

Death: or The Playground

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WGA

Lights up on a hospital bed, machines are humming. The bed is illuminated with a single light from above. There is no movement. We cannot see the patient in the bed. There are three circular tables arranged on the stage around the bed: one front and downstage center, one a little upstage left and one a little upstage right. There is also a podium far downstage right, near the audience. There is a small light affixed to the podium. The beeping of the electrocardiograph becomes louder and louder. Protagonist, seated in the audience, becomes increasingly agitated by the situation and the lack of action. Eventually he is unable to contain himself and leaves his seat.

PROTAGONIST

(under his breath) Goddamnit.

[He gets up from his seat. He tentatively approaches the bed/machine. He is drawn to look at the body, but is uncomfortable with coming onto the stage. As soon as he gets close the nurse walks in.]

NURSE

Excuse me, sir, are...are you family?

PROTAGONIST

Family?

NURSE

Of the patient?

PROTAGONIST

Uhhh...yeah, I'm... He's my, uh...

NURSE

Okay well we're really trying to be considerate of your needs, but you really should try to respect visiting hours.

PROTAGONIST

Of course. I'm sorry.

NURSE

Now if you'll just take a seat over there I'll let you know of his progress in a minute.

PROTAGONIST

Thank you.

[Protagonist takes his seat in the audience again. He's confused. He looks around at the audience as if he can't comprehend why they are there or why they don't do something. He gets frustrated and stands up again. Just as he steps onto the stage chaos breaks out. The Nurse returns dressed as a cocktail waitress, doctors and poets and bar people mingle around the bed. Drinks are ordered, a bell is rung, and the Nurse/Barmaid announces (As though to say "Last Call"):

NURSE / BARMAID

The patient will be dead in 5 minutes.

[People jabber on about drinks and poetry and general confusion results until the focus is drawn to the table stage left. At the table stage right are seated Paul Robeson and William S. Burroughs in a heated discussion. At the stage left table are Salesman and Mark in a likewise heated discussion. Soon Protagonist finds himself whirled around to a seat at the bed/bar, next to Anticanadian. Hippy Beatnick 1 & 2 continue to mill about the bar.]

About 15 seconds after the chaos breaks out, a young comely woman in a Vegas showgirl outfit walks in from stage left. She is carrying a placard like the ones they use at boxing matches to show what round it is. On this placard are the words, "THIS IS HAPPENING." She walks to center stage in front of the middle table, brandishes the placard, flashes a million-watt smile, does game-show girl presentation of the sign, and then proceeds off stage right. Spots go down on the stage right and center tables and all characters on stage stop speaking audibly.]

SALESMAN

Well I appreciate your diligence, Mrs. Marks, but what we are talking about here is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It is one of the most amazing products that I have ever been involved with and I feel remiss not to spread the gospel, if you will, to the masses about its wonderful benefits. It literally pays for itself.

MOTHER:

See now I've always had a problem with that.

SALESMAN:

What's that, ma'am?

MOTHER:

When people say the word 'literally,' when they clearly don't mean it. Obviously, the product won't pay you or me anything. Why don't you just say the product will practically pay for itself? Or maybe preface the whole thing by saying "In a manner of speaking"? Obviously the product won't earn *me* any money. What you mean to say is that because of the immeasurable value I will eventually place in this policy, whatever I paid for it will seem like a bargain. I mean, isn't that really what you meant to say, and since we're still on the subject --

[Salesman searches his training materials.]

SALESMAN

Um, I think we're going off the subject, actually. At this point we're supposed to be *(points to manual and reads aloud)* "closing the deal." There's certainly no closing going on here. And hardly any dealing either, to be honest.

MOTHER

Since we're on the subject, why do you feel the need to barrage me with clichés like, "It literally pays for itself." if the product is as valuable as you say? I mean, if it's so revolutionary, shouldn't anyone be able to see the value of owning a policy like this?

[Salesman stares at her blankly.]

SALESMAN

(Looks in pamphlet again) And in just six easy payments you can outright own this amazing new product, which I can say without hyperbole is the single greatest thing in the history of the universe.

MOTHER

What was the name of your company again?

