(They arm-wrestle.)

MARGARET
Listen Cindy, you’re not going to believe this. West Quad is coming over for a little hanky-panky, or should I say hanky-panties.

(Beat.)

At midnight. Winchell and Cooley, at least.
See what you can do. Call me back. Eight four seven five six.

I’ve got you, Cavanaugh. Give it up.

Enjoy yourself while you still can, weenie. I’m only using seven percent of my strength so far.

Swish

Republican.

Flower-child.

Agnew look-alike.

Watch this, Bill.

How’s that?

Ow. I got a cramp.

I dealt for Cavanaugh.

(All sit back down. BLISS and MARGARET have changed places. They all look at their cards.)

When do you find out?

I call my friends and neighbors at the draft board to find out. Maybe I can make the credits up in the summer.
METCALF
You’re probably already 1-A. You’re gonna make a great troop.

SATWICZ
Of corpse. Have you seen Cronkheit lately? Somebody bid.

CAVANAUGH
I pass. I don’t watch Walter any more.

BLISS
Yeah, I don’t either. I went to a draft counselor last week.

METCALF
Hell no, you won’t go. You hip-eyes.

BLISS
Wait for your physical. Then we’ll see.

METCALF
I’d go if I was called. Pass.

BLISS
Volunteer then.

CAVANAUGH
He’s going to Wayne State, not Fort Wayne.

BLISS
For real?

METCALF
I haven’t accepted yet.

SATWICZ
Pass.

BLISS
At least one of us got in. Maybe I’d have gotten in too if my uncle was—what—a thoracic surgeon?

METCALF
He’d have written you a letter.
Not with my GPA. Or my M-CATs.

You should have studied.

You can’t. The first question was about Spinoza. The second was some history of art thing--the pyramids. You’d think there’d be science in it.

There was.

Yeah. Kekule structure. Stereochemistry. Redox reactions. It was so hard.

If you didn’t go to political rallies so much, you’d do better in school.

Yeah, right. Honky.

(To MARGARET.)

What would you bid?

Definitely pass.

Throw it in. Agnew deals.

(Metcalf shuffles. The phone rings. CAVANAUGH answers it.)

Hello.

(Beat.)

It’s for you, honey.

(Margaret goes to phone.)

So what did your pinko draft counselor say? No doubt he was loyal to Hanoi.
SATWICZ
She told me I should try to avoid military service if I was actually, in conscience, against the war.

MARGARET
Cindy! How many? Great! Try to get some of the other floors to come along. Get as many girls as you can. How long? Great!
(She hangs up and returns to seat.)

METCALF
It's too late for conscientious objection.

SATWICZ
That's what she said. I should have. I didn't know it would get so bad.

METCALF
You could still try the Coast Guard, or the National Guard.

The what?

MARGARET
Waiting list ten miles long. I called. Besides, it's six years.

METCALF
Then you should just go. Serve the two. Or run to Canada. Or wait it out in jail.
(Deals, slowly.)

BLISS
You can't go to Canada any more. They check your draft card at the border.

METCALF
Glacier Park. It's an eight hour walk.

BLISS
You got an answer to everything don't you? My family's fought in every war since 1812. What about yours?

METCALF
The last two.

BLISS
Where'd your old man fight?
New Jersey. The Second World War ended.

Convenient.

We shouldn’t be in Vietnam at all.

I’m glad you’re not our Secretary of Defense. I dealt and I pass.

The North Vietnamese have fought the South Vietnamese forever. What do we care?

The North Vietnamese are communists. If we get out, all south-east Asia goes red. Not to mention the blood-bath.

I don’t actually give a shit. Why do they have to involve me? Lots of Americans live in the U.S. who are not required to shoot brown-skinned, rice eating peasants in the biggest rubber-producing country in the world. What about all the thirty- and forty-year-olds? What makes them so special? And what about girls? It’s not fair.

You’re nuts, Satwicz. Who said anything was fair.

Not me.

Right on, Dave.

Right on, shit. Grow up. Somebody’s gotta fight for this country. I’m going to have to serve too. I’m eligible until I’m thirty-five. I’m getting a deferment, not an exemption.

Maybe the war’ll end before you leave New Jersey.
BLISS
They’ll make some stooge do it. In the First World War an entire battalion of Frenchmen got ordered to the front. They advanced, bleating like sheep. It was a massacre.

Oui Monsieur General.


Poor little sheep.

They died like men though, didn’t they?

The generals hadn’t fine tuned machine-gun warfare yet. It was more like lemmings.

One diamond.

You gotta suck it up. Until you’re twenty-one you stink. You’re the unwiped butt of humanity.

Gross.

What do you expect? Nothing is fair. If they wanted it to be fair, they’d let us drink.

Or vote.

One heart.

I pass.

Pass. Throw it in

CAVANAUGH

No way. You guys can play it while I finish up my little project.

CAVANAUGH tables the dummy.

BLISS leads. SATWICZ takes trick.

CAVANAUGH pours the contents of the beer bottle into the test tube and begins to heat it with Zippo lighter, using chopsticks, as before.

SATWICZ

Let’s get the kids off the street.

(Takes trick. Leads.)

Drop, queen. Thank you.

(Takes trick. Leads.)

Now what?

(MARGARET gets up and walks over to desk, where she watches CAVANAUGH.)

METCALF

(Takes trick. Leads.)

I wouldn’t burn my draft card if I were you, Dave. You’d make some convict a great wife. Nice scarf.

SATWICZ

Eat my shorts, Bill. Another diamond?

(Takes trick, leads.)

Already had one of those, thanks. The next one is a ruff and a sluff.

METCALF

(Takes trick. Leads.)

Not after this.

SATWICZ

(Takes trick. Leads.)

A tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing. So long as you have the Ace of Clovers, as promised by your opening bid.
BLISS
(Takes trick. Leads.)
I think partner might have bid a tad light. Now I finesse the crown jewels off the dummy to my partner, Hideous Hog.

METCALF
(Takes trick. Leads.)
Come to Hideous. And now the uppercut. Another diamond.

SATWICZ
(Takes trick. Leads.)
I still have a trump.

(There is a small explosion. The players ignore it. While straightening up, CAVANAUGH knocks an envelope from the desk to the floor. MARGARET picks it up.)

METCALF
True enough. Yet you must lose the last trick, being now unable to reach the dummy. Off one.

SATWICZ
Oh big deal. Fifty points.

MARGARET
What's this, Terry?

CAVANAUGH
Just mail.

MARGARET
Aren't you going to open it?

CAVANAUGH
(Continues puttering.)

MARGARET
Busy right now.

MARGARET
(Takes letter to BLISS.)

Look.
Appears to be from selective service.

BLISS

CAVANAUGH

(Returns to table. SATWICZ shuffles.)

Little government details. What if I don’t open it?

CAVANAUGH

Terry!

MARGARET

Join the navy, Terry. My dad did.

BLISS

CAVANAUGH

You can’t get in anymore.

METCALF

What about the Marines?

CAVANAUGH

That’s not funny.

(SATWICZ deals.)

CAVANAUGH

Remember when I told you not to stop going to comparative anatomy?

METCALF

CAVANAUGH

I just couldn’t get up that early.

METCALF

CAVANAUGH

Reveille is early.

Shut up. That rectum, Kluge. He always filled the blackboard up with embryology before the class started and I never could remember my colored pencils.

CAVANAUGH

SATWICZ

CAVANAUGH

A secret textbook. He had one, honest to God, and I didn’t find out until the last week.
A flunk is a flunk. Somebody passed.  


Look, Terry, you can blame other people all you want, but gunners and weenies are not the problem. You didn’t get up for class.  

Do not rub in salt. One spade.  

Don’t bother, Ron. I’m drafted and I’m dead. Two Clubs.  

Please don’t say that Terry.  

Two clubs?  

Sole surviving son? You can get out if--  

--Ron, remember the little kid who comes up to visit with my mom? My brother, Mickey?  

Oh, right.  

You got flat feet or anything? You could perforate an eardrum, if you’re really desperate. You can get it fixed later. Two diamonds.  

Just what I need, dipshit, a hole in my eardrum.  

Three clubs. High blood pressure?
CAVANAUGH

It’s low.

SATWICZ

Maybe you could lose weight.

CAVANAUGH

Not enough.

METCALF

Maybe you could gain weight.

CAVANAUGH

No, thanks.

BLISS

Three hearts. You could go to jail.

MARGARET

No.

CAVANAUGH

You could do the peanut butter thing.

BLISS

The what?

MARGARET

Peanut butter thing. You don’t bathe for a month and then you spread peanut butter in your butt-crack.

BLISS

Butt-crack?

MARGARET

Butt-crack. My draft counselor said it has a really high success rate, especially when you stick live insects in the peanut butter, and eat a dab of it in front of the psychiatrists.

CAVANAUGH

No one would do that. Pass.
SATWICZ
To save your life they would. There were guys at the physical in nylons and eye-
makeup.

In nylons?

CAVANAUGH

SATWICZ
And girdles. Carrying purses.

WINCHELL FAGS. WINCHELL FAGS.

VOICE OFFSTAGE

METCALF
(He moves to window.)

Bite the hairy root, Cooley.

(He returns.)

Did they get off?

SATWICZ
Hell no. There was a guy in hip-huggers and a halter-top shooting up heroin in the
bathroom who didn’t get off either. They figured boot camp would straighten him
out.

METCALF
They take guys like that into the army?

SATWICZ
At the end they stand the inductees up on a line and they have take a step forward.
Then they make them take the oath.

MARGARET
(To BLISS.)

SATWICZ
Not yet. That was just the dry run for me. These guys had induction letters.

CAVANAUGH

Yeah Ron.
BLISS
My dad wants me to join the Air Force like in World War Two.

CAVANAUGH
I could’ve fought that. A good clean fight.

BLISS
Not according to him. Anyway, I guess it’s join up or never go home again. And my Dad works two jobs so I can go to school. It sucks.

SATWICZ
We could all resist. Try for a late CO’s.

CAVANAUGH
They’d make us all medics. I can’t get one, though.

METCALF
Why not?

CAVANAUGH
My pastor, whom I haven’t seen in some years, won’t write me a letter. And you can’t get a CO without one.

(Beat.)

Who bid last?

METCALF
You did. You passed three hearts.

CAVANAUGH
Oh right, I did.

METCALF
Three no trump. So are you going to open the letter or not?

CAVANAUGH
No. I know what it is. I was just kidding around. My mom already opened it--see, it’s taped.

(MARGARET opens letter.)

Terry!
CAVANAUGH
It’s just an information form. They want to know what courses I’m taking. No big deal. Not like Dave and Ron.

MARGARET
This is an induction letter, just like Ron’s.

SATWICZ
He’s in denial.

CAVANAUGH
Dave, would you please shut up with the psych one-oh-one shit. I haven’t even appealed yet. Anything could happen. But I’ll tell you one thing. I’m not going. Even my mom says I didn’t have to go. I’m going to Canada.

MARGARET
Oh, Terry.

CAVANAUGH
It’ll work out.

BLISS
(Beat.)
I’m dummy. I’ll order the pizza. Pizza Bob’s okay?

SATWICZ
Sure.

CAVANAUGH
It might not be open.

METCALF
Why not?

CAVANAUGH
Pizza Bob died of a heart attack on Monday. They had pictures of the funeral in the paper.

(Beat.)
The pallbearers all wore Pizza Bob shirts.

MARGARET
That nice man? He died? He wasn’t very old.
You don’t have to be old.

CAVANAUGH

What do you know about it?

METCALF

It’s like going to a funeral every day.

SATWICZ

What do you mean?

METCALF

Gross Anatomy class—Ron I told you--the first day I had just gotten--

BLISS

Don’t tell them.

METCALF

--There I was, congratulating myself for being allowed to take the class—I mean it’s a grad class—and I’m the first one there. For ten minutes I’m there alone.

CAVANAUGH

(Sings.)

“I was working in the lab, late one night, and my eyes beheld an eerie sight—“

It’s not funny. Forty people on steel tables.

(Beat.)

All nude. They had shaved their heads! A few were in their twenties and thirties. All wrapped up in clear plastic, dripping a little of the embalming fluid.

(Beat.)

No names, just the causes of death. One woman had been shot. You could see the place on her head where the bullet went in. She was a pretty corpse as corpses go.

(Beat.)

But they didn’t seem dead until I saw where their skulls were sawed. There were little porcelain pots and you could look in and see their brains floating, naked.

(Beat.)

I felt so sorry—for them. But boy, was I glad that it wasn’t me.

(Beat.)

And then I realized, after a week or so that, I am exactly like them. Exactly. Except that their time had come and gone and mine hadn’t yet.

(Beat.)

First we took the skin off.
That’s sick.

METCALF

You have to. Eventually we cut the faces in half and cut off the fingers, the nipples, and the penises.

SATWICZ

My Lord.

METCALF

You know what day they had scheduled to study the heart?

BLISS

Valentines Day.

METCALF

People who run the lab have a sense of humor.

MARGARET

That’s horrible.

METCALF

The first day, the whole class realized at the same time, as they had their arms up to the elbow in human grease that there was a drawback to this doctor stuff.

MARGARET

That’s the grossest thing I’ve ever heard.

METCALF

Why do you think they call it gross anatomy?

(Everyone by now is studying their cards carefully. BLISS crosses to phone.)

SATWICZ

Leading the five of clovers.

(METCALF plays a card from dummy. CAVANAUGH seems to have trouble deciding on a card.)
BLISS
Could I get an extra-large vegetarian pizza please? Um, mushroom, sweet peppers, extra cheese. No I’m sure we don’t want any meat. I’m on the fourth floor of Winchell house in West Quad. Room 423.

(He moves to window, dropping the receiver.)

Hey look, guys. There’s a big demonstration or something outside. I don’t see any signs, though. Long hairs. Must be that same bunch of hippies.

(Beat.)

No. It’s a crowd of women.

METCALF
Are they burning their bras?

(He notices an insect.)

Oh my God! Aaugh!

WOMENS VOICES OFFSTAGE
Winchell Wipers! Winchell Wipers! Winchell Wipers!

MARGARET
What’s that thing?

(METCALF retreats, leaping to desk.)

Bugs?!

WOMEN’S VOICES OFFSTAGE
Pants! Pants! Pants!

BLISS
It’s a bunch of girls. Panty raiding us. I can’t believe it.

MARGARET
(Climbs on chair, finds bugs on it.)

Cockroaches!

(She runs to dresser and discovers more bugs. She runs to the desk top.)

Kill them!

(SATWICZ uses a rolled up Playboy, CAVANAUGH, the newspaper, and BLISS, a flyswatter to conduct a cockroach search and destroy mission, sweeping the stage L to R. METCALF, wearing goggles, uses the chopsticks to take a pair of undershorts from hamper
to the window. It is like a flag. When
they reach C, they freeze. Fade to
Black.)

THE END
STATIC
A One-Act Play
by
Douglas Engebretsen
CHARACTERS

ZUMSTEIN, mid thirties: a taxi dispatcher
FARGO, mid thirties: a taxi driver
ELLA, mid twenties: a phone answerer
BECKELHEIMER, early forties: owner of the taxi company
RADIO, miscellaneous voices
RICO, mid thirties: a taxi driver

SCENES

Scene One. SETTING: a Yellow Taxi dispatch office. Time: a busy football Saturday, 5 AM.

Scene Two. SETTING: The same. TIME: a few minutes later.
A One-Act Play

by

Douglas Engebretsen

Scene One

The main set approximates a small Ann Arbor taxicab office: a dispatch desk equipped with a coffee cup, a two-way radio, (off-stage actors will speak over a public address system for the radio voices, or perhaps one actor, doing all the voices will be hidden in the set) a telephone, a microphone, a steel-backed map with numbered magnets, and a wastebasket. Near the DR corner of the desk there is a large goldfish bowl or fish tank. There is a small table adjoining (L) the desk, (or at the L side of the desk, if it is big enough) and a small telephone console. Fifteen feet DR there is a small table with a Mr. Coffee. A taxicab-set is far DL.

Setting: Yellow Taxi dispatch office. Time: 5AM on a busy football Saturday.

(Lights up. ZUMSTEIN feeds the fish as ELLA, seated, files her nails, and RICO paces.)

ZUMSTEIN

Suppertime, Elizabeth. Don’t hide now. I see you in the treasure box, sweetie.

ELLA

Not again.

ZUMSTEIN

I have to feed her. How would you like to become hors devours for your close relatives? Think of it.