SALESMAN

(Fishes in his briefcase and pulls out another pamphlet) Here it is, ma'am like I said before: Immortality Inc. We sell assurance policies to only the select few who meet our rigorous financial, social, cultural, political, figurative, antisocial, antidisestablishmentarian, innovative, corrupt, temporary, made-up, affectionately expressed requirements.

MOTHER

Oh. And how'd you find me?

SALESMAN

We bought the mailing list from Reader's Digest.

MOTHER

I see. Well you know, my husband and I already have quite satisfactory life insurance policies, as a matter of fact we can't wait to die so we can enjoy them.

SALESMAN

Oh, no ma'am. This isn't life INSurance; this is life ASSurance. We sell immortality, for what we consider to be a very reasonable fee.

MOTHER

Oh. Oh well I'm quite sure that's impossible.

SALESMAN

(Smiling proudly) Until now!

MOTHER

Oh, you misunderstand. I don't mean like no one has ever thought of it before. I mean it goes against the laws of physics. Immortality can't be sold because it doesn't exist.

SALESMAN

(Still smiling) Until now!

MOTHER

(Looks at first disgruntled, then resigned) Let me explain this to you. Your boss told you, you were selling immortality, but if I buy this, there's no way I'm going to be immortal. You see, this is a scam to sucker poor innocent folks who are just trusting enough to believe that someone has finally found a way to stop the aging process. Look why don't we forget about this all selling business? How 'bout you and me shuffle off to the West Indies and get married. Your boss will never know

what happened to you. You get off scot-free. By the time the shit does go down with these bogus policies, we'll be licking banana daiquiris off of some island girl's breasts. Whudduya say to that?

SALESMAN

(Looking nervous, but still smiling) Until now!

MOTHER

(sighs) How much?

SALESMAN

Your basic policy with Immortality Inc. can run as low as \$7.5 billion! And remember, they can be paid in six easy installments!

MOTHER

\$7.5 billion, hunh? Well, my husband should have no trouble affording that, he's an assistant restaurant manager.

SALESMAN

Oh, I've heard the food-service industry is the place to be these days.

MOTHER

Tell me about it. Hopefully he'll have his own store by next summer.

SALESMAN

Then we can begin the paperwork?

MOTHER

Certainly. Six payments, let's see that comes out to one point something like two billion and change per payment? Boy we're really gonna have to cinch up the old pocketbook.

SALESMAN

Again ma'am, how can you put a price on something that's gonna change your life?

MOTHER

Unless it's bullshit.

SALESMAN

(Looking nervous again) I'm sorry . . . ?

MOTHER

Nothing. You can't. You're right; there is no price too great to pay.

SALESMAN

Welcome to our family. Now if you could just sign here, here, here...

[Fade out spot.]

[As the lights come up on ROBESON and BURROUGHS, who are very involved in conversation,

a brief flutter of the bar/hospital bed chaos follows the action from stage left to stage right. A B-52 is ordered and there is a bit of laughing and shouting. The boxing girl comes out with another sign, this one says, "This is Happening NOW." Protagonist shifts his attention to the discussion going on stage right.]

BURROUGHS

No, see, you're not following again, Robeson. Your sociopolitical diatribes have become obsolete here in "early oughts" America, you see. This is the dawning of a pus-encrusted millennium, dear fellow. The pigs and chickens have spent decades wallowing in their own filth and now they need a good asshole to toss their problems in. Old warhorses like us have been sent out to stud with infertile mares.

[The waitress comes over and BURROUGHS fishes out some change and begins to count it.]

ROBESON

William, why don't you just let me pay?

BURROUGHS

My pedophilic publisher did not see fit to give me an advance on my latest novel. He thought it of no social significance.

ROBESON

Ironic.

BURROUGHS

To the extreme.

ROBESON

Of course, I remember a William Burroughs who would kowtow to the demands of no man!

BURROUGHS

How could you? You were too busy rubbing shoulders with fascists and idealists. Thank you.

[The waitress brings back a syringe. Burroughs begins to shoot up.]

ROBESON

Must you perform your narcotic last-rites ritual every time we meet?

BURROUGHS

Oh, these aren't last rites, comrade. I'd never let a priest near me when I'm dying. They've only got a key to the shithouse.

ROBESON

I have no reason to apologize for my dealings with the Communist party, you know.

BURROUGHS

Spoken like a true son of Mother Russia. Only her womb is barren now, isn't it,

Robeson? (*Burroughs begins to cough violently.*) Her brood is going the way of the Dodo bird, aren't they? (*Burroughs continues coughing.*)

ROBESON

Are you all right?

BURROUGHS

Of course I'm not alright, you Dodo. I'm dying.

ROBESON

Aren't we all?

BURROUGHS

Robeson?

ROBESON

Yes, William?

BURROUGHS

You're my best friend.

ROBESON

I know, old fellow.

BURROUGHS

If I speak to you with words that imply anything but utter reverence and admiration, please dismiss them as the puerile ravings of an old lunatic. Which is what I am.

[At this point Hippy Beatnick 1 & 2 begin to follow the conversation.]

ROBESON

Oh William, you're no crazier than anybody else. Do you really think I fall for that eccentric genius pap? I've known you too long.

BURROUGHS

Since the beginning of time, I'd wager. (*Pause*) Robeson?

ROBESON

Yes, William?

BURROUGHS

Favor us with a story, would you?

ROBESON

I thought my sociopolitical diatribes were obsolete.

BURROUGHS

Oh, they are. But I know you burst at the seams if you don't have a chance in the limelight whenever we draw a crowd.

ROBESON

I do not!

BURROUGHS

Well, out with it then, before you make a fuss about me dominating the conversation.

ROBESON

Fine. I will tell a story. And not because of any seam-bursting I may or may not be doing, but because . . . I look around at the state of affairs of this country and it makes me sad.

BURROUGHS

And so it begins . . .

ROBESON

(Gives BUR withering stare) As I was saying, I am enraged when I look at how humans have embraced the concept of non-accountability. "I didn't do it, she did it." "She didn't do it, they did it." Folks are in a torrid love affair with the idea of passing the buck. I'll tell you a little story that might burn your ears a bit. Scoot up here, children, and listen good. When I was a boy in Mississippi - I was seven, I believe - I always had a fondness for junipers. And I would pick them over our neighbor's yard. Well, one day, crotchety old Mr. Smithers spied me picking his junipers from his house. Well, Mr. Smithers came storming out of his house, telling the world and heaven to get that nigger-boy from his tree. And my pappy, he comes running out of our shotgun shack to my aid.

"Robeson, I don't know how many times I'm gonna tell you to keep your kid from my tree," he said. "Those are champeen junipers yonder, boy, and he's takin' money from mah pocket."

"Paul," he said to me, "was you pickin' dem junipers up there yonder, boy?"

"Uh-uhn, Poppa," I says to him, "I'se just shoooin' the crows away; just shoooin' the crows away."

"Buh- Buh- But I saw him Robeson! You can't believe him again! Robeson!

Robeson, I demand you believe me this one time, over that insufferable boy!

Robeson, I demand that you take my word for it, that you support me in a conflict. It pains me terribly!"

"Mistah Smithers, if my boy Paul says he ain't pickin' yo' berries, he ain't picken' yo' berries and that's the end of it! Don't let me hear you makin' a fuss at him again!"

"But Mr. Robeson..."

"Just shoooin' crows."

"Mr. Robeson..."

"Shoooin' crows,"

"O this is a terrible injustice. A grave tragedy, sir. I'm being written off as a hollow caricature! Mr. Robeson, I need your endorsement here. Please, sir."

When I got back to the house, I was racked with guilt. Here my pa had defended to me that terrible queer old man, and I had lied to him outright! Well frankly it was more than I could bear and late that night I came clean to Pa about the whole affair. Well he musta turn four shades of furious. But he didn't beat me; no that wasn't his style. My pa took me into the other room and he says to me, "Boy, do you know who profits by layin' blame to where it does not justly fall?"

Now sometimes I had a little trouble following Pa so I took a lo-o-o-ng second at that one. When I realized exactly what he meant, I says, “Yes, Pa.”

“Who, boy?”

“The common man, the chattel, the chaff, the unexceptional people do, for one more has entered into their number.”

That’s the way my father taught me to be honest. By comparing telling a little lie to taking an irretrievable step towards mediocrity. You haven’t been weak or even inconsiderate; you have taken a one-way ticket to simply being another faceless member of this human swell, almost looked over at Judgment Day.