ELLA

Picture myself as a guppy hiding from my mother?

ZUMSTEIN

She’s gonna have them any day now. You never know, with guppies. They have such enormous appetites. The last time she got them all.
RICO
Not to change the subject, but can I still get in the football pool?

ZUMSTEIN
(He rubs his hands together.)

Funny what a bruised thumb can do to the point spread.

Ten bucks?

RICO

ZUMSTEIN
I don’t want to take your money, Rico.

RICO gives him a bill. ZUMSTEIN puts it away and rummages for a sheer of paper, which he marks and puts away.

RICO
Call the roll, will you? It’s gotta be five o’clock.

ZUMSTEIN
That clock’s thirty seconds fast.

RADIO
Nineteen. Nineteen.
(Considerable static.)

Good morning, Nineteen.

ZUMSTEIN
(Keys mike.)

KQA seven-three-six. It’s five AM. That you, Heinrich?

RADIO
Good morning, Nineteen.

ZUMSTEIN
(Drinking coffee.)

Good morning, one-nine. Any other 5AMs?

RADIO
Two-seven. Three-four.
Good morning, Two-seven. Good morning Three-four. Anyone else?

Number Seven. Fifteen. Number Nine.

Number Nine, Fifteen and Seven. Anybody else?

Number Seven.

Go ahead, number Seven.

Can I get a Band-Aid for Grbac's thumb?

That all depends. Do you want the stars and stripes or the Disney characters?

Stars and stripes.

That we can do. You want the small package or the big?

Either one you got.

But there's no more six pointed stars.

Come on.

Sorry. These have seven points on them.

I'll take it.
Number Nine.

Go ahead, Number Nine.

I want to buy a vowel.

How many mumbling mice will be making midnight music in the moonlight?

One hundred would be mighty nice.

Done. Anybody else call? I’m out.

(RADIO crosses to Mr. Coffee and pours a cup. Lights come up on taxicab set. FARGO, shoeless and shirtless, enters L, sits behind wheel, and keys mike)

Good morning, two-eight. Good morning two-eight.

(ZUMSTEIN returns to desk)

You’re late, two-eight. Bring it in, Fargo. You’re two minutes late and I got somebody waiting for that cab. Did you copy, Two-eight? Bring it down.

No way, man.

You know the rules.

(Beat.)

You’re late for your five AM, and Rico gets your cab. He’s been down here since four thirty.
I got rent.

(Beat.)

Hey, Paul, I’m really stuck. If I don’t come up with one hundred thirty-eight dollars for the landlady, I’m gonna be in the shelter by Tuesday. Have a heart. She’s trying to move in some guy who’ll pay two-fifty.

ZUMSTEIN

I have been in similar circumstances, Stanley, but not for a while, lucky for me. (Beat.)

But we have used up way too much air time on this problem already. The 5AM rule is clear, is it not? And I have orders on the board--On the hospital stand, number Nine, get the hospital front.

RADIO

Fifteen, Union.

ZUMSTEIN

Fifteen at the Union, pick it up going to North Campus.

RADIO

Number seven, Hayward.

ZUMSTEIN

Number Seven, get nine-thirty-eight Pomona going to the Gandy Dancer--And Two-eight?

Right, Two-eight.

FARGO

Pick up the boss on his way down here.

ZUMSTEIN

It’s gonna have to be a while.

FARGO

Why’s that, two-eight?

ZUMSTEIN

The power steering fluid is low in this thing, and the hood sticks. I’m sure you got somebody closer, Paul.
But nobody coming down here, now, do I?

(ZUMSTEIN drains coffee. FARGO exits L.)

You picked up, Two-seven? Follow with eight-thirteen Persimmon. I need a cab around the depot.

RADIO

Nineteen, at fourteen-hundred Broadway.

ZUMSTEIN

I got Nineteen on Broadway hill. Anyone else?

RADIO

Three-four at Angelo’s. Number Nine, Two-seven.

ZUMSTEIN

And Three-four. Nineteen, look for Martha going to the hill dorms.

(Beat.)

And the train’s in, drivers. I need another cab around the depot and one around the bus. I got Three-four. Anyone downtown? Right, number Nine. Right, Two-seven. Anyone else?

RADIO

At the bus, Three-four.

ZUMSTEIN

Three-four, you’re there; pick it up, going west side, and number Nine, follow with the bus for Julia coming back at you. I’m out.

(ZUMSTEIN pours coffee, grimaces. FARGO, dressed in army pants and a sweatshirt, re-enters taxi, eating a bowl of cereal. He keys mike.)

FARGO

Two-eight.

(ZUMSTEIN hurries back, spilling coffee.)
Two-eight, you ready?

FARGO
You should send somebody else for Beckelheimer. I know you got somebody closer.

ZUMSTEIN
Did you get your order?

FARGO
I have to let the car warm up.

ZUMSTEIN
Take your time. Everyone likes to get in a warm car.

FARGO
The power steering fluid is low.

ZUMSTEIN
Add some. The boss likes his power steering fluid all the way up. Nothing like taking care of the equipment. You know old Burt.

FARGO
It might take me a few minutes. The hood’s so warped I can hardly get it up at all. Hasn’t been the same since I hit the deer.

ZUMSTEIN
That’s another thing.

FARGO
Did you see what he did to the car? He had horns like a moose.

ZUMSTEIN
You ought to give the little animals a chance. Little orphan fawn.

FARGO
It was I-94 and he was twenty feet away and I’m doing 70. Lucky he didn’t take my head off.

(ZUMSTEIN drains coffee. FARGO exits L.)
ZUMSTEIN
Shut up Fargo. I have business to transact here. You find your passenger, Two-seven? Follow with eight-thirteen Organ Grinder Footpath. I need a cab around the depot.

RADIO
Nineteen, at fourteen-hundred Broadway.

ZUMSTEIN
(Drinking coffee.)

How come you don’t want to give Beckelheimer a ride to work, Fargo?

FARGO
Well, considering the deal with Garzunga yesterday--

ZUMSTEIN
His name’s Hongista. Deborah read the name on his badge. He got real wild in the office.

FARGO
How was I supposed to know he was a cop? He was driving an old Ford pickup, wearing this baseball cap, and here I was in the wrong lane at the light at Fifth and Liberty, and when I politely signaled my intentions to change lanes, he resisted my attempts to accelerate so I shot ahead of him before we got to the light at Washington, and inevitably had to cut him off a little roughly.

ZUMSTEIN
(He examines a new slip of paper carefully.)

Very interesting, Stanley.

FARGO
Right. Anyway, I could see in the rearview mirror that he was getting a little emotional, so I signaled a parley--

ZUMSTEIN
I heard you flipped him off. Was this before or after you ditched him?

FARGO
Right. But he didn’t seem like a cop.

ZUMSTEIN
He was driving a Ford Bronco with handcuffs over the rear-view, wasn’t he?
 Didn’t see them.

And his hat. He had it in the back window. Big shiny badge.

I was ahead of him most of the time. I never saw any of it.

You’re lucky Deborah lied for you. You owe her.

I’m taking her to the Mongolian Barbecue, aren’t I? And then Bingo.

How romantic.

You shouldn’t have flashed that finger noise to him, though. He was snorting around here like a wild boar looking for poor little Stanley Fargo, who except for Deborah would lose his license, and thus his warm place to sleep.

They could be monitoring the band.

I won’t turn you in, Two-eight, but only if you bring that cab in, now, right now, and if you get me some half-and-half on the way. You can forget about Beckelheimer. He cancelled the time order.

Okay, drivers. I have a few orders here. I need a cab for the Gandy Dancer, a cab for Arrowwood, one around the ER, three cabs deep east, and the phones are ringing. Anybody hit a stand?

(Lights fade to black. Music: “Hail to the Victors.” Gradual music fade.)
Scene Two: The dispatch office, a few minutes later.

(Lights up. FARGO enters L, carrying a carton of half-and-half. Making a face, he hands keys to RICO. ZUMSTEIN takes the half-and-half, pours half of it into his coffee. He drinks.)

Thank you. I appreciate it.

ZUMSTEIN

Is there something to drive?

FARGO

I need a cab for Detroit.

ZUMSTEIN

(Keying mike.)

Give me the order!

ZUMSTEIN

Need a cab deep east.

FARGO

Don’t all call at once.

ZUMSTEIN

Do it again.

(Radio)

Somebody with a nine? Do it again, I didn’t get it. Was that you, coming out on the Burrwood, six nine?

RADIO

Number Nine, Holiday East.

ZUMSTEIN

Right, number Nine. I have number Nine at the Holiday East. Anybody closer?

(Beat.)

Okay, number Nine. Get the Vamp coming back on the VA. It’s a rush. Do what you can.

(Beat.)
You wouldn’t have gotten it anyway. Closest cab always gets the blood. I’m not going to let some poor veteran of the foreign wars croak because you need to make rent.

I was deep east.

I love the blood.

FARGO

(Beat.)

ZUMSTEIN

Look, Fargo, everybody else lives too. Anyway, there’s got to be something out there.

FARGO

The lot’s empty. Except five-five with a blown header.

(Beat.)

Don’t you drive today?

ZUMSTEIN

I need the money too.

FARGO

I mean big deal, I was only two minutes late.

ZUMSTEIN

Yeah. But you were late.

FARGO

You’re in six-eight, aren’t you?

ZUMSTEIN

Brand new car, too. If I have to put up with one-hundred-four-thousand maniac football fans moving at two miles an hour, at least I have a clean-running machine with a decent radio. Yes, I’m in six-eight.

FARGO

It has a Blaupunkt. Look, you can have two-eight on Tuesday and Thursday next week if I can use six-eight today.

ZUMSTEIN

There might be someone who forgets to come out at seven. I’ll put you on the waiting list.
FARGO

You bet.

(Long beat. He takes out a quarter and flips it.)

How about some speed chess? It's pretty slow until seven. Look, I'll bet you fifty bucks. Against the use of six-eight for the next twenty-four hours. Even up.

ZUMSTEIN

Fifty bucks? You're kidding. Against me? Don't you ever learn anything?

(FARGO nods.)

You're on, Stanley. Let me get this order out--Number nine on the Union, pick up the League going to Willowtree lane--Ella, can you sit in for a minute? I'll be right here if it gets busy. It's not six yet.

ELLA

Just for a minute, okay?

(ELLA sits primly at desk, as ZUMSTEIN removes chess pieces, board, and chess clock from the desk. ELLA answers phone.)

ELLA

Yellow Cab.

(Beat)

Where are you? Where? Speak louder, sir? Three two five? Going where? Thank you, sir: Your cab will be there in about five minutes.

(She writes on slip. ZUMSTEIN finds two folding chairs. He and FARGO set up the board on DR corner of the desk.)

Yellow Cab. Yes. Where are you? Going to? Maple Ridge? Five minutes.

(She writes on slip. ZUMSTEIN and FARGO set up the board during the following exchange.)

What's the score?

ZUMSTEIN

Three-eighty-four to four-sixteen.

FARGO
I thought it was three-eighty-three to four-sixteen. The last one was a draw, remember?

No. what--

I traded two rooks for a queen and got a stalemate. I was white--you played the chopped liver--

--Oh, right. I should have won, though. I didn’t see the check on king six.

(The pieces are now set up.)

Okay, three-eighty-four to four-sixteen, your advantage. Would you like white?

(FARO holds out both hands. ZUMSTEIN taps FARO’s right hand, revealing a white pawn.)

Well done, Mr. Karpov.

(FARO sets clock)

Shall we say--?

(FARO sets clock)

Shall we say five minutes?

Five minutes apiece. Hit the clock with the same hand that moves the pieces. Illegal moves lose, we snap off kings, and you have to call the flag to win on time.

Okay.

(They shake hands. ZUMSTEIN moves. FARO winces.)

That move?

Yellow Cab.

(Writes a slip.)

Pawn to King four. So what?

You always open pawn to Queen four. Are you trying to tell me something?
Like what, Fargo?

Take your time. You have five minutes.

I remember this move.

I remember this move.

ZUMSTEIN
(Beat.)

FARGO
(Moves.)

ELLA
Yellow Cab, may I help you. No, sir, I can’t.

(Hangs up.)

FARGO
(Moves. Captures pawn.)

Let’s get the kids off the street.

Right. You know the Scheveningen?

Like my landlady. Are you gonna play it?

(Captures pawn.)

I’ve seen your landlady.

(They play until FARGO captures pawn.)

Crash!

ZUMSTEIN
None of that crypto-Fisher stuff. That was a sacrifice.
ZUMSTEIN moves.

FARGO
And I'm Fred Rogers. Would you like to be my neighbor?

ZUMSTEIN
Don't start that nerd stuff, Fargo. Just play the game normal.

FARGO
Okay, Mr. Moose.

Ella
Yellow Cab, may I help you?
I'm not sure how long. Yellow Cab.

ZUMSTEIN
Ah, ha! The dragon bishop springs to life.

FARGO
A diversion. Look at your queenside pawns.

ZUMSTEIN
I beg your pardon?

FARGO
Look at them!

Ella
Drivers, I need several cabs eastside now, and one downtown. Anybody around Pheasant Run?
RADIO

Three-four, Packard/Platt.

ELLA

Right, three-four. Anybody else? Just a minute, drivers.

(Answers phone.)

Yellow Cab, can you hold? Yellow Cab.

(She scribbles slips quickly.)

ZUMSTEIN

Notice I have consolidated my center--maintained the initiative.

FARGO

Except you’re down a pawn and three quarters of a minute.

ZUMSTEIN

All in good time, my pretty.

(Captures pawn.)

And the material’s now even.

ELLA

Paul, I think you’re going to have to help me here.

ZUMSTEIN

Not now.

(FARGO moves.)

ELLA

No, really, Paul. The phone’s ringing off the hook.

(Answers phone.)

Yellow Cab. Oh, hi, Lorrene. Going to work? Oh, a few minutes.

(Writes slip, hangs up.)

RADIO

Three-four.

ELLA

(Hangs up.)

Right, three-four. Anybody else? Three-four, get thirty-eight fifty-four Partridge Path going to the hospital.
That one’s been around since Noah’s Ark.

(FARGO holds up knight, moves it.)

FARGO

This one is Noah’s big sister, Doah. See this knight?

(FARGO holds up knight, moves it.)

ZUMSTEIN

I see it, Fargo. It’s a doomed knight. A knight of extremely woeful countenance. Only a dog would go out on a knight like this. It is a dark and stormy knight. This knight has been crusading too long. It is about to be stripped of its rusty underwear. It is a late knight.

(ZUMSTEIN moves FARGO moves.)

FARGO

No, it is an early morning. And I’m Sugar Pops Pete, the Prairie Pup.

Please don’t do that.

(ZUMSTEIN Moves.)

FARGO

You started it. Talking about my knight like that.

(Moves, singing.)

“Oh, the pops are sweeter and the taste is new./They’re shot with sugar, through and through---”

ZUMSTEIN

(Moves, humming to the tune of Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries.”)

---Na na na nah nah, na na na nah nah---

FARGO

(Moves, singing simultaneously with ZUMSTEIN.)

---Kell-ogg’s Sugar Corn Pops, Sugar Pops are tops—oh, the Pops are sweeter and the taste is new, they’re shot with sugar, through and through--
---Na na na nah nah, na na na nah nah---

FARGO
Pick a pack of Cheerios, pick a pack of Jets, pick a pack of Trix-----Pick a pack of Kix, and Wheaties, too--

ZUMSTEIN
(Moves.)
Please, Fargo, you know how your voice upsets me. It has no tonal quality.

FARGO
(Capturing rook.)
And in your Schmertz, you have managed to hang your rook.

ZUMSTEIN
You think the exchange worth the main monarch, villain?
(Captures knight.)
Boinga boinga! Riposte! Arrivederci Gomez!

ELLA
I need five cabs eastside now, drivers.

FARGO
(Moves, sings.)
-- the choice is up to you, in the Betty Crocker Pick-a-pack package.

RADIO
Nine, three-four, two-seven.
(Static/interference.)
ELLA
Don't all talk at once, drivers. Let me call all the orders, please. I need five cabs eastside, two downtown and one around the hospital.

FARGO
A good move is a quick move here.
(FARGO moves.)

ZUMSTEIN
True enough.
The same hand, Zumstein.

FARGO

The same hand as what?

ZUMSTEIN

FARGO

Hit the clock with same hand you move with, please.

ZUMSTEIN

I did.

ZUMSTEIN

You did not.

ZUMSTEIN

When?