So I see the state of affairs in this so-called United States and I’d think you could understand that I am a little frustrated. If a poor black man from New Jersey...

BURROUGHS

I thought you said Mississippi.

ROBESON

What’s the difference?! If a po’ black man in any state could see the vile kind of humanity that is evidenced by someone who lies, how much more frightful is the state of America, where people lie as casually as they brush their teeth. Where people say the only way you can tell a politician is if his nose grows when he speaks! And this of our leaders? You can imagine my distress!

BURROUGHS

But how can you prove they’re liars?

ROBESON

Well just look at their track record. When gang-bangers began shooting up the cities of South Central Los Angeles, Watts, and Compton, our government blamed the gang-bangers themselves. But how did these pubescent boys get the guns? There are no Uzi factories in South Central! In truth, the government itself has been using L.A.’s inner cities as its own little sociological experiment, pressing their noses up against the glass to see how things are going!

BURROUGHS

Oh come now, isn’t that a bit much?

ROBESON

A bit much? Oh, I don’t think so. Yes, my elected officials are liars. I’m as sure of it as I am there will be a sunrise tomorrow. But I will find the Promised Land, sir, yes I will. It will have integrity in spades and the earth will never know its sincerity’s equal. And I will sleep there, Lord, I will sleep there. Till Methuselah himself comes to rouse me. And I will live there, Lord, I will live there. Right up there on that tallest juniper bush. Just shooin’ the crows away. Till Gabriel himself comes to take me home.”

[Narrator, who has entered the bar during the Robeson - Burroughs conversation, grabs his drink and approaches the podium upstage right.]

NARRATOR

The Subplot of Subtexts: A Three-Part Dramalogue with Romantic Undertones

[Two actors enter the bar, smoking. They’ve obviously just had sex. They approach the center

table and sit.]

LOVER 1

Why'd you tell me that you slept with that salesman?

LOVER 2

What?

LOVER 1

Why'd you have to tell me that you slept with that salesman?

LOVER 2

Whudduyou mean?

LOVER 1

Well, we were broken up . . . you had no responsibilities to me. What were you doing?

LOVER 2

I felt guilty. We were still sleeping together, and I thought you should know.

LOVER 1

You thought I should know.

LOVER 2

I thought you had a right to know.

[Pause.]

LOVER 1

You of course knew that I might choose to stop sleeping with you, because you had slept with another?

LOVER 2

I was aware of that possibility, yes.

LOVER 1

And you didn't want that?

LOVER 2

Not at all. It was the last thing that I wanted. You're a wonderful lover.

LOVER 1

But you had so much respect for me you wanted me to be aware of all the factors so that I could make an informed and cogent decision about the future of our relationship.

LOVER 2

I respect you immensely.

LOVER 1

And you did all this knowing of course that if you hadn't told me that I would

have gone on happily blissfully sleeping with you, unaware of your betrayal?

LOVER 2

I thought that keeping that from you was immoral.

[Lights come up on table stage left, with two new actors.]

LOVER 1

I suppose there was no way of giving me the choice to know or not know without revealing that there was something to know.

LOVER 2

Now you see my dilemma.

LOVER 1

Certainly.

LOVER 2

Why did you sleep with that showgirl?

LOVER 1

I was weak.

LOVER 2

Weak?

LOVER 1

Precisely.

LOVER 2

A two-year relationship in which you knew that I was in love with you and you trivialize your betrayal to simple weakness?

LOVER 1

That's why I didn't tell you.

LOVER 2

You thought it better to allow me to sleep with you blissfully unaware?

LOVER 1

I wanted to cause you the least amount of pain.

[Pause.]

LOVER 2

Thank you.

LOVER 1

Thank you.

[Pause.]

LOVER 2

I suppose intentions don't really count for anything when it's all said and done, do they?

LOVER 1

You were the best lover I'd ever had.

LOVER 2

Then why did you sacrifice it?

LOVER 1

I wasn't sure if I'd be able to reciprocate your feelings.

LOVER 2

Did a nice little job of sabotage, didn't you?

LOVER 1

And let me congratulate you on your fantastic eradication of any chance we might have had by sleeping with my best friend.

LOVER 2

I was hurt.

LOVER 1

Hurt or scared?

LOVER 2

I didn't want to confront the possibility that you might not be able to reciprocate my feelings.

LOVER 1

I think we might be the most efficient saboteurs in the history of mankind.

LOVER 2

So are we happy, now?

LOVER 1

I suppose intentions don't really count for anything when it's all said and done, do they?

LOVER 2

Would you do anything differently if you had it to do it over again?

LOVER 1

I would never do it over again.

[Pause. Lover1 sees that Lover2 is hurt.]

I suppose I'd choose to have foreknowledge of the ramifications of my actions.

LOVER 2

Then would you change anything?

LOVER 1

How could I? I mean, I never had much choice in the matter, did I?

[*Pause.*]

LOVER 2

So this is it, then?

LOVER 1

I was really the best lover you'd ever had?

LOVER 2

I didn't want to confront the possibility that you might not be able to reciprocate my feelings.

LOVER 1

I was weak.

LOVER 2

Are we happy, now?

LOVER 1

I don't suppose either one of us had much choice in the matter, did we?

LOVER 2

Seems to me it was written in the stars before we even met.

LOVER 1

A two-year relationship and you trivialize your betrayal to simple kismet?

LOVER 2

It's really more powerful than we give it credit for.

[*Lights come on table stage right, with two new actors.*]

LOVER 1

I suppose there's a chance we could try and put the past behind us.

LOVER 2

What about your indelible kismet?

LOVER 1

Well the good thing about kismet is that it's yet to be written. The stars are nothing without us to play out their dramas.

LOVER 2

Must be quite a performance.

LOVER 1

Bravura.

LOVER 2

Standing room only.

LOVER 1

You would never do it over again?

LOVER 2

We were broken up . . . you had no responsibilities to me.

LOVER 1

You were a wonderful lover.

LOVER 2

You knew that I was in love with you.

LOVER 1

THEN WHY DID YOU SACRIFICE IT?!

[Lover2 looks up, shocked, hurt, distressed.]

LOVER 2

I didn't have a choice.

LOVER 1

WHY DID YOU SACRIFICE IT?!

LOVER 2

(Now getting more dismayed and distressed) I wasn't strong enough...

LOVER 1

(Screaming and crying) WHY?!

[Lover 2 looks at Lover 1 as if they have been betrayed. Lover 2 holds Lover 1 as Lover 2 cries. Strokes hair. Grabs head and looks deep into Lover 1's eyes.]

LOVER 2

Before you, I had nothing. But at least, now, I've known love.

[Lover 1 shakes head, unwilling to hear the rest.]

Thank you.

[Lover 2 puts Lover 1's head back into Lover 2's arms, strokes hair. Lights fade down on table and up on Hippy Beatnick 1 & 2 sitting at the center table. Andrea enters the bar.]

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

What's wrong, man?

HIPPY BEATNIK 2

I don't know, man. I'm just . . . I don't know.

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

What? You've got that boredom again.

HIPPY BEATNIK 2

That boredom?

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

That boredom with life.

HIPPY BEATNIK 2

Yeah. You ever get that way?

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

Man, I can't remember the last time I wasn't that way.

HIPPY BEATNIK 2

Crazy, man.

ANDREA

What're y'all talkin' 'bout?

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

It's a trip, 'cuz you can't, for the life of you, imagine what could possibly make you happy.

HIPPY BEATNIK 2

Yeah . . .

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

Like all the stuff that used to make you happy-booze, sex, a family...

HIPPY BEATNIK 2

Yeah, you think about it now and you're like...

HIPPY BEATNIK 1 & 2

'ehh.'

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

It's ennui. (*HB2 nods.*) A malaise.

HIPPY BEATNIK 2

A malaise. (*HB2 repeats, pointing his beer bottle at HB1.*)

ANDREA

I feel like that sometimes.

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

Like what?

ANDREA

Oh, just kind of 'blah.'

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

'Blah' like how?

ANDREA

Blah like, everything bores me.

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

(Pointing his beer bottle at HB2) She's aware of it.

ANDREA

Aware of it?

HIPPY BEATNIK 2

Yeah, see, it's not a matter of being in it or not being in it. We're all in the malaise. It's just a matter of at what point that you become aware that you're stuck in "something," and then at what point you become aware that you're stuck in the malaise.