ZUMSTEIN

Three moves ago.

ZUMSTEIN

The queen move?
FARGO

No, that was four moves ago. The knight capture on bishop five.

(FARGO moves.)

ZUMSTEIN

I didn’t.

(ZUMSTEIN moves.)

FARGO

Yes, you did.

(FARGO moves.)

ZUMSTEIN

You’re seeing things, Fargo. I took off the pawn with my right hand and put down the knight with my left hand, and then I punched the clock with my right hand.

(ZUMSTEIN moves.)

FARGO

No, you didn’t. You took off the pawn with your left hand, put down the knight with your right hand, and punched with your right hand, which means you moved and punched with different hands.

(FARGO moves.)

ZUMSTEIN

(Moves.)

You’re seeing things, Fargo.

FARGO

I got fifty bucks on this, you know.

FARGO

ZUMSTEIN

And I put up six-eight, remember? The cab I’ll be driving today after I make short work of your pathetic pawn structure.

(FARGO moves, ZUMSTEIN moves, FARGO moves.)

FARGO

A legend in his own dreams.
ELLA
Yellow Cab. Will you hold, please? Yellow Cab. Will you hold, please? Yellow Cab.

(Scribbles on slip.)

Help me, Paul.

ZUMSTEIN

Just a minute.

(ZUMSTEIN moves.)

Please, Paul.

ELLA

Just a minute Ella, This’ll just take a second.

ZUMSTEIN

FARGO

Check.

(Moves.)

What?

ZUMSTEIN

Check.

FARGO

Paul.

ELLA

Fargo, that’s *not* a check.

ZUMSTEIN

Queen check. Gardez la dame, monsieur!

FARGO

Take that.

(ZUMSTEIN moves, does not punch clock.)
Three-four, number Nine, Two-seven.

RADIO

Just a minute, drivers. Paul, dammit, I got orders coming out my . . .

ELLA

Illegal move!

FARGO

No way. I adjust.

ZUMSTEIN

Yellow Cab.

ELLA

Cheater. You do that all the time. See how neat my pieces are, set on the center of the squares, and how your pieces are all over the place. I can’t figure out what square your king is on half the time. Typical.

FARGO

(Moves.)

So, what’s the real deal about Hongista?

ELLA

(Moves.)

Yellow cab. Yes sir. We run Twenty-four hours a day--every day.--Of the year, sir.

ZUMSTEIN

Don’t bring that up. Pawn takes pawn.

ELLA

(Yellow cab. Yes sir. We run Twenty-four hours a day--every day.--Of the year, sir.

FARGO

(Beat.)

(FARGO moves.)
ELLA

Yes, I like the sound of your voice too, sir--No, I’m sorry, sir--
(Beat.)

Creep! No, not you, ma’am, sorry.

ZUMSTEIN

(Sings. Moves.)

Gold doubloons and pieces of eight / Handed down to Applegate/ The chest is here, but wait/--Check--Where are those gold doubloons and pieces of eight?

FARGO

I love Disney. (Sings) A dream is a wish your heart makes/ when you’re fast asleep/ in dreams-- Queen takes Rook, check.

(FARGO moves.)

ELLA

I mean it, Paul. I have orders all over town. I can’t get anything out because the phone keeps ringing. Please. Stop playing and help me.

ZUMSTEIN

(Moves.)

We’ll just be another few seconds, Ella.

ELLA

I don’t care what you do. I’m getting myself a cup of coffee.

(She walks to the Mr. Coffee, examines pot, and shakes her head in disbelief.)

(Beat. FARGO moves.)

You drank all the coffee?

(Loud and slow)

You drank all the coffee?

(Beat.)

And I’m sitting there doing your work as well as mine.

ZUMSTEIN

(Moves.)

You can make some more, Ella.

ELLA

Make some more! What am I, some kind of coffee drudge? Some household menial? I am a professional phone answerer.
This is going to be an interesting endgame.

(FARGO moves.)

This move is forced.

(ZUMSTEIN moves.)


(ELLA walks back behind desk, shaking her head.)

ELLA

Just a second, drivers. Yellow Cab, will you hold? Yellow Cab, will you hold? Yellow Cab, may I help you?

(ZUMSTEIN)

Even again. And one minute apiece. I love my position.

(FARGO)

(Moves rook left, capturing pawn.)

Snicker.

(ZUMSTEIN)

(Captures pawn.)

Snack.

And now the windshield-wiper action of the rook.

(Moves rook to right.)

Ooh. Take your time. Fifty bucks!

(Fargo hesitates, then moves. Zumstein moves, rubs hands in anticipation.)

Goodbye, Queenie.
Goodbye, Fargo's queenie.

ZUMSTEIN

(ZUMSTEIN captures queen.)

All on the clock.

FARGO

(FARGO captures queen.)

Run, critters.

ZUMSTEIN

(ZUMSTEIN moves.)

Oop-oop-oop.

FARGO

(Moves.)

You can run, but you can't hide.

ZUMSTEIN

(ZUMSTEIN moves.)

Allouette, gentille allouette--

ELLA

I'm getting coffee water!

ZUMSTEIN

(Fine, Ella.

(Ella exits L.)

RADIO


ZUMSTEIN

(Coming to himself.)

I gotta take care of this, Fargo. Stop the clock.

(Stops clock.)
FARGO

Stop the clock! You have five possible moves and there’s fifteen seconds left and you want to stop the clock? You must be crazy!

ZUMSTEIN

(He sits at desk.)

Just for a minute. Sorry, drivers, we had a small technical problem. Anybody hit a stand?

RADIO

On the union, nine. Hayward, two-seven.

(Static/interference.)

RADIO

Union, nine, on the Hayward, two-seven.

(ZUMSTEIN moves magnets.)

RADIO

On the Joe, Six-oh.

RADIO

On the St. Joe stand, Six-oh.

RADIO

On the main, Nineteen. Liberty, Three-four.

ZUMSTEIN

(Moves magnets.)

Gotcha, Nineteen and Three-four. Anybody else? Nine on the union get Trotter house to the bus. On the Hayward, Two-seven, get the music school for the dime lady. On the Henry and good morning, George, pick up Lorrene. Six-oh, get—Nineteen, get three-two-five fifth one going downtown, and on the liberty Three-four get the Elks going to Mapleridge. You rolling, Rico?

RADIO

Dunkin’ Donuts, Two-eight.

ZUMSTEIN

Two-eight, get the regular at Cranbrook going to Bursley.
Way over there?

Can’t help it, Two-eight, it’s a time order. Do what you can.

Here, Ella.

What about the other ten orders?

Yellow Cab. Yes, I know. We’re pretty busy down here. It’ll probably be another five minutes. We’re getting callbacks and the lines are all lit up.

We’ll just be thirty seconds more.

The denouement, Monsieur, en garde!

What? That move? You were thinking while the clocks were stopped! Admit it!

I admit it. Now what?

I have this in reserve. And then punt for a little time.

It comes down to manual dexterity.

You think it’s for nothing I play jacks? Do you think I knit sweaters because I’m bored? These are talented fingers. Watch and learn from them.
Illegal move!

ZUMSTEIN

FARGO

I didn’t punch! Lucky for me. I take it back.

(FARGO moves and punches clock.)

ZUMSTEIN

(Moves pawn.)

Who’s the cheater now?

(Sings, to the tune of “When Johnny comes Marching Home.”)

The pawns go marching one by one, hurrah, hurrah--

Block with the knight.

FARGO

(FARGO moves knight.)

ZUMSTEIN

(Moves.)

Get outta here.

FARGO

Kill the knight. Drink his blood.

(FARGO captures knight)

ZUMSTEIN

Cry Havoc! And slip the dogs of war. Fifty bucks!

(ZUMSTEIN captures bishop. At this point they capture whenever possible, until they are down to king against king and pawn.)

Resign!

ZUMSTEIN

(Moves.)
Are you crazy? This is for money!

ZUMSTEIN

Resign!

FARGO

You'll never queen that pawn.

(FARGO moves.)

Watch me.

(ZUMSTEIN moves.)

Look at your flag. Look! Look!

(FARGO points to clock, moves.)

Not as bad as yours.

FARGO

Go ahead. Go for the win. You have time. Lots of time.

(Both players move.)

Block with the king.

FARGO

Gain the opposition.

ZUMSTEIN

Check.

(Both players move.)

Gain the opposition.

(Both players move.)

Check.
Block with the king.

FARGO

(Both players move.)

Death! The king is dead. I win. Give me the keys.

FARGO drops king in fishbowl, holds out his hand.

ZUMSTEIN

Are you crazy? You can’t do that.

FARGO

Yes, I can. You can take a king with a king if the other guy doesn’t catch the illegal check.

ZUMSTEIN

Not if I haven’t punched yet! It’s still my move.

(Reaches for and upsets bowl.)

Wups!

ELLA

What are you guys doing?

(Loud knock offstage. ZUMSTEIN searches floor, picks up guppy, fills bowl with water from pitcher, takes ELLA’s place. ELLA goes back to her chair.)

BECKELHEIMER

(Knocking offstage R.)

Somebody better let me in!

(Fargo sweeps chess pieces into wastebasket.)

Who locked the door?

(Fargo grabs mop from behind desk and starts to mop up mess.)

ZUMSTEIN

Who called? Not a word, Ella. Not a word.
We’ll work out the financial details later.

(ELLA breathes on nails.)

Let me in!

(Fargo crosses to R--exits, then enters, R with Beckelheimer.)

Sorry. We didn’t know it was locked.

What’s going on here? Aren’t you supposed to be in two-eight?

Rico’s in it. I’m first on the list.

How come I couldn’t get in on the phone? I had to drive down here.

It’s been real busy, Burt. You know these football Saturdays.

At six o’clock? And why is the floor all wet?

I didn’t have anything to do while I was waiting, so I decided to mop up.

Yeah, Burt. It’s been real crazy.

Mac’s wife called and said he’s throwing up blood. You’re gonna have to stick around for a while, Paul.

What? Mac is not sick. He just doesn’t want to do his shift. Throwing up blood doesn’t cut it. The Michigan State game he was in a coma with meningitis. He was passing kidney stones for Iowa.
BECKELHEIMER
Come on, Paul. He’s covered for you before. Remember New Year’s? Be fair.

ZUMSTEIN
How long is “for a while.”

BECKELHEIMER
When I can find another dispatcher to take over--

ZUMSTEIN
But I’m scheduled. It’s the Ohio State game. I need to drive. I got six-eight, it’s the Ohio State game. I need--

BECKELHEIMER
I need you here.

ZUMSTEIN
What a bite in the ass.

BECKELHEIMER
Watch your mouth.

(To Fargo)

Take six-eight.

ZUMSTEIN
That’s my car!

BECKELHEIMER
It’s my car, Paul. I got the title and that’s it.

FARGO
Thank you, thank you.

ZUMSTEIN hands him the keys reluctantly. FARGO and BECKELHEIMER exit. A long pause as ELLA files her nails and ZUMSTEIN paces, rubbing his face.)

ELLA
How’s your fish?
Oh no.

Try to relax! Don’t push! Breathe!

I’m coming.

One left. I saved one, this time. Elizabeth I have saved your--son.

I shall name him—

Achilles. I shall name him “Achilles.”

The mighty Achilles.

ZUMSTEIN

One left. I saved one, this time. Elizabeth I have saved your--son.

I shall name him—

Achilles. I shall name him “Achilles.”

ZUMSTEIN

(ZUMSTEIN rummages in drawer.)

(Finds net)

(Dips net into bowl.)

(Beat.)

(Holding up the net.)

ELLA

It’s all that coffee. Want a nice warm bath, fish?

(Holding a cup she reaches for the net. ZUMSTEIN grabs it away as BECKELHEIMER enters.)

ZUMSTEIN

Get back! The mighty Achilles--and this world will not prevail against him!

BECKELHEIMER

What are you doing?

(Beat.)

ELLA

What do you think? He’s naming his son.

(Fade to black.)

THE END
PLUTO, DIS ASSOCIATES
A One-Act Play
by
Douglas Engebretsen
CHARACTERS

NICK SHADOW, a devil
HIDEOUS (HICKEY) SIDEWINDER, his Administrative Assistant
FRANK FIRESTONE, a poet, sort of.
LORELEI GENTINI, his girlfriend
DAMNED SOUL #1, middle aged, well dressed.
DAMNED SOUL #2, middle aged, well dressed.
DAMNED SOUL #3, ski mask, knife, shirt with holes.
DAMNED SOUL #4, loud shirt, gold chain.
DAMNED SOUL #5, New Age dress.
VERGIL. the one, the only, in coveralls

All Damned Souls and Vergil may be played by the same actor.

SCENES

Scene One. SETTING: an office. There is a desk with phone and a computer angled at center stage. TIME: the present.

Scene Two. SETTING: FRANK’s place, 4 AM Saturday morning. A desk cluttered with papers and books, some of them open, and a separate table with the remains of dinner and two candles. A screen. A phone, a computer, a microwave, toaster, a hot plate with a pan and a small refrigerator. A coffeepot. A mattress on the floor. TIME: Later that day.

Scene Three. SETTING: Hickey’s office, a train station check-in. UL is a door marked “To the trains” above with a small sign beside it which reads “All Hope Abandon Ye, Etc.” There is another door R, marked with the international logos for unisex rest room. TIME: the next day.

Scene Four. Setting: Frank’s place. Time: eight o’clock the same evening.

Scene Five. Setting: Hickey’s office, as before, an hour later.
PLUTO, DIS ASSOCIATES
A One-Act Play
by
Douglas Engebretsen

SETTING: An office. There is a desk with phone and a computer angled at center stage.

Scene One

(As the lights go up, NICK is talking on the telephone.)

NICK
Yes sir, the brochure is correct. The load is minimal. No problem sir, I think we can meet those terms. In Malaysian ringgit. We'll be in touch by the fifteenth. Right. Thank you, sir.

(Hangs up. Dials again.)

Good morning Mr. Thwatt, Oh, sorry, Reverend Thwitt is it? My name is Shadow, Nick Shadow--

(Pause.)
The computer has it wrong. Let me correct it. Are you still at 515 Asmodeus Circle?
No I'm not the phone company.

(Pause.)
Sorry to call so early--but I wanted to--I'm not a salesman sir--I wanted to make sure you have the opportunity to attend an extraordinary presentation, one that will lead you to wealth beyond belief. No sir, we're not anyone you know as yet, but we would like to be.

(Pause.)
Yes sir, Rich as Croesus. Envy of all your fiends--er--friends.

(Pause.)
I represent Infernal Properties and Enterprises Limited, with offices in most large cities nationwide.

(Pause.)

No--Shadow, like in "me and my shadow."

(Pause.)
That's right, sir, and I work for Pluto, Dis, and Associates--Moloch, Mammon, Scurvy and Crump. You might say we were Devils' Advocates--sort of. Hello? Reverend Thwitt? Hello?

(Beat.)

Where do these leads come from? Ms. Sidewinder, would you come in here, please?
(HICKEY enters.)

What's my calendar look like today, Hickey?

HICKEY

You have several appointments this morning. I assume you had lunch with Mr. Satan yesterday.

NICK

Yes. There was heck to pay for the fiasco down in Level Seven.

HICKEY

You should have let me handle it.

NICK

Now, Hickey, Our Father Below is not your type.

HICKEY

You know how I am, don't you.

NICK

Yes. Unfortunately.

HICKEY

I'm still a young woman, you know. And beautiful.

NICK

Of course you are. How well you keep yourself up.

HICKEY

Like my nails?

NICK

Astonishingly--I suppose perverse is the word.

HICKEY

Thank you. Ever so.

NICK

You have my schedule. Anything important?

HICKEY

Hmm. Not really. Just the Beelzebub correspondence.

(Beat.)

NICK

We get her, or the Other Firm?

HICKEY

The file’s thick. It could go either way. Need to run it down to stimu--I mean, simulation.

NICK

That’s one thing we have to do better, if we’re ever going to increase market share, (Beat.)

How can I do anything without the proper tools! Faster computers--you’d think after everything we’ve done for Bill Gates--by the time these old spiritu-tu-ohs finally plot out the choice percentages and degrees of freedom, the other side has already beamed up the little sinners! It’s maddening. Those idiots downstairs make my ichor boil.

(Beat.)
And please call Phil Hades about the Damnation software six point one. If it crashes we got problems. The dialog boxes are barely obscene. And every time I hit “Save,” I feel surges.

HICKEY

You’d think they’d retire those old electroshock units next door. They’ve been here forever.

NICK

So many new specimens are coming in with their electrodes already installed--Did you appreciate the musicians from yesterday’s plane crash?

HICKEY

They pierce everything now, don’t they? Such arias. Lovely. Sometimes you get the very best from a marriage of the old and the new.

NICK

Yes. What’s at eleven-thirty?

HICKEY

Major Projects--Mammon will be speaking--and then lunch. Atheist-in-a-Foxhole-Chicken I think. Concupiscent pudding.
NICK

(Beat.)

We’ve got to have something new. Look at what the other side’s doing. Have you seen that disgusting TV show? That redhead winning back all those souls we’ve invested so much daytime TV on? And she doesn’t look the slightest bit like an angel. It’s all special effects.

HICKEY
I love daytime TV.

NICK
We have to invest in our future. What’s after lunch?

HICKEY
You have a twelve-forty five with Ted Turner.

NICK
I’m not skipping dessert for him. Did his contract stand up?

HICKEY
Jot and Tittle aren’t sure. He’s got good lawyers. He might try to weasel. He gave a billion away not long ago.

NICK
Hah! The minimum deal was Jane and half of Montana, Soul on Delivery. I sent the invoice to purchasing. We’re covered. Any other CEO’s?

HICKEY
I pencilled in R.J. Reynolds, if you finish early with Turner. At one-thirty you see Ghengis Kahn.

(Beat.)

He’s filing a grievance about the mosquitoes. And he says it’s driving him crazy the way Bonaparte keeps mumbling Sacre Bleu, over and over again, under his breath. He wants a new tar-pit, too.

NICK
It has nothing to do with me. Send him down another bag of feathers.

(Beat.)
He and Napoleon are the worst complainers. If you ask me, they both have major issues dealing with authority.

HICKEY
(Beat.)

Oh, and I got a call from a certain public official.

NICK

Don’t tell me. Did he mention lucre?

HICKEY

I told him Moloch would call his people. Make sure the check isn’t drawn on a foreign bank, though. Memo to Accounts Payable?

NICK

Right. The public sector is so much like family.

HICKEY

At two o’clock you have Irish terrorists, replacing a cancellation with the Time-Warner exec. Two-thirty is scheduled with the New Age Cloning League, and at three I give you your massage.

NICK

Lovely, darling. Do we have plenty of acetylene? Those little hat pins?

HICKEY

At three-thirty you have a Senior Devils Meeting in the steam-room.

NICK

Friday the thirteenth already?

HICKEY

They will be discussing the Beelzebub memo.

NICK

I’m not looking forward to that one, I’ll tell you.

HICKEY

Politics is never pretty.

NICK

I don’t suppose there’s a chance I can beg off Senior Devils? Any decent leads? Interesting little people, perhaps?
HICKEY
An inquiry came in on the eight-hundred number yesterday afternoon. A man who said he was answering the cash-for-poetry ad.

Did he?

HICKEY
He also answered our nose-hair clipper ad, and the one about making thousands of dollars reading books at home. And he sends the Publisher’s Clearinghouse stuff back like clockwork.

NICK
It sounds too good to be true. Religion?

HICKEY
Democrat.

NICK
What did you tell him?

HICKEY
That one of our reps would be in contact.

NICK
Dang. You’re the best, Hickey.

HICKEY
Aren’t I a devil?

(Fade to Black.)

Scene Two

Setting: FRANK’s place, 4 am Saturday morning. A desk cluttered with papers and books, some of them open, and a separate table with the remains of dinner and two candles. A screen. A phone, a computer, a microwave, toaster, a hot plate with a pan and a small refrigerator. A coffeepot. A mattress on the floor, occupied by FRANK and LORELEI. FRANK is wearing pajama bottoms, LORELEI, a robe.
“... Torture without end
Still urges, and a fiery deluge, fed
With ever-burning Sulfur unconsumed:
Such place Eternal Justice had prepared
For those rebellious, here their prison ordained
In utter darkness... Satan with bold words
Breaking the horrid silence thus began.”

LORELEI
(Turns on lamp. Sits up. Takes out earplugs.)

Why are you doing this? I might as well go home. I have to work in five hours.

FRANK

You don’t work on weekends.

LORELEI

I’m subbing for Amanda.

Why don’t you quit that job?

FRANK

Why would I do that?

LORELEI

I can’t believe you take off your clothes in public.

LORELEI

In the changing room. It’s a beginning watercolor class at the senior center. Their eyes are so bad it all looks like impressionism.

(Beat,)

By the way. Every time you read your so-called great literature to me, I feel like you think I’m illiterate.

FRANK

You have to like Milton--just listen to this

(Beat.)

“Not for what the Potent Victor
Can else inflict
Do I repent that I,
To the contention brought along
Innumerable force of Spirits arm’d
That durst dislike his reign and me preferring,
His utmost power with adverse power opposed
In dubious battle on the plains of Heav’n,

(Shakes fist.)

And shook his throne!

LORELEI

You left the seat up in the bathroom, again.

(LORELEI disappears behind screen.)

FRANK

I’ll drive you.

(Beat.)

“And him thus answered Beelzebub,
‘O Prince, O Chief of many throned Powers,
...Too well I see and rue the dire event
That with sad overthrow and foul defeat hath lost us Heav’n.”

LORELEI

Don’t bother.

(LORELEI emerges; clothed, and applying lipstick. She crosses to the phone and dials.)

FRANK

(Tries to take phone.)

Please stay.

LORELEI

(Resists. Becomes angry.)

I want to sleep in my own bed.

(Beat.)

I come over here for a nice romantic evening. I even bring the food. Do we talk? No.

(Beat.)

You spend the entire night reading selections of “Great Poetry” to me. I read too, you know. I don’t move my lips, either, like your workshop bimbos.

(Beat.)
You only care about what you are interested in and that's about it.

I'm sorry, honey, I--      FRANK

Darn right you are Frank.       LORELEI

Lorelei, I'm really sorry.      FRANK

You're repeating yourself.      LORELEI

(Beat.)
I deserve better, and I'm going to have better. I don't want to see your sorry face for a while, Frank.      (Beat.)

You can send me the four hundred bucks you owe me, too. If I don't get it by Thursday, I might send my new boyfriend over to collect.

FRANK

Let me give you a ride home.     LORELEI

I don't think so.       (Dials.)

I need a cab at The Artist's Network. Washington side.       (She hangs up and exits. FRANK, pours coffee, puts it in the microwave and turns it on. He puts two slices of toast, which will burn, in the toaster.)

FRANK

I'm sorry!     (Beat.)

What did I do exactly?       (Beat.)

I thought she'd love John Milton. She liked Robert Burns. Robert Frost.       (Beat.)

Maybe he's overrated.     (Beat.)
Who knows? Stanley Fish says any hack is good as Shakespeare if enough people
like him. It's mostly luck anyway. If I could only write my best every day—like my
Creamed Corn Epiphany.

"My Corn is A-Creamin' In
Gravy-like and dangerous, pooling
Dribble of outraged, lukewarm cornality—the God of
Montezuma, gathering stormcloud of his revenge,
Turn on, Turn on, turn on
Oh ye microwaves.
And abuse the sickening mush that is my world's
Displeasure, while my diarrhetic Rhesus monkey
Begs for change."

I know this is good stuff!

I know this is publishable at least. I know this is publishable. I read poems worse than this
everywhere. Look at the journals. Look at the Review. I bet there's stuff worse than
this in the Review. I know there is.

"O philtrum of the spilling flock,
Do ye lately, flatulently, stab the Nile
That slakes the thirsty Job,
Job, Jojoba?

And dost Thou see them granitely
Asphodelled, O Sarpedon,
And saraband my Wile
E Coyote. Mbeep. Mbeep?"

This is poetry?

It sounds nice, but what does it mean? How did it get published? I know my stuff's
better than that.

"Bat-bitten trailerdevil; Vile, bile-smelling geek-head
Finishing-school mullet-head lesion.
Baguette-eating barney-brain.
Dingle me if you dare, you clot-frogging wetwipe."
Fashionable, and therefore popular, but does this particular poem make a unique statement? Does it break new ground? Does it add significantly to Western Literature?

(Beat.)

And what a generic title. “Song of the Spirit-heart?” I bet she knew somebody at the Review. Probably a little of the tit for tat.

(Beat. Walks to printer, takes out ink cartridge, shakes it.)

It’s so corrupt. The true cutting-edge artists starve and suffer, writing legitimate, important work that people aren’t advanced enough to appreciate yet, and the mediocre crud ends up stuffing the libraries even fuller. It makes me sick.

(Reaches in his pocket. Examines change)

What happened to all my money?

(Assumes prayerful stance.)

If only thirty two more Freshman sign up for English and some adjunct writing teacher I don’t even know drops dead in the next three days, I’ll be fine, but no more furniture moving again. Please.

(The phone rings.)

Hello. You know what time it is?

(Pause.)

Yeah, I filled out the form.

(Pause.)

My price is twenty bucks a poem for first rights. Don’t tell me you’re going to set them to music and make me famous.

(Pause.)

Yeah, right. And I’m Gina Davis. You’re serious? Excuse me, I have to go now.

(Pause.)

Listen, mister, I don’t know what your little game is, but you’re wasting your time.

(Pause.)

You will, huh?

(Pause.)

You’ll bring what over yourself?

(Pause.)

Draw a what? No way, man. I don’t have any Marilyn Manson, either

(Pause.)

Black Sabbath, I might have.

(Pause.)

Look, I pawned the CD player. Even if I still had it, it won’t play backward.

(Pause.)

It’s locked up at Vinnie’s Pawnshop.
Let me get this straight. You want me to draw a five-pointed star on the floor and light two birthday candles and you’ll show up with a free printer cartridge and my what?

Nobody does stuff like that. I open the door and somebody will probably kill me. Goodbye. I’m hanging up. Goodbye.

Stop bothering me! I already told you I--

Oh, sorry, Blackie. How come you guys are working so late?

What happened to the fourth guy?

Ambulance come already?

Four o’clock in the morning with a player-piano half way up the stairwell sounds like a problem

How much extra? Fine. Where are you? Six-sixty-six what?. Where’s Acheron?

Listen, Blackie, it’s gonna take me a few. Okay?

Rats.

(Hangs up. Tries lamp on desk. Finds matches in desk drawer, and strikes light. As he walks to the table the match goes out. Stumbling, he knocks over a package of fettucini.)

Hello? And you’re--

Glad to see you’ve changed your mind.

What?

FRANK

NICK

FRANK
NICK
I am the man to whom you spoke on the phone a few moments ago, and this is my
associate, Ms. Hideous Sidewinder.

Hickey
Call me Hickey.

(They walk in. Hickey gives him an ink cartridge.)

So hard to get aftermarket. It'll work fine.

NICK
And here's the old CD player. You'd gone past the date, you know.

Get out of here!

Frank
We never would have come uninvited.

NICK
There was some luck involved, of course. You probably couldn't have tossed the
fettucini in a pattern like that again.

(Points to the mess on the floor.)

A five pointed star!

Frank
Now let's get down to business. Ms. Sidewinder and I are overscheduled this
morning, so I hope we can dispense with the preliminary posturing and haggling. I
doubt that you'll be able to beat our best deal.

Frank
I don't want to buy anything!

NICK
We're the one's buying.

Frank
(Beat.)

It's the only one I've got!
That's what everyone says. Believe me.

NICK
It's stupid to carry around such a medieval notion, right? What makes you think you even possess such an item? Many people are certain there's no such thing. Smart people, too.

FRANK
I've always thought that soul was—well—

"I got sunshine, on a cloudy day, 
And baby when it's cold outside, 
I got the month of May—"

HICKEY
Oh Mr. Firestone, I had no idea you were so talented.

NICK
Nor I, sir. You have really a professional sounding voice. Have you considered a singing career?

Oh really, I—.

HICKEY
Oh, it is, Frank. Believe me, it is.

NICK
With a little coaching—

HICKEY
Very sweet, but still with a lot of character. Resonance. You should do something with it.

FRANK
Get out of here!

My Bible!

Where did I put it?
No need for that.

Who took it?

We certainly didn’t.

I think you might have included them in that lot of books you sold to the bookstore across the way.

I did?

Well, then.

What’s it going to be, Mr. Firestone? Would you like the lady back? And a little stipend, of course. Enough for a Ph.D. at an above-average University, leading, eventually, to a tenure-track position at a respectable state college within easy driving distance, teaching creative writing. Now there’s a package for you!

I’ll be honest with you--

The best policy.

The idea is tempting, but the academic job market is getting better now with all the boomers retiring. Besides, Lorelei chews me out all the time. It’s her art form.

Ridiculous dream. I’m leaving now.

Oh, don’t leave on our account. We have another appointment. And we’ve finished our presentation.

It was so nice to meet you, Frank. Let us know how everything goes.
Yes. Keep in touch.

(NICK and HICKEY blow out the candles and exit. The light comes back on. The phone rings.)

FRANK

Hello--Blackie? I don’t know if I can help you with this job. I’m asleep on my feet.
(Pause.)

Don’t cry like that Blackie.

(Hangs up. Takes black toast out of toaster.)

(Fade to Black.)

Scene Three

Setting: A train station. UL is a door marked “To the trains” above with a small sign beside it which reads “All Hope Abandon Ye, Etc.” There is another door R, marked with the international logos for unisex rest room. Time: the next day.

(Lights up. HICKEY stands at the desk LC, dressed as an Amtrack ticket clerk, NICK, as a porter. Both wear fake wings and halos. Wait long enough for scene to register, then DAMNED SOUL #1 enters.)

DAMNED SOUL #1

At last. I’ve never been so--. What’s this?

Come to catch your train?

My what?

Your train. Right this way.
Must be some mistake. I’m just on my way to the--

HICKEY

Been a change of plans. You’ve died. Right this way.

DAMNED SOUL #1

Died?

(Beat.)

Oh come now. Expect me to believe something like that? I’m perfectly healthy. Watch me make a muscle.

I jog several miles a day, don’t I?

HICKEY

Heart attack at the gym. You shouldn’t have sprinted the last four laps.

You’re kidding!

HICKEY

Cholesterol you know—all that bacon and eggs. Bound to do it.

DAMNED SOUL #1

Impossible. I checked my resting pulse not half-an-hour ago.

What is it now?

(He takes carotid pulse, looking at his watch. He shakes watch.)

An elegant funeral, I should think. Treasury, Commerce, the Anti-trust people. You can watch the clips on Tuesday. You were very sharp in junk bonds, Mako Rick. Have a seat. You’ve come home.

DAMNED SOUL #1

I was beginning to worry. That bearded fellow down the hall--

HICKEY

With the keys? Oh never mind him. It’ll all soon be forgotten.

DAMNED SOUL #1

And what’s with the three headed guard-dog?
HICKEY
That’s inbreeding for you. Hip displasia too, poor thing. Nick would you be so kind as to show our friend to the third rail?

Of course.

NICK
(Lifts bags.)

My, these are heavy. Kruggerrands?

DAMNED SOUL #1
I know it’s probably silly, but I like to stay a step or two ahead. Have a look at how these beauties shine. There’s a priceless gold crucifix in there, too. Florentine, 15th century. Want to see?

HICKEY
Haven’t time, right now. Schedule, you know. Would you like to check the bag?

Carry-on please. I hate to wait.

(Beat.)

When will we arrive?

(HICKEY)
Excuse me?

DAMNED SOUL #1
(Rubs hands together. Sings)

At the Pearly Gates.

(This train is bound for glory, this train--"
This train is bound for glory, this train--
This train is bound for glory,
If you want to ride you better be holy--"

(Beat.)

I can’t wait. Great food, I bet. Ha. Ha. What do you do for excitement? I’ll show you folks how to have a good time.

(To NICK.)

You must be Saint Peter.

HICKEY
(Beat.)

He’s on annual leave. This is Saint Nick.
I'd never have recognized. You seem thinner.

Strict diet. All you eat is peas.

Not very jolly. Could you ho, ho, ho, for me?

I always brought you everything you wanted, though, Ricky.

Hmmm.

And which Saint are you?

St. Hezbollah.

Come along now. You have to catch your train. Right this way.

Need to use the little boy's room on the way out? Sometimes it takes a while to get underway.

Thank you, St.--?

Hezbollah. There's the rest room.

Ahhhhhhhh!
NICK
(Picking up bags.)
Thought he could take it with him, did he? Remember to call the containment people about the crucifix.

HICKEY
We learned our lesson with the Holy Water didn’t we?