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

It took three years of me knowing I was in something before I finally realized what it was...

NURSE/BARMAID

(Ringing a bell) The patient will be dead in three years!

ANDREA

So what do you do once you realize you're in it?

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

(Pointing at Justin) The \$64,000 question.

HIPPY BEATNIK 2 & ANDREA

The what?

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

Never mind.

HIPPY BEATNIK 2

There are some who say they wish they'd never become aware of the malaise. "Let me float in ignorance," they say.

ANDREA

Now that I know that I'm in a funk, can't I just get out?

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

As we said, it's not a matter of getting in or out of the malaise. How do you get out of the sea if there's no dry land?

HIPPY BEATNIK 2

No, the best thing to do is just try to keep your head above water, and try not to

think about the futility of life.

ANDREA

That's all I can expect to look forward to?

HIPPY BEATNIK 2

That and the sweet release of death.

ANDREA

Well, how did this happen?!

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

I have my theories. (*He takes a slow sip*). I think it all started in the Eisenhower Administration. (*Protagonist slowly turns his attention toward Hippy Beatnik 1 during this speech.*) I spent one summer trying to change the color of my van from orange to green. Not by saving my money and getting a paint job, but by convincing myself that the color had changed. I felt that if I willed my eyes to see differently in spite of what was there, I could do anything. I would see my orange van and it would appear green to me. The rest of the world would see orange, but I would see green. If I could achieve that one small workable insanity, my van would be green--if not today then tomorrow. I felt I was on the verge, I was so close, it would be the moment of my triumph--my seizing the power to render the world. So one day I'm looking at my van, and I could swear it was starting to work. I was seeing trees, toads, tadpoles, jealous lovers obsessing over people named Ted or Theresa, Tahitian sunrises, Tellurian sunsets, tropical storms, tape grass, tanks, all manner of things green. But then this homeless guy comes by and asks me what I'm doing. So, naturally I tell him. And do you know what he tells me. he tells me that I might possibly already be seeing the van as green, and everyone else has been seeing it as orange. He said we've all agreed to call that color orange--that color I see--so, though, I may be seeing green, I'm calling it orange. I may, in fact, be trying to see my green van, which I uniquely in the world see as green, as orange just like everyone else. Fuck! Fuck! Fucking homeless!

Andrea & Hippy Beatnik 2

Amen.

PROTAGONIST

Excuse me, how does that explain this malaise thing?

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

Don't you get it, man?

PROTAGONIST

Ye-yeah, I get it. I just wanna be sure I'm not misinterpreting anything.

HIPPY BEATNIK 2

Dude, there are no more hurdles to climb.

ANDREA

There are no more frontiers. Women can vote, people are rich, life is good.

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

What possible mark can we make on a world that has no more obstacles to go through? What do we protest against? Who do we vilify? Sanctify? There aren't even any good villains or heroes around anymore because everyone can get pretty much whatever they want.

HIPPY BEATNIK 2

So what do the passionate amongst us do? We have all this energy, these earnest intentions, and so all around us, it's like the world is going in slow motion.

ANDREA

And we just swing blindly, trying to make an impact on something.

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

But instead we just float along.

HIPPY BEATNIK 2

Trying to see green in orange vans.

ANDREA

Looking for a new frontier. (*all pause*)
So what're you guys doin' tonight?

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

I'm thinkin' of moving to Mexico. He's joining the army.

PROTAGONIST

To get out of the malaise?

ANDREA

This a force stuck inside us that we bring wherever we go. The malaise is not an environment that crowds you from the outside; it starts from your soul and goes out, making your environment look like it. See? You don't 'escape' the malaise.

PROTAGONIST

Ah, you can only work on your own soul to maybe change what's coming out of it, right?

HIPPY BEATNIK 1

Give that man a Cotton Candy!

PROTAGONIST

Say, I know this is off the subject, but you wouldn't happen to know who that is dying over there, would you?

[At bar/hospital bed, Anticanadian speaks up. He is visibly soused.]

ANTICANADIAN

That is such a load of crap.

ANDREA

Excuse me?

ANTICANADIAN

You college kids and your hoity-toity philosophizing. Why don't you take that talk back to France or Canada or wherever you're from? Say, kid.

PROTAGONIST

Me?