NICK
The Heretics are still upset about those rubber suits.

HICKEY
(Beat.)
Don’t you think we better switch the signs back?

NICK
I doubt there’ll be an inspection today.

(DAMNED SOUL #2 enters)

HICKEY
Hello! Welcome to our little railway.

DAMNED SOUL #2
Those people down the hall are rude. It’s none of their business, is it?

HICKEY
We’re more forgiving here.

DAMNED SOUL #2
One minute I’m watching Days of Our Lives, having a little drinkie-poo after my tennis lesson, and the next--

HICKEY
It is a shock, isn’t it? My, what stunning piece of jewelry.

DAMNED SOUL #2
What’s it to you?--I don’t suppose you have a decent mirror in this place.

HICKEY
In the bathroom. Help yourself.
Noooooo.

My feet hurt.

Hell hath no fury like a woman's corns.

One nasty client after another, all day. I tell you it's hard to be nice all the time. Sometimes I'd like to tell them just to kiss my--

Hickey!

I'm sorry. No rest for the wicked, I suppose.

Nor should there be! We may be number-two, but we try harder, don't we? Remember who we are, my dear--The Legion of Hell's Angels. The Evil. The Proud.

*Semper Thermes.* Keep yourself together.

Just a little time-of-the-month, I think.

You look a little pale. Like an Altoid?

No thank you. I need a sweater, I think.

It is drafty.

(DAMNED SOUL #2 exits rest room door.)

DAMNED SOUL #2

(Scream fades.)

HICKEY

NICK

HICKEY

(Beat.)

I'm sorry. No rest for the wicked, I suppose.

NICK

Nor should there be! We may be number-two, but we try harder, don't we? Remember who we are, my dear--The Legion of Hell's Angels. The Evil. The Proud.

*Semper Thermes.* Keep yourself together.

HICKEY

NICK

HICKEY

(Beat.)

Just a little time-of-the-month, I think.

NICK

You look a little pale. Like an Altoid?

HICKEY

NICK

It is drafty.
Hullo there.

(DAMNED SOUL#3 enters.)

We can’t welcome you in properly, I’m sorry to say. When we’ve done with the annex, perhaps, but we’ve had such an abundance of murder one lately that it’s hard even to keep up the paperwork. Could you wait in here until we process you? Go ahead and freshen up. The water in the tap is quite cold.

(He walks DAMNED SOUL#3 to restroom door.)

There you are.

DAMNED SOUL#3

Nooooooo.

NICK

(Calls after him.)

If you see Attila, you’ve gone too far.

HICKEY

Do you know when Moloch is going to get back with those figures? I have yesterday’s balance sheet to do, and I’m getting my hair done at five.

NICK

Again? I think that color becomes you very well.

(Beat.)

What did you think of our little toad, yesterday?

HICKEY

Frank? Nice man, I thought. Didn’t seem very interested in your offer, though.

NICK

It was the best I could do. Boss wouldn’t sign the sheet.

HICKEY

Why not?

NICK

Some prophecy Pluto found in the book of Thoth. I followed the astronomy, not the math. Dis said the deal had a hold on it, unless Firestone would go for the babe.

HICKEY

According to Frank he’s already got her.
NICK
According to Dis, too. Get this--they’re both are dying to get married but think the other doesn’t. And they feel **unworthy**.

HICKEY
(Beat.)
Good communication is very important to a relationship.
(Beat.)
Surely you might have offered him more money. There’s always that.

NICK
He wouldn’t have taken it. He **likes** that dump he lives in. Feels like his suffering legitimizes his so-called art--his gift to posterity. Can you believe that?
(Beat.)
Lorelei is worse. She’s absolutely selfless. And she slaves over those dinners to make sure he’s eating enough. It’s sick. How can we swing any kind of deal with such utter imbeciles?

HICKEY
There’s the old standby, lust. Technically, anyway.

NICK
Maybe not. Remember they both would like to make the whole thing legal. We could be way out in right field there. Uncharted waters.

HICKEY
I love your metaphors, Nick. Anger?

NICK
That’s not Frank’s way. And Lorelei’s probably crying her eyes out for hurting his feelings.

HICKEY
What about envy? No. Avarice? No. What does that leave, Sloth--no, they work too much--Gluttony?

NICK
They’re not very big eaters. Frank’s quite satisfied with Lorelei’s cooking.

HICKEY
Has to be pride, then.
NICK
Yes. A fast-ball right down the middle. We’ll challenge him with fame. Did you notice the rejection slips? We can change that.

HICKEY
What about her?

NICK
What about her, Hickey? You gotta field the ball clean before you make the throw. One soul at a time.

HICKEY
You are so good at what you do, Nick. (Beat.)

Oh, by the way.

What?

NICK
When I gave him the ink cartridge, I’m afraid I might have also handed him the disk with the Damnation software. I had it in my purse to give Phil, and can’t find it anywhere.

HICKEY
Just take another copy off my hard drive. I’ll try to get back to Frank’s place while he’s gone. I’ll switch boom-boxes, too. I must have grabbed the wrong one at Vinnie’s. There was a note from Dis on my desk about it. (Beat.)

Here comes another client.

HICKEY
Leave this one to me.

(DAMNED SOUL #4 enters)

DAMNED SOUL #4
Hey, angel, you are some cool chick. I dig you so much. You a Scorpio? I like your style, baby.

HICKEY
Virgo, actually. Well almost. I’m on the cusp.
DAMNED SOUL #4
The lady must be Libra, then. I see the signs of love. Why don’t we have a coupla drinks and go back to my place? I got a real nice place. We can get happy and nobody bother us.

HICKEY
Well, you’ll have to ask Nick here. I don’t do anything without it being okay with Nick.

DAMNED SOUL #4
Yeah, sure. I figure a classy girl like you, it’s gonna cost me something. I can afford a good time.

Right. And what sign are you?

HICKEY
You got the bull baby. Venus rising. And I got some big horns. Let’s do it. How much you need, man?

DAMNED SOUL #4
Why don’t you ask Nick what his sign is?

HICKEY
Probably the dollar sign, right?

DAMNED SOUL #4
(Laughs.)

Okay, man I’ll bite. What’s your sign, man?

NICK
(Takes DAMNED SOUL #4 by collar and belt, throws him through rest room door.)

Mark of the beast!

DAMNED SOUL #4
Aaaaaah! Help!

HICKEY
Didn’t guess you were a Leo, did he?

DAMNED SOUL #4
We’ll give you some help!

NICK
(Beat.)
Down in level two. With real scorpions, lots of them!

(Mocking.)

Hey, girl, you are some cool chick. I dig you so much. You a Scorpio?

He liked my style.

HICKEY

NICK

Of course he did. You didn’t like his, did you?

HICKEY

Of course not, darling. You’re not jealous, are you? The devil must always be the gentleman.

(Beat.)

Hellish, isn’t it?

(Fade to Black.)

Scene Four

Setting: Frank’s Apartment. Time: eight o’clock that same evening. Frank dries dishes. The room is somewhat tidier.

(Lights up. There is a knock. FRANK answers the door. LORELEI enters, with flowers and groceries. They embrace.)

FRANK

(Takes flowers.)

How was work?

LORELEI

I got flash burns from the heater. There was one halfway decent painting. You can tell it’s me, anyway.

FRANK

Great.

(Puts flowers in vase.)

I thought I’d never get done carrying boxes of books. And the hide-a-bed came apart halfway upstairs. Blackie bids on the worst jobs.
LORELEI
I thought you were going to work on your manuscript.

FRANK
(Sighs.)

I owe you money. I didn’t feel like writing today anyway. Kind of flat.

LORELEI
(Takes his hand.)

Sorry I gave you such a hard time. I brought these artichokes as a little peace-offering.

FRANK
It was my fault. Who cares about Milton at four in the morning? I wouldn’t, either, if I didn’t have to write that stupid thesis.

LORELEI
Your “Gargoyles in Gehenna?”

FRANK
No, I had to change the title for *John Galt Review*.

Who is John Galt?

LORELEI
FRANK
Some guy. Anyway I had to change the title. Now it’s: “Tempero-spatial Phenomenology of Non-forgiveness in Joyce and Milton: a hermeneutics casebook for $n$-vectorspace heteroglossia.”

(Beat.)

It’s better. Easier to defend. I broke it down to a system of differential equations. That’s where literary criticism is headed, anyway.

(Beat.)

The paper’s pretty juicy so far, though. You should what Joyce wrote about hell. The walls are four-thousand miles thick.

LORELEI
(Beat.)

Cheerful. Why don’t I make a salad?

FRANK
I’m starving. I picked up some Hot Rod Bob’s.

(Takes dishtowel.)

I gotta tell you about this weird dream I had this morning.
LORELEI
( Begins to make salad. )

What sort of dream?

FRANK

I got a phone-call from the devil.

LORELEI

Good grief.

FRANK

He called himself Nick Shadow. Then a few minutes later two of them showed up.
There was a she-devil with him. Ms. Sidewinder, her name was. And if they hadn't
been trying to hustle me for my soul I would have sworn they were real-estate
salesmen.

LORELEI

Why don't you sit down and have a glass of wine?

FRANK

You can't believe how real it all seemed. And today I find my boom-box and it's not
my boom-box. Look.

( Shows boom-box )

LORELEI

The one you pawned at Vinnie's?

FRANK

I don't remember going in to claim it. Besides, this one's a Veratron. And my new
ink cartridge is wrong... And that's not all. Ever seen a floppy like this?

LORELEI

America-On-Line, maybe. The background's so dark you can't read it.

FRANK

No way. In the dream they brought me a boom-box and an ink cartridge. Free gift, no
obligation.

LORELEI

I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation.
FRANK
What explanation? We’ve entered a parallel universe? I never even heard of a Veratron.

LORELEI
All that junk is the same. Maybe those free hypnosis sessions you had last week to improve your memory--maybe that’s it. I think you need some rest. You’re working too much.

FRANK
I have twenty essays to correct before Monday, so I better do some of them tonight. What are we having for dinner?

LORELEI
Zucchini Parmesan.

FRANK
With homemade pasta?

LORELEI
Can’t. You’re out of eggs.

FRANK
(Pause.)
Did I tell you I assigned my students a response paper to Portrait of the Artist.

LORELEI
Oh.

FRANK
Lorelei, you know I’m not trying to say anything about you when I read out loud. I mean you do, right?

LORELEI
Frank, will you go to church with me tomorrow morning? All this devil stuff makes me nervous.

FRANK
(Pause.)
I guess. I used to go every week when I was a kid.
LORELEI
I was thinking about it the other day when I was modeling and I realized I hadn’t been to church in years. My dad kept trying to get me to go when he was still alive, too. I wish I’d gone with him.

(Pause.)

I’d like to go to church with you, Frank.

FRANK
It’s a date.
(They take each other’s hands.)

Why don’t you fix dinner? I’ll run up to campus and get some papers to grade.
(He puts on coat.)

LORELEI
Half an hour?

FRANK
Could you check my email? My mom got her computer, finally.

Sure.

(FRANK exits. LORELEI turns on computer and then takes out artichokes and large pot. She returns to computer, puts in disk and hits a few keystrokes. There is a drastic change of lighting, with red the predominate color, then blackout.)

Scene Five

Setting: Hickey’s office, as before. Time: an hour later.

There is limbo music. VERGIL, dressed in coveralls, enters, and limbo-ing back and forth under a limbo bar, held by NICK and HICKEY.
Limbo lower now.

HICKEY

Little bit lower now.

NICK

How low can you go?

(VERGIL falls.)

VERGIL

Gosh darn it! I hate comin’ down here. You lowlifes give me trouble every goll-darned stinkin’ time.

NICK

Devil made me do it Virg. What’s the rumpus? You got business down here, or just come down see us for the heck of it?

VERGIL

Visit. Hah! Like we don’t have anything better to do than mix up with garbage-can trash like you.

NICK

Now Virg, I know these digs ain’t quite what you’re used to, but it’s good enough for us. Have a cigar?

VERGIL

Don’t light up that thing. They stink like hell.

NICK

Limbo is non-smoking no doubt?

VERGIL

A few of us chew a little. Homer, he chews, Horace does. But we don’t have to. Not like here. Not like you.

NICK

Now Vergil, I enjoy a Havana like any other virile guy. You’d think doing custodial work all this time would have given you a little of the common touch.

VERGIL

Like you, I suppose. Greaseball salesman for Satan.
NICK
I’m not the greasy one, Virg. Look at those coveralls.

VERGIL
At least it’s honest work. Don’t harm nobody. That and my little side job.

NICK
You used to have. O tempora! O mores!

What?

Latin.

VERGIL
I haven’t had one of these tourist gigs in a coon’s age, I’d say. Well, I got a call today. Should be comin’ down here any time now. Nice young couple.

What?

VERGIL
Guy and a girl. Engaged to be married the word goes.

I don’t like this.

(LORELEI enters from L door.)

LORELEI
Help! What’s going on! Who are you?

Stay back.

HICKEY
Don’t be afraid, Lorelei. I’m Hickey. This is Nick, Nick Shadow.

LORELEI
O God help me!

NICK
There’s no need for that!
What are you doing here?

(Beat.)

LORELEI

I, I, w-was j-just using the c-computer--

HICKEY

--The Damnation software. Lord below!

LORELEI

God above!

NICK

Stop! You can’t do that here. Vergil!--do something!

VERGIL

You’re safe with me, Lorelei.

LORELEI

I must be dreaming. That’s it. I must be dreaming. I’m dreaming I’m in hell. Of course. Great. I’m only dreaming. It’s okay.

HICKEY

Have some pomegranate?

VERGIL

Don’t listen to this little lizard, Lorelei, or his scumbag of a girlfriend, either.

HICKEY

You’re certainly no gentleman, Vergil. What were you saying, my dear?

LORELEI

I don’t know what happened. I was downloading some email to Frank’s disk. It looked like one of those America-On-Line floppies, so when I put it in to re-initialize it--I hit control-option-return like it said, and then the screen locked up with a fatal error--so then when I hit escape--

NICK

You found yourself in an elevator.

LORELEI

I couldn’t get it to stop!
HICKEY

Of course not, Lorelei. But just relax. After you take a few deep breaths you’ll be fine. Care to freshen up? There’s the ladies room.

VERGIL

Not so fast. Switching the signs again are we?

(Beat.)

Come with me, Lorelei. I’ll show you around this chamber of horrors. Not so bad really. It’s climate-controlled today, and it’ll give you something to do until Frank shows up.

LORELEI

He went down to his office.

VERGIL

He’ll be along shortly, I think.

(They exit left door.)

NICK

It’s not my fault! The Damnation Software must have a virus or something. Dang Hackers!

HICKEY

What are we going to do now?

NICK

We? You mean what are you going to do, don’t you? It wasn’t me who gave away the software to an unauthorized agent!

HICKEY

But I was acting under your direction. That makes you even more guilty than me. Chapter six, paragraph three, section two, subsection six of the Codex Uniforme de Subterraine. The penalty is twenty-thousand years in the Pool of Despair. I get ten soft spanks on the bottom with a purse-strap for being your accessory.

NICK

That’s impossible. You signed a waiver.

HICKEY

Not in blood.
What? Hell's bells!

NICK

You couldn’t find a pin, remember?

HICKEY

(Beat.)

We’re in it together, Nick. What are we going to do now?

NICK

No idea. A wuss like Vergil isn’t likely to help. Claims he’s in Purgatory
If you’re in Purgatory, you’d have to know it. He’s as dumb as a doorknob.

HICKEY

Probably under too much stress. We all are, I suppose.

NICK

How long has he been around here anyway? Wouldn’t he have moved up a little by
now? Called me a greaseball! As if spaghetti wouldn’t melt in his mouth. Little
Tuscan ape!

HICKEY

Sticks and stones, dear--

NICK

Gosh Darn it!

HICKEY

Now, Nick--don’t lose your temper. No one ever loves an angry man.
Just do your worst and call it bad.

NICK

That’s it. Professional distance. Thanks, Hickey.

HICKEY

Now when he comes in, I think we should be sure that Frank thinks that Lorelei is--

NICK

You mean--

HICKEY

That we’ve got someone he wants.
Cherchez la femme.

HICKEY

Right. See what he’ll give in trade. Think he’d fall for the old Orpheus pitch?

He thinks he has such a hot voice.

NICK

(DAMNED SOUL#5 enters)

DAMNED SOUL#5

(Gravely.)

Madame Osiris knows and sees all.

How do you do?

HICKEY

DAMNED SOUL #5

I feel the presence of the spirits. I feel the channel opening. Cross my palm. Three dollars.

Dimes okay?

HICKEY

(She gives her thirty dimes.)

DAMNED SOUL #5

Fine. Let me see your palm, please.

(Studies hand.)

Such a flexible, compliant thumb. You should stand up for yourself more. And this heart line. I’ve never seen one so well developed. A-chi-wa-wa!

NICK

You should see Cleopatra’s. Or Helen’s. Deep as a ditch.

DAMNED SOUL #5

I think I saw the devil dead in a ditch yesterday.

HICKEY

Sure he was dead?
His face was green.

Wrong shade for a winter. Perhaps I could interest you in hosting a Mary Kay party sometime? I’m a district rep. Free gift for the hostess.

My, this certainly is a high mount of Venus you have. Regular mountain range.

Etna.

Excuse me?

Edna. This is Edna. My fiancee.

How do you do, Edna? My, it’s stuffy in here. I feel as if I’d died and gone to--Haha.

New A/C. Haven’t got the bugs out of it yet. One room’s too hot, one’s too cold. The bathroom is about right though. Care to freshen up? Your mascara’s starting to run.

Yes, You don’t mind?

(Enters rest room.)

Heeeelp!

(Opens door again. Shouts.)

All the way down to eight. Give my best to Nostradamus.

And Ra. Tell Ra, Hickey says “hi.”

Must you, Hickey?
HICKEY

Sorry, Nick. I haven’t seen him in years. Beautiful man--body like a god, really. Such perfect features.

NICK

He is a god.

HICKEY

Don’t be jealous, darling. It’s just that Ra and I were very special to one another--once.

NICK

Only once?

HICKEY

I can’t remember. It was an afternoon alongside the Styx--there on the blanket, having a little cook-out. Nice little fire. Eating our s’mores.

NICK

Enough, Hickey.

HICKEY

I’m sorry, Nick.

(FRANK enters from L door.)

FRANK

Not again! Don’t tell me this one is a dream. What did you do with Lorelei?

NICK

She came to us of her own accord. Didn’t she Hickey?

HICKEY

She’s gone below, Frank.

FRANK

No way. She came here the same way I did. Through that weird little elevator. You wired up that little computer trap too, didn’t you? Anyone would reboot from that screen. What did you do with her?
NICK
Could you lower your voice a little, Frank? It’s a bit of a mistake is all—a mistake.
We’re sorry. Very. And we admit it, of course. We’ll make good on it. Just as soon
as the paperwork is straightened out. Just give us time. A couple of weeks should be
enough. Of course you could expedite things.

FRANK
What? How?
(Beat.)
Never mind. I’m not listening to you. I want you to produce Lorelei or I’m gonna
start complaining big time—“Now I lay me down to sleep—"

NICK
Not that!
(Beat.)
Look. We’ll get you your girlfriend back, and throw in a little extra. I know you want
to help Lorelei, right?

FRANK
Right.

NICK
Then just calm down. Remember our offer yesterday? The Ph.D., the job?

FRANK
I turned it down.

NICK
And you were right to, Frank. I can tell you, confidentially, that that was a chintzy
deal, Frank, a lousy deal, though I’m embarrassed to say that. You would have been a
fool to take it. A chump.

FRANK
So? I turned it down.
(Sings.)
“Faith of our fathers, living still—“

NICK
Please, Frank! Show a little good faith. I’m going out of my way here. Hang on a
minute.
(Beat.)
I’m sure I can get you a much better offer now. I had a little discussion with my
division manager—and I’m pretty sure that I can meet all of your demands and throw
in a little something extra--like, hey, getting that article published? And that manuscript you’ve been working on. Wouldn’t it be nice to see a couple of your poems in Poetry? The New Yorker?

FRANK
I’m not selling my soul.

NICK
Indeed, Sir, you completely mistake me.

FRANK
And you mistake me. Give me Lorelei. Now.

“Amazin’ Grace! How sweet the sound.
That saved a wretch like me--”

NICK
(Exasperated.)
All right. Okay. You win. I’ll be back in a minute. Just hold on.

(NICK exits rest room door.)

HICKEY
It’s difficult for us, too. You shouldn’t be so hard on Nick. He’s been doing his--best for you I should think. And I certainly didn’t mean to leave that disk with you. I bound it to the ink cartridge with a rubber-band and then forgot about it.

FRANK
You forgot?

HICKEY
I’m afraid so. Did you try the printer yet? I’m sure you will be pleasantly surprised. We’ve supplied ink for many popular authors.

FRANK
Nietzsche?

HICKEY
Bless you.

(Beat.)
Be positive, Frank. Maybe everything will turn out for the best.
Where'd Nick go?

FRANK

HICKEY

Mr. Pluto’s office. He has to sign off on everything. This is a special deal for everybody.

(Beat.)

You’re special, Frank. I really admire you.

FRANK

More flattery, I suppose.

HICKEY

I’m being real now, Frank. I forget sometimes, chained to this desk. Not many solid people come through here.

(Beat,)

You’re such a take-charge kind of guy. You know, a real leader. You know the old saying: Lead, follow, or get the heck out of the way. That’s you.

FRANK

I’ve always felt I had something to offer.

HICKEY

And sure you have. That’s a marvelous voice you have too. You must have had some training.

FRANK

A few lessons--Mrs. Neidlinger, her name was--she had sung professionally in New York. Of course that was a long time ago.

HICKEY

Well, those few lessons have certainly come to fruition, haven’t they. Such a lovely voice.

FRANK

Thank you.

HICKEY

Do you suppose you could sing for me? Just a little something while we’re waiting?

FRANK

Well, like what?
HICKEY

I don’t know. I like the old songs best. There was a tavern on the green a long time ago, before I was damned, where a boy I knew—oh never mind—he used to sing a song.

(Beat.)

Do you know “My Love is Like a Red, Red, Rose

FRANK

What? You?

HICKEY

I’m just a lost soul, not a devil.

FRANK

But Nick is, isn’t he?

HICKEY

Oh, he’s a real one, all right. But I drew breath once, just like you.

(Beat.)

What a thing it was to walk in the sun along the water, watching the ships. The wildflowers growing. Feeling the wind.

(Sings.)

Oh, my love is like a red, red rose that’s newly sprung in June.
Oh my love is like a melody that’s sweetly played in tune.
As fair art thou my bonnie lad, so deep in love am I
And I will love thee still my love, till all the seas go dry.

Til all the seas go dry, my dear, and the rocks melt with the sun.
And I will love thee still my dear, while the sands of life shall run.
But fare thee well my only love, oh fare thee well awhile,
And I will come again my love, tho ’twere ten thousand mile

FRANK

That was beautiful, Hickey.

HICKEY

Thank you.

(Beat.)

Now, where I come from, you’d sing a song back. It’s a custom.

FRANK

I know one like it.

(Sings.)
O fare thee well, I must be gone,
And leave you for awhile:
But where'er I go, I'll come back again,
If I go ten thousand miles my dear,
If I go ten thousand miles.

HICKEY
(Sings)

Ten thousand miles it is so far
To leave me here alone,
Whilst I may lie, lament and cry,
And you will not hear my moan, my dear,
And you will not hear my moan

(FRANK joins in.)

The rivers never will run dry,
Nor the rocks melt with the sun;
And I'll ne'er prove false to the one I love
Till all these things be done, my dear,
Till all these things be done.

HICKEY
(Beat.)

I'd forgotten that. My father used to sing it to my mother.

FRANK

What happened to you?

HICKEY

I--Well, let's just say I made some bad choices, and leave it at that. I'm ashamed to say.

FRANK

Please, don't be--

HICKEY

Ashamed? Oh you don’t know, Frank. I had my chance to do the right thing. Believe me. I had every opportunity. Now it's too late.

(Beat.)

This is what I deserve.
Are you okay?

I'm going to be a nun.

What?

Just kidding. Vergil, this is Frank.

Pleased to meetcha.

Charmed.

Not the Vergil. Arma virumque cano?

They only let us speak pig-Latin.

Arms-ay and-ay e-thay an-may I-ay ing-say.

That's me, all right.

I got to meet lots of famous people. Vergil knows everybody. Movie stars, lots of stockbrokers too. And you can't believe the lawyers! Everybody sues everybody else in that circle. What was it, eight?

That's how far we got when my pager went off. You up to some kind of mischief, Spawn-of-Hell?
Pawn of hell, unfortunately.  
I can’t let them leave.  
You let Aeneas.  
Let’s get out of here, Lorelei.  
How about if you don’t look back on the way out?  
Don’t be a sucker. You should hear the voices they can come up with. You’ll think someone’s being eaten by ants. Nick’s a sicko.  
Can’t you just let us go?  
I’d like to, believe me.  
Who’s gonna stop us?  
Try to make it look good, so I don’t get in trouble.  
Tie her up. What could we use for rope?  
Red tape?  
Of course.  
What’s going on here? Hickey!
I can’t believe what I’m seeing. You’re at the bottom of this, Vergil.

VERGIL
You’re outclassed here, slime-bucket. We got safe conduct outta here, and you’re left holding the bag.

NICK
Well, it appears that since these people are technically alive, my options--

VERGIL
You ain’t got no options. I got ‘em. We’re outta here.

Now Vergil, surely--

VERGIL
Forget it. C’mon folks. I got a key to the elevator.

LORELEI
I’m tired of this dream. I want to do something a little more normal.

(FRANK and LORELEI exit L door.)

VERGIL
There are two gates of sleep. One is of horn, easy of passage from the shades of truth, the other, of gleaming white ivory, permits false dreams to ascend to the upper air. Goodbye Nick.

(Exits.)

NICK
That’s the best you can come up with? What kind of meaningless, arcane crap is that? Tuscan wimp! Four-flushing, gibbering cretin! Poet?! Hah! You’re a fraud, Vergil.

(VERGIL re-enters.)

VERGIL
I’ll take Hickey with me. I think she deserves more.

We’ll come up with a new name.

(Breaks bonds.)

NICK
Just a minute--
Yes!

(She embraces Vergil.)

VERGIL
Dolores. Maybe you’ll be happier a little farther up, where the sun shines once in a while.

(Beat.)
Who knows? I got a promotion myself a week ago. Maybe you’ll get lucky too. Each of us carries around our own hell, but for some, maybe it ain’t permanent.

(VERGIL and HICKEY exit.)

NICK
That’s heresy, or blasphemy or something. You are damned souls. Get back in here. You heard me! Get back here now. Right now. I mean it! You come back here this instant. Fools! You don’t know when you have it good--I mean bad. Gosh darn it. Gosh darn it to heck! What am I going to do? Hickey! Don’t go with him! I lo--

(Beat.)
I lo--.

(Coughs.)
I lo--.

(Long beat, as he realizes he can’t say “I love you,” then sings.)

“Please allow me to introduce myself, I’m a man of wealth and taste.”

(Fade to Black.)

THE END
WOODY WOODPECKER’S DREAM CAFÉ
A One-Act Play
by
Douglas Engebretsen
CHARACTERS

ACTRESS: a student, twenties
ACTOR: a student, twenties
WORTH: a student, thirties
WILSON: a student, thirties
BLACKIE: an ex-trucker, forties
CUMMINS: a student, thirties
NORA: a student, forties.
CLARENCE: a student, thirties.
MAUREEN: the teacher
ADELE: a student, thirties
ROGER: a student, twenties
NICK: the devil
MICHAEL: the archangel

SCENES

Scene One. SETTING: a playwriting workshop. TIME: the present

Scene Two. SETTING: the same. TIME: one week later.

Scene Three: SETTING: the same. Time: thirty seconds later
WOODY WOODPECKER’S DREAM CAFÉ
A One-Act Play
By
Douglas Engebretsen

Scene One

Time: Present
Setting: A classroom with a door R and a window L. A long table and chairs C.

(Begin with lights out, then a spot on
ACTOR and ACTRESS)

ACTRESS
I know we’re going to die. Dear God. I never should have married you. Daddy warned me you had no common sense. You knew the gas gauge was bad, didn’t you?

ACTOR
Try to stay calm, Tia. Crying just uses moisture. Flowing Springs can’t be much further.

ACTRESS
Will we have to drink our pee? I can see the National Enquirer headline: “Honeymooners cheat death by drinking own pee.” I’m usually such a hydrated person, too.

ACTOR
Sid should be along with the motor home any time now. I left a message.

ACTRESS
Right. The man who never returned a call in his life.

ACTOR
Shut up, Tia. Try and stay calm. If I say I called him, I called him.

ACTRESS
Shut up? We’re married two days and you’re telling me what? Oh, I wish I were single again. Twenty-six years of independence and now what? This? Shut up? Yes, shut up!
ACTOR
Three days. This is Tuesday. Besides, you’re almost twenty-seven. I mean—

ACTRESS
Oooh! You’re calling me old and dried out is it? I hate being married to you! Give me that.

ACTOR
Don’t. You have to go easy on the water. It’s all we have.

(Swooshing sound of a scythe.)

WORTH
(Deep voice)

Unless--you drink your own pee.

ACTOR and ACTRESS
Heeeelp! Heeeelp!

(Spot off, lights up. It is a playwriting workshop.)

WORTH
(Pause.)

Comments?

WILSON
(Long pause)
Waylon Jennings, I heard an interview the other day. He took out this gun once that he had with him because he had loaned it to Merle Haggard and was gonna shoot any musician who used pickup notes.

WORTH

You’re referring to—

WILSON

Just like melody should just develop and you shouldn’t have this big sign hanging out in front telling which direction the chord goes and like that. The title shouldn’t give it away.

BLACKIE

I got a good laugh from Death Valley. I thought it was—
(CUMMINS Enters R.)

WORTH

I'm sorry to do this, but as I emailed you, I have a director's meeting this evening, so Dr. Cummins—

CUMMINS

How do you do?

WORTH

Dr. Cummins will be here. So if you would all be kind enough to introduce yourselves, I'll see you next week. Make sure you all get copies of next week's plays. Sorry to bug out on you like this, but I'm late--sorry.

(Exits R. Pause.)

CUMMINS

Yes, well, carry on.

(To ACTRESS.)

And you are?

ACTRESS

Lucille. I'm in the theatre program.

CUMMINS

An actress!

ACTRESS

I thought it would help me in my roles.

CUMMINS

Yes, I suppose it would. Shakespeare and all. And you?

ACTOR

I was going to take script analysis, but it was closed except for the Tuesday section and that interferes with snowboarding practice.

CUMMINS

I see. And what about you, sir?

( Pause.)
BLACKIE
I was a cross-country trucker with Mayflower until I broke my back.

CUMMINS
Degree program?

BLACKIE
I got an Associate’s in Welding before I went to truck school. What with getting laid over in Cleveland a lot, I’ve watched a damnable lot of movies over the years, so I figured I could write something at least as good as Battleship Earth.

NORA
(Pause.)
I’m in the Elementary program, now that my son’s all grown up and moved away. I’m getting a second bachelor’s.

CUMMINS
Wonderful.

CLARENCE
I’m just here to get my stuff looked at.

CUMMINS
(Pause.)
That’s fine.

CLARENCE
Yeah.

CUMMINS
When are we gonna do it?

CLARENCE
Excuse me?

CUMMINS
That’s what I came for.

WILSON
Four of us haven’t gone yet.

CLARENCE
So do it, then.
WILSON

Senior in the fiction program. And this is Maureen.

MAUREEN

Never had a drama workshop before. This is my sister--

ADELE

--Adele. It’s long drive from Indiana, but it gets me out of the house one night a week.

ROGER

And I’m Roger. We’re discussing my play.

This one?

CUMMINS

Here’s an extra one.

WILSON

Death Valley. I think there was TV show.

CUMMINS

That’s right. Twenty mule-team Borax.

BLACKIE

Yes. Gabby Hayes or somebody--

NORA

Jane Wyman?

BLACKIE

Nope, I’m almost positive it was president Ronald--

CLARENCE

Ray-gun--Excuse me. The names suck.

WILSON

The title?
CLARENCE
The names. What are the odds of anybody named Thad or Tia?

MAUREEN
Oh, I could. The parents of Thad Smith and Tia Jones are pleased to announce—I can see it—the birth of--

BLACKIE
Yeah. When I got married--

CLARENCE
--Nobody's gonna buy names like that. Try something like Ed and Lois. And call the play something with a little life in it.

ROGER
Well--

CLARENCE
Deep subject! Ha ha ha haaaa ha!

ROGER
I mean it takes place in--

CLARENCE
You're not allowed to talk!

CUMMINS
Well that's--

CLARENCE
Another deep subject! Ha ha ha haaaaa ha!

MAUREEN
I liked the play.

BLACKIE
Me too.

WILSON
It was a little short maybe--

CLARENCE
Came right to the point, though, didn't it?
(Pause.)


CUMMINS

This looks like a very promising piece. The humor is helped by the iteration of the word key word, pee, and sets up a dramatic situation that could be resolved in a number of interesting ways. The characters are clear-cut individuals in a cosmos that doesn’t seem to care for them at all, but it is nihilistic without being overbearing. Really a fine draft. I wish I could see what you finally do with it. When you get it done, drop it off at my mailbox. Is there anything else you wanted to say, Roger?

ROGER

No. Thanks very much.

(They pass him their copies of the play.)

BLACKIE

Mine is next. I apologize for its shortness, but I had a hard time getting it on the road.

CUMMINS

Do you have actors?

BLACKIE

Roger, could you do Andy’s part?

ROGER

I don’t know--

BLACKIE

Wilson?

WILSON

Andy?

BLACKIE

What about Bob? Josh?

ACTOR

You do Bob.

ROGER

It’s better if Blackie gets to hear the whole thing.
I would, too.

ROGER

I’ll do Bob.

MAUREEN

I’ll read the stage directions.

(Pause.)

Setting, a containerized warehouse. Lights up. Andy is sweeping.

WILSON

Forty-three—ee years o—old. Happy birthday—. I wish Harrison would get back with that beer.

ROGER

Hi Andy. Hell if I can read or write. Ain’t I a card, though?

WILSON

Not your fault, Bob. No one ever taught you, you ignorant asshole.

ROGER

The missus made zucchini bread from scratch for you. Billy drew a picture. See?

WILSON

Toadies. A whole family of toadies. Here, finish this. And mop the driver’s lounge, too. Somebody threw up in there. I find out who did it, he’s gone.

MAUREEN

Bob sweeps.

ROGER

We can hop, can’t we, boss? Boy, we sure can hop. Heh. Heh. We sure can. Probably it was the afternoon crew. They left pizza and beer cans all over. Those college kids, they sure do barf good.

WILSON

Morons. Where’s Harrison?

ROGER

He quit. I think he ran off with your wife. He’s been over there every morning this week.
WILSON
He what? Who gave him permission to quit? We got twelve thousand pounds going
to Indy this afternoon. No way in hell! That son of a bitch wants a job again—

ROGER
Blackie called in sick again. Howard dropped a hide-a-bed on him yesterday.

WILSON
Shit! I want you to call that malingering son of a bitch that if he doesn’t get in here—
Ow! He’s fired. I don’t care if his kid has leukemia or not, I—
(Gasps.)
I’ll fire his shit so fast—Oh!

MAUREEN
He dies, Lights out.
(Pause.)
Comments?
(Pause. WORTH enters R)

WILSON
The idea still seems good, but a continuation seems problematic.

How do you mean?

MAUREEN

WILSON
The plays inside the outer structure have to be too short for believability— the idea
that they are real plays. Would a real drama workshop take such a short play
seriously?

ROGER
Well, we’re discussing this. How long is the play?

CUMMINS
I figure it’ll go ninety pages.

MAUREEN
Truth is often stranger than fiction. Maybe they wouldn’t know much about a
workshop anyway.

NORA
Think about Worth’s taxi-dispatcher rewrite. Seven suicides are not likely, I would
think, no matter how dysfunctional the taxi business in Ann Arbor is.
It was over a five-year period.

MAUREEN
Let's look at that now. Then we'll talk about both plays. Is that okay with everybody.
(They nod.)

Whether or not it happened is not the point. It has to be convincing.

CUMMINS
How do you know what is believable? Is this conversation believable? What if we had a transcript of it? Would that be realistic?

MAUREEN
I suppose it would depend upon the context.

CLARENCE
Well, it's one thing to say "I take you for my wedded wife," and another to actually—do it. Austin and--

Like Tony and Tina's Wedding.

CLARENCE
It's been in New York for years.

MAUREEN
--Or a dream--you believe that. Or a memory.
(Pause)

By the way, I really like how economically the second play started. Every speech helped establish who the people were. It's good to remember that every speech helps establish character, every context, milieu, every action, plot.

I thought it was read well, too.

NORA

ADELE
Me too. You guys were really good.

WILSON
Thanks. I really got into it. Roger, you were good.

ROGER
Thanks.
ACTRESS
A good reading really makes all the difference. If you can just get inside the character’s skin, it’s no problem reading. You begin to understand the texture of the text itself, how it would be for the real person there.

ACTOR
Not too much over the top. I mean it’s all intuitive. You could probably do it without a script.

WILSON
Stuff bombs if it gets quiet, though. If somebody coughs--

MAUREEN
But that’s also when it’s getting really good. You have to have faith in what you’re doing.

CLARENCE
What are we doing? I mean right now.

CUMMINS
Clarence--

CLARENCE
You’re not allowed to talk! Dying on stage. Give me a break. How can anybody do that realistically? Bang, you’re dead? Auugh—

MAUREEN
(Laughs.)

Clarence, sometimes you are the Blue Racer.

CLARENCE
Thanks a lot. Cummins, who is the Blue Racer?

CUMMINS
The guy with the blue dreadlocks who used to hang out endlessly in the English lounge until he started reciting Shakespeare in the buff.

CLARENCE
You made me him?

CUMMINS
What did the rest of you think?
You kept all our names.

CUMMINS

It was easier.

MAUREEN

(Pause.)

Remember to change the names before you send it out.

(Pause.)

Shall we read Worth’s rewrite, and then quit?

(Pause.)

Josh, you’re doing Zumstein’s part again? Adele and Roger?

Right.

MAUREEN

And I’ll read the stage directions. Setting, a desk with a map.

(Fade to black)

ACTOR

(Sings.)

Inchworm, inchworm,
measuring the marigolds--

(Spot on ACTOR, bent over desk with pencil and ruler.)

Six-oh, you’re closest to the train station by a quarter inch. Get the professor one last time at the nursing home--before he kicks the bucket.

(Pause.)

Heh-heh.

(Pause.)

What’s the matter with you people? I tell the joke, you laugh. Huh?

(Pause.)

I admit, things are not what they were. That was then, this is now.

(Pause.)

Listen to me. I was honest man (as much as taxi-dispatchers can be honest). And now what?

(Pause.)

A corpus Delicti. As in evidence of the crime.
Sui, the Latin word for self, and -cide, like in homicide, insecticide, genocide—to kill. 

(Pause.)

Early on, I should have known how it would end. You’re not supposed to do operations on yourself. 

(Pause.)

It was not my fault. I was just a lemming. 

(Pause.)

The first guy was a total low-life. Look who he hung around with—D’Angelo and people like that, and then D’Angelo did it with that gun he always played around with. And then it stopped for two years. 

(Pause.)

But then when Torston Kuchi got it through the heart, up in Arrowwood, and Kevin died, shall we say under suspicious circumstances, in the stairwell of the parking structure, it started up again. First it was Q, who opens his veins bathing in the manner of the Roman legions, then his girlfriend Stacy who got heroin from Dave’s brother, who’s never mentioned in polite company. 

(Pause.)

Reno! 

(Pause.)

It all started with him? He was a good driver, too. A little aggressive maybe. He had about thirty points. 

(Pause.)

And there was Oxander. Barbiturate powder and half a bottle of whiskey. Who knows if that was even on purpose? 

(Pause.)

And the other Dave. Q’s buddy. 

(Pause.)

He was some kind of mechanical Einstein. Nobody knew. He could take anything apart and fix it with a hammer a crescent wrench, and a screwdriver. When the clutch went out on my car he fixed it for a hundred bucks and a case of beer. So why does a mechanical genius take cyanide in the choir loft of the Lutheran church? 

(Pause.)

They found his suicide note in Quinn’s wallet when they found Q in the tub. And Q! It was about being forty. The guy couldn’t face losing his youth! You wouldn’t expect that kind of vanity from a guy who looked like that. 

(Pause.)

Some you can’t count. Gene clearly smoked himself to death. And Debra. A little addiction there—that can happen to anyone. 

(Pause.)

Give me a break! I had a small drinking problem and I was depressed about Milham, and I just got a little excited one night I came home and the fish were dead because
the power went off. If Avery hadn’t left his pistol on the table I would have been all right.

(Pause.)

I’m also not counting Doug Blair, who bought it running from the cops on a dead end street, and La Shawna who picked up the wrong guy at the halfway house. Or Stuart, who clearly ate himself to death, and Milham, who had a pretty normal heart attack for a man his age. Or Wes, makin’ a connection in Ypsilanti when he got shot.

(Pause.)

Like I said, it started with the guy no one liked and then Anderson, and D’Angelo and Q and Stacy and the other Dave and then me. It was only seven in what? Ten years?

(Pause.)

When I took that cartilage out of my knee, I should have known. It’s not normal to do operations on yourself. I could have gone to the doc, if I was willing to spend money on what was really a very simple procedure. I mean I checked the books at the medical school library, and it seemed safe enough. But after you’ve cut yourself and seen your own blood streaming down your leg, you’ve gotten weird.

(Pause.)

He took his own life. Big deal!

(Pause.)

We made a million dollars for them in ten years. Ten cents a flag drop! Everything we did, we did for the company. Fifteen hundred orders a day!

(Pause.)

Who wants an order? Somebody answer me. I got orders on the board.

(Blackout, pause, lights up)

MAUREEN

(They applaud.)

What a great speech.

ADELE

I feel like I know the guy.

CUMMINS

But was the whole thing believable? That’s what I’m wondering.

BLACKIE

There’s a lot going on here—If—

CLARENCE

--I was not quite convinced.
How many?

CLARENCE

It’s like Heaven’s Gate. You couldn’t keep something like that out of the paper.

BLACKIE

If it was real.

WORTH

It was.

CUMMINS

That’s not the point.

WILSON

I don’t know. Remember that fish have fallen from the sky before. In Australia, I think. Every time I go to San Francisco I run into my next-door neighbor at a pizza parlor. Just because something happens doesn’t make it more believable.

MAUREEN

The audience is more than willing to suspend their disbelief. We couldn’t do much otherwise.

(Pause.)

BLACKIE

Maybe his speech gives too much information.

MAUREEN

You need to give a lot at first and the audience knows and expects it, so you can get away soliloquies, and prompts. You know that Tattoo character in Fantasy Island? “The plane, boss, the plane.” Ricardo Montalban should turn around and say, “Shut up, you stupid little narrative device.

CUMMINS

Like I had a reason for everyone to tell who they are.

MAUREEN

It works.
Dante has the suicides changed into trees and speak when the Harpies tear off their limbs, as long as they bleed.

I already have too much material.

It's a great first scene. I'm looking forward to the rest.

Getting back to Mr. Cummin's piece, it also looks promising, with genuine humor, helped by the iteration of key words, and setting up dramatic situations that could be resolved in a number of interesting ways. The characters are clear-cut individuals in a cosmos that doesn't seem to care for them at all, but it is nihilistic without being overbearing. Really a fine draft

(They laugh.)

I think your characters could be more distinctive.

You have to admit that the stakes are low.

I have an idea for how to juice it up, but I need a heavy. It could be you, Blue Racer.

I?

Heh heh.

Well, I hate to break up a good discussion, but since Mickey is pointing at the six, that has to be it for tonight. Adele, can you give me a ride?

I have to go to the library.

Never mind. I'll just call Bill.
Scene Two

Setting: the same place, one week later.

(WORTH is absent. Lights come up on the workshop, already in progress.)

CUMMINS
(Clears throat.)

And whose play is next?

NORA
I guess I’m up. Lucille, you’re doing Helen, right?

ACTRESS
Yes. Josh and I practiced it a few times.

NORA
Oh, good! I hoped you would. And Wilson is Ace and Maureen is Phyllis. Wups, forget Phyllis, I wrote her out. Does everyone remember the story? Ace and Helen have been living together end for three years, and Helen is starting to fear that something is going on between him and Phyllis. Dr. Cummins, could you read the stage directions?

CUMMINS
Certainly. Lights up.

(Lights fade.)

Wearing rubber gloves Helen is doing the dishes. Ace enters right with a suitcase.

(Spot on ACTOR and ACTRESS who have separated from the group.)

ACTRESS
What did I do?

(Pause.)

We’ve had some problems, but why now? I finally get a decent job, and we have a little money—
You know.

I really don’t.

I don’t know--

Still love me?

Always.

He moves toward the door. She stops him.

I do everything—I just--

I can’t stay.

You aren’t happy?

If you love me, you’ll let me go.

Are you crazy?

I’ve made up my mind, and if you really, truly, love me, you will let me go.

Stop saying that!

I’m sorry--
ACTRESS
(Wailing.)
You’re mine! I have given you everything I have.
(She hits him on the head with her gloves.)

You promised me! What kind of man are you? I live with you three years, cook and clean for you, and now you’re going to just walk away?

I-I can’t help it. I have to--

ACTOR

ACTRESS
(Continuing to hit him.)

You have to what?

ACTOR
(Disengaging.)

I’m going over to Phyllis’s.

ACTRESS
So you can live off her? We’ll just see about that. There’s a few things about you Phyllis doesn’t know about.

(Runs to phone. Dials. He takes the phone away.)

ACTOR
I just need to talk to her is all. Look, maybe I can stick around here one more week—

ACTRESS
Oh, Ace, don’t ever leave me! I would die! I would just die.

CUMMINS

Scene Two. Setting: Some years later. A motel room with bed, end table, dresser and lamp. There is a door right, a door to the bathroom left. Lights up.

(Spot on ACTOR)

Ace is combing his hair. There is a knock.

ACTRESS
Let me in, Ace.
Ace hides several small objects before he goes to the door and lets Helen in.

What about Cincinnati?

Changed my mind. How’s the conference?

I’m really surprised. Where’s Zack?

I left him with Mom. Why?

I-I just wondered. Do you have luggage?

Nope.

You must be tired.

You sound kind of nervous. Look. Your hands are shaking.

I’m real busy with the Angstrom account. I gotta make some big numbers.

Zack hasn’t seen you in a week. Or me either.

When he’s a couple years older we can go camping or something. Go to the mountains.

Or the seashore?

Right.
ACTRESS
“When he’s older, I’ll take him camping in the mountains, or to the seashore.”
Sound familiar? What’s wrong?

CUMMINS
There is a knock. Ace goes to door, left, and brings in a tray with two dinners and a bottle of Jack Daniels. The phone rings. Ace answers it.

Wrong number!

He hangs up.

See?

Hmmm. Filet mignon!

(Pause.)

You okay, Helen?

Never been better.

She pours herself a stiff drink, drinks half.

Go ahead.

She pours him one. He drinks it.

Like a shower curtain across the brain, isn’t it? Feel better now?

CUMMINS
She takes papers out of her purse and smashes them into his face.
ACTRESS

How stupid do you think I am? It's insulting. Just--because I let this go on for six weeks? Yes, it does. Hell of a Christmas, huh?

ACTOR

Divorce?

ACTRESS

I got custody.

ACTOR

You can't.

ACTRESS

I sure as hell did.

ACTOR

There must be some--I'm sorry, I wasn't--.

(Pause.)

I'm really, really--We need to--

ACTRESS

Not me. Not Zack! I'm outta here.

CUMMINS

She starts to leave.

ACTOR

No listen to me—Please—I love you—don't leave. Darling--

CUMMINS

Ace gets up and tries to kiss her.

ACTRESS

(Indicating her derriere.)

Why don't you just pucker up and kiss this Huh? One more time, baby. Kiss this!

(Blackout. Lights up. All applaud except CLARENCE.)

MAUREEN

Terrific.
That really felt good.

Slime.

No doubt.

(Pause.)

You guys like that sentimental crap? Listen. You try to play that kind of stuff anywhere around here and they’re going to throw stuff. No offense, but that thing stinks. The first scene was crap. No guy’s gonna stand there and take that kind of sludge from a woman just when he’s trying to get down the road, and then she gets all over him later for doing what a guy’s gotta do. I mean get a little reality. Get over yourself, Nora. Throw in the dishrag. Go back to mah-jongg or whatever you did before you thought you could write. What a bunch of crap.

Why thank you, Clarence.

You’re not allowed to talk!

No. Go ahead. It’s all right.

Punk.

I can hardly wait to hear your next play.

Just wait.

You guys done?

I am. Jerk.
CUMMINS

People, please. Remember, there should be nothing personal in your comments. The purpose of the workshop community is to help one another find the best solution to dramatic problems: to be another set of eyes and ears. Remember, we are all professionals here, and none of us are perfect writers, and the best judge of performance will be the audience, that wonderful, mystical body we always must imagine nearby.

BLACKIE

That may be, but if junior here opens his mouth again to Nora, I'm going to kick his ass, broken back or no.

CLARENCE

Well—

BLACKIE

That's a deep subject. Ha ha ha Haaa ha.
(Pause.)
I think Adele is next, if memory serves me.

What about mine?

CLARENCE

MAUREEN

Adele's is next.

What?

CLARENCE

ADELE

Adele is next!

Dr. Cummins, could you read the stage directions?

Okay.

ADELE

Blackie, could you do Igor's part?

My pleasure, ma'am.
CUMMINS
(Lights fade. Spot on BLACKIE and NORA, who both wear brown grocery bags over their heads.)

Setting: Mars. The probe has landed. Igor Watley and his wife, Ardene, are the first humans ever to set foot on the red planet. They leave the space-lock.

BLACKIE
I can’t see a thing. This faceplate is all fogged up.

NORA
Use some Kleenex.

BLACKIE
Darn! I forgot to bring any. Here, maybe I can reach it with my tongue. There. That does it. Pretty smeared, though. I can hardly see a thing. Wave your hand, Ardene.

NORA
You’d think for ninety billion dollars you wouldn’t have to use your tongue to clean the window.

BLACKIE
You’d think so. Ardene, the whole inside of this suit smells like freeze-dried mouse-turds.

NORA
You should take care of it, Igor. Mine is nice and piney-smelling.

(Beat.)
Igor, did you remember to pick up the keys to the airlock? They were lying on the red thingy.

BLACKIE
You think I’m stupid?

NORA
Show them to me. I don’t trust your memory. Remember the time--

BLACKIE
--They’re right here someplace--Oh damn! I did leave them in there! Why did you put them on the red thingy anyway? I always leave them on the other thingy—the green one. I wish just once in your life you’d leave something where I left it!
NORA
Now, don’t yell at me for your mistakes. It’s not my responsibility to keep track of the keys. And I told you they were on the red thingy ten minutes ago. Mission Control! Come In!

BLACKIE
Don’t get them involved in it! I can get the damn thing open. The antenna wire will work—Wups! Didn’t mean to do that! Can you hear me? Can anyone hear me? Ardene!! Ardene!!

(Pause.)

ACTOR
I liked the dynamic of the relationship.

CLARENCE
Yeah, right.

BLACKIE
Kinda like.

ADELE
--I have to admit—

CLARENCE
--Well, I—

ACTOR
--The reason that we—

CLARENCE
I was talking!

(Two idiots on the moon. Ha Ha. Next Play.)

MAUREEN
It’s Adele’s time, rude boy.

CLARENCE
So talk!
Really, I—

MAUREEN

--It's not about you.

CLARENCE

Then who is it about?

ADELE

CLARENCE

--You're not allowed to talk.

CUMMINS

Excuse me, I--

CLARENCE

--Could we get on to the next play!

CUMMINS

Fine. I just wanted to say that while the setting was a little exotic, it certainly earned its premise. One needs to take risks now and again or we risk being boring which—

CUMMINS

(Pause.)

WILSON

(Me. I'm not sure where this thing is going, so don't react yet. I just want to hear what it sounds like. Clarence could be Zol, and Maureen could be Klag. I'll read the stage directions.

CLARENCE

Never mind. Who has the next play?

CUMMINS

(Passes out copies of play.)

Never mind. Who has the next play?

WILSON

Me. I'm not sure where this thing is going, so don't react yet. I just want to hear what it sounds like. Clarence could be Zol, and Maureen could be Klag. I'll read the stage directions.

CLARENCE

I never do acting.

WILSON

Josh?
I'd rather not. This looks pretty hard for me.

I'll do it.

Me, too.

(WORTH enters R.)

Setting: a road. Zol enters Right, Klag Left, with flags. Zol’s is pink, Klag’s blue.

I can’t read this.

Just like it’s spelled.

Ik forble-board yuns, exonate smag. What raggy smythe, eh? Exulla?

Non dabu Exulla, tarpon zek!

They exchange flags. She moons Zol, who smiles and returns moon. They spit.

Forgon idjee. Vot spuuk yu?

She slaps him.

No-bless. Ang villun cobascu estraviga.

He breaks wind on Klags’s flag.

Nop? Torson idjee, nob coppule-orum. Compronsic?
(Holds nose while speaking.)

Nog! Yob wesgo bleth—morgen goble feeder-fahter. Mon-gainy torson awlalay hib!

ACTRESS

Pong!

ACTOR

She tears off his pants.

WILSON

ACTRESS

Ping! Izvan-yityi gos codly norm forby. Nizzon zeeth.

ACTOR

(Whimpering.)

Hizzon Whaat? Zeeth? Ampasslik!

ACTRESS


WILSON

She breaks Zol’s flag triumphantly.

ACTRESS

Griz on, tarponzek. Awwlaway hut!

WILSON

They march Left, Zol with hands on head.

ACTRESS


WILSON

Thank you.

ACTRESS

(Long pause. Everyone looks stupefied.

WORTH

Very good. Reactions? This is not much like our usual play, is it? Thank you, Dr. Cummins. My director’s meeting was briefer than I expected.
CUMMINS
And I’ll take my leave. Thank you all. It was certainly interesting listening to your plays. Good work, I’m sure.

(He exits.)

ACTOR
Wow, I didn’t get that at all.

ACTRESS
I think it was about symbolism. It was sort of a symbol of symbolism. Where everything is metaphorical for everything else. I mean, the two people were like fighting or something.

WORTH
Ritualistic, I thought.

ACTRESS
And then she marched him off.

WORTH
Did everyone see that?

WILSON
I worked on it a couple of months.

WORTH
Certainly a piece rich in connections. Well paced, the reversal comes right on the heels of the discovery there, in the initial sequence. And then the cadence coming to ratify and reify the whole event. Pong! Ping! Pure poetry.

(To CLARENCE)
I don’t think we have time for yours today, however.

CLARENCE
And why not?

WORTH
Because the head of the department of English wants to ask you some questions about the last play you handed in.

CLARENCE
Woody Woodpecker’s Dream Café?
WORTH
Yes. Some of the dramatic incidents were just a trifle too close to what, shall we say, is real literature. Published literature. Blackie?

(BLACKIE approaches CLARENCE and WORTH.)

NORA
That was a sick play. I knew there was something wrong with him.

Get back.

CLARENCE
(He looks for his briefcase. BLACKIE pulls it away.)

BLACKIE
No way, man. I drove truck way too long to be stupid.

Did you run out of ideas? Or was it simple time pressure.

I didn't do it.

WORTH
Why deny it?

I didn't.

CLARENCE
Who then?

I found it.

WORTH
Pages blowing down the street, was it? The whole thing?

(Stands. Reaches for briefcase.)

I'm afraid this little show has run its course.

CLARENCE
(Moving to BLACKIE.)
No! Give it back!

WORTH

What’s inside? You know what happens if a gun appears in a theatre, None of us are quite good enough to live, are we?

CLARENCE

No gun!

BLACKIE

What’s this, then?

(He shakes the briefcase, opens and removes gun.)

CLARENCE

(Struggling with BLACKIE.)

I had to. He made me do it.

WORTH

(Joining the fray.)

Who made you do what?

CLARENCE

(Gaining possession of the gun.)

I was working at Woody’s two nights ago, and a weird guy came in with a gun.

WORTH

We know. It was a Vietnam vet running marijuana, right? Plagiarist!

CLARENCE

I couldn’t help it!

(He points the gun at the audience.)

Like this.

(Pause. He points gun at the cast and at different spots in the audience.)

“When you coming back, Red Ryder?”

(Pause. Loud.)

“When you coming back, Red Ryder.

(Pause, then very loud.)

“Never!”

(Blackout.)
Scene Three

(Lights up. They are all seated again)

Comments?

MAUREEN

I see what you’re getting at, but—

WILSON

I don’t get it at all. What’s the point of the last scene anyway? And it’s inadequately prepared.

WORTH

So you start with one play and end with another. It gets the audience thinking and that’s always good, but I don’t know if it works here.

MAUREEN

Assuming of course that this is the ending. But it’s not, is it?

WORTH

Anticlimactic.

ADELE

You men and your guns.

WORTH

What?

ADELE

He didn’t use it.

BLACKIE

I know I’m new to this, but the audience is not going to like having a gun pointed at them, even a prop. Mistakes have been made.

ROGER

(Laughs.)

It raises the stakes.

ACTOR

It gets the hormones working.
BLACKIE
Some citizen paying thirty-five bucks doesn’t want their hormones working that much. Besides, when somebody threatens me, it tends to really tick me off. I don’t think you want that.

ACTRESS
They’d direct it at the actors, though.

BLACKIE
There’s always that opportunity for improv. That’s what gets people in trouble. But first they’d get so scared they’d probably figure that if the movie was over, they’d just run to the car and warm it up for the missus.

WILSON
So end it. It’s done all it set out to do. The oatmeal box thing.

You’ve lost me, Wilson.

CLARENCE

WILSON
The Quaker on the Quaker Oats box is holding a box of Quaker Oats with a picture of a Quaker on a Quaker Oats box. You follow?

ROGER
As much as I ever do.

WILSON
And that pictured Quaker is holding a box of Quaker oats with a picture of a Quaker on a Quaker Oats box holding a box of Quaker oats with a picture of a Quaker on a Quaker Oats box and I guess you get the idea.

CLARENCE
I get the idea but so what?

WILSON
I agree. But even if it’s true you never know what the audience might buy into, at whatever level, they can only enjoy one Quaker at a time, so there they are, enjoying whatever Quaker they are looking at, at the time they are looking at it and all the other Quakers are half faded into their short-term memory. And that’s the end. I mean what’s the point? It’s probably half an hour long already, and he can just keep filling in the middle if he wants it longer. The structure’s sort of like Canterbury Tales to begin with. Think about the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale.”
Excellent point.

ROGER

But it doesn’t have to be. He could depart from it at any time, you know.

WILSON

Do you think Chaucer could have departed from his formula, once he had set it up?

MAUREEN

But he did. “The Canon Yeoman’s Tale,” for example. The Canon came in from the outside, left the yeoman, and that was that. So much for a self-contained system.

You can always just write more.

ROGER

Of course you can if you want to. Would it be good to?

NORA

Why wouldn’t it be?

CLARENCE

A lot of it is just about using up time. It sounds stupid, but it’s true.

WORTH

You still have to have plot, action, and character. You can’t just sit there and discuss stuff forever. I mean, did anybody ever say My Dinner With Andre was my favorite movie? People have lives to live. If you blab on enough, they will.

MAUREEN

You have to have a certain amount of plot, or people don’t care what’s going on.

BLACKIE

And you better get somebody up a tree quickly.

ADELE

(Laugh.)

--And throw rocks at him—
BLACKIE
Or forget it. And if you run out of action, the audience is going to walk out of the theatre.

MAUREEN
You have such good memories. Cummins, is there anything further you wanted to say?

CUMMINS
I agree with most of what you’ve said. If I can make it last three times as long—

CLARENCE
No way.

CUMMINS
Well, you never know. I sure would like a ninety-minute play, somehow.

MAUREEN
You might be able to pull it off. I don’t know.

CLARENCE
Women have given birth in less time.

ADELE
It has to last at least until the gun goes off.

CUMMINS
I thought you just had to use the gun.

ADELE
Waving it around is not the same.

WORTH
There are no guns in your play.

ADELE
I’m thinking of using a bow and arrow, though. Like Artemis.

(Pause.)

BLACKIE
I wondered about that deer license on your coat Adele. I’m a bow hunter myself—
It's gotta be six stories.

BLACKIE

NICK

Only five, Blackie. You said the secret word, “hunter.” Oh yes.

(He pulls a gun.)

NORA

A terrorist!

(WILSON and WORTH knock over the table. The group drags it over to the door. They huddle behind it.)

WILSON

Whoever you are—

NICK

“Prince of Darkness” ring any bells?

ROGER

Oh come on--

NICK

I usually go by the name “Nick.” Think of me as your—what? How about “future barbecue host.” Ha Ha Ha Haaa Ha.

(Pandemonium. They all rush to the door, pulling on it, screaming and groaning.)

So entertaining you are. No, I’m not Yoda, am I? Someone a little closer to home.

(More thunder and lightning. The sound of wind, and earthquake.)

All things must come to an end.

(BLACKIE stands and aims gun at NICK.)
I'm a dead shot, Blackie. That's a prop, anyway. This is the real thing.

(They both shoot. Pause. They both remain standing. NICK blows smoke from the barrel.)

I lied. But that's not why I stopped by.

Who's got a cell phone? Call security.

(NICK replaces gun, produces cell phone.)

Allow me.

(He punches in the numbers, holds the phone to his ear.)

Why do you suppose they don't answer?

Now I'm sure you're a good person. Just let us go, and we'll just see what can be done to meet your demands.

Demands? Maureen, I have no demands. I'm just here to set the record straight.

What do you mean?

No, no, please don't comment. You're spoiling the rhythms. We need a longer speech here I think.

But I--

I've been at this longer than you have.

And knowledge is power.

(Pause.)

Knowledge is what people have left when their imaginations have died.
You read that, didn’t you, Roger? It was in last Tuesday’s bridge column! And four clubs went down, too, didn’t it?

Okay, okay.

Lets just say I have a little secret I’m going to let you in on.

A secret?

You don’t exist. None of you. And if you did, you won’t much longer.

Philosophy has been trying to prove that for two thousand years.

I remember.

What?

Do any of you remember anything—anything at all? Let your minds be idle.

(A pause.)

An idle mind is the—

My point exactly. Ha ha. Little joke. Here we are, gathering nuts in May.

I’m in shock.

Ha ha ha.
What do you want, Nick?

**WILSON**

**NICK**

**Torment.**

(Measured.)

Ha ha ha ha ha.

(Pause.)

You thought you’d live forever, didn’t you? In five minutes my associate, Mr. Moloch is going to come through the door with a Hawaiian pizza and by then, you're all going to be—you’ll pardon the expression—history—every one of you.

**ALL**

No!

(Some go back to the door. Some go to the window and look out hopelessly.)

**NICK**

(Pause.)

Oh, let me demonstrate! You first, Blackie, since you attempted violence to my divine persona.

(He points at BLACKIE, who dies, painfully. Adele rushes to him, attempting CPR.)

**ADELE**

Help me!

**NICK**

And then our fine actor-lovers. Broken hearts. A common sort of ending.

(They run to one another, embrace, and die in each other’s arms.)


(Pause.)

Don’t all talk at once.

**WILSON**

(Trying to rush him, he struggles against the touch that kills.)

Stop!
The voice of reason. I have no time for you.

Certainly not these—procreators.

No!

Or authority.

What did we ever do to you?

Or talent.

My, my--hey, hey.

And now my son, an appropriate death.

When you comin’ back, Red Ryder?

No!

And there we are. Look around, human beings. See this and know it is your future—hey? Am I right?

When you’re dead, you’re dead.

Little bit louder now.
(Cheerleading.)

When you’re dead, you’re dead! Two, four, six, eight, who do we appreciate? (I say Pluto, you say Dis) Pluto! Dis! Pluto! Dis! Pluto! Dis! Pluto! Dis! Pluto! Dis!

(He pauses, listening. There is a distant drumming and the faint skirl of bagpipes.

Unfair play!

(He rushes to the window, staring at the door. Curls his lip in hatred.)

Michael, you old dog.

(Pause.)

Legions.

(Pause.)

Legions!

(Pause.)

To me! To me!

(He exits, climbing awkwardly out the window. Lights fade, the table is removed, and three bales of straw are placed DR, like a bench, with MICHAEL in place. The ending tableau is accompanied by Rachmaninov’s Vespers. The first piece: Priidite poklonimsya (O come, let us worship) [2 minutes 41 seconds] is a realistic taxi mime and a bridge to a second formation of bales. The second piece, Blagoslovi, dushe moya (Bless the Lord, O my soul) [5 minutes 36 seconds] is a Javanese style dance with archery. Both are accompanied by a slide show of natural photographs. During the dance, the cast very slowly arises and moves to the final position with MICHAEL UL, ending with a group wave to the audience. Lights fade.

THE END