ANTICANADIAN

Yeah you. You wanna hear a real story? Come and talk to real-live nephew of Uncle Sam. I'll set you straight. (*hunkers down and whispers, as if someone is listening*) I once spent the summer trying to change the way people looked at the world. Not by subterfuge or by propaganda, but by actually trying to teach folks the way things are supposed to be. I thought that if one person could start a conspiracy of perspective, I could skew the world's ideology just so. I just needed to achieve that one monumental nudge and I could start a chain reaction. Before long, people would be helping old ladies across the street again, not locking their doors at night...

PROTAGONIST

Oh, we've fucked things up way too much to get there again.

ANTICANADIAN

But see, that's my point. I don't think we're that far away from it. (*pause*) I tell you what we're gonna have to do. We're gonna have to take it upon ourselves to be martyrs for the real American Dream. Now, mind you, not that mythology that assumes every Tom, Dick, and Jean-Claude knows the struggle of the real American people. No, I'm talking about bona fide Grade-A American values and virtues. I'll be damned if Sally Socialist and Barry Big Government can hold a candle to good old fashioned American virtues, I can tell ya.

PROTAGONIST

If you don't mind me asking, what's your motivation here?

ANTICANADIAN

Excuse me?

PROTAGONIST

What's your motivation behind this desire to change the world?

ANTICANADIAN

Well, I'm an altruist, naturally.

PROTAGONIST

I see.

ANTICANADIAN

You don't believe me?

PROTAGONIST

Well it's not as if I don't believe you, it's just . . .

ANTICANADIAN

What?

PROTAGONIST

It's just . . .

ANTICANADIAN

Listen, what difference does it make where any of this comes from? If a poor white American male from some nameless Midwestern town such as myself can see how fucked up the world is, then what does that say about this country's leadership? Someone's gotta be trying to make this country a safe place for their kids.

PROTAGONIST

But isn't that exactly what our country's leaders are trying to do?

ANTICANADIAN

(Eyeing Protagonist suspiciously) Say, where are you from?

PROTAGONIST

I'm from Philly.

ANTICANADIAN

Oh yeah, who won the '43 World Series?

PROTAGONIST

Uh . . . the Cardinals.

ANTICANADIAN

Who was Andrew Jackson's Vice-President?

PROTAGONIST

First or second term?

ANTICANADIAN

Second naturally.

PROTAGONIST

Van Buren.

[pause]

ANTICANADIAN

What company invented the Frisbee?

PROTAGONIST

I don't see what this is--

ANTICANADIAN

Aha!

PROTAGONIST

Wham-O.

ANTICANADIAN

Lucky guess.

PROTAGONIST

Oh come now, isn't this a bit much?

ANTICANADIAN

Yeah, I bet you could tell me every Grey Cup champion since 1943.

PROTAGONIST

Well now you're just being silly.

ANTICANADIAN

Say, how'd your candidate do in the presidential - oops, I mean, prime minister elections this year?

PROTAGONIST

Like I told you, I wouldn't know. I'm from Philadelphia.

ANTICANADIAN

Yeah, Philadelphia British Columbia more like.

PROTAGONIST

Alright, well, I think I've had enough of...

ANTICANADIAN

Yeah, you know what's wrong with you people? It's like I'm sitting here in America trying to enjoy my food, and there's all these people pressed up against the window staring at me. It makes me crazy. Don't they have anything better to do? Did they not understand? Do they not remember? 54-40' or fight! I think that has to go down as the all-time best slogan in any war, or non-war. Do you see the simplicity of it, the righteousness, the unwavering truth, the manifuckinfest destiny of that statement? We chose an imaginary parallel on a map and we said "this land is our land," up to there, 54 degrees 40 minutes, is ours or we take it. There was no why! That's the problem today. We try to fight wars over principles, and once you do that you open a whole can of worms. You either have to prove you are right or your opponent is wrong-and/or that the moral thinking involved makes sense in some way. I mean, your opponent can block you or challenge you on so many points, and with your own viewpoints, but a slogan like 54-40' or fight! How can you oppose that? Pure Manifest Destiny!!! But you people have never just accepted your defeat. You sit up there with your bad, free health care, just squished up against the window, watching me eat, using my own arguments against me. You just WANT. You just stare down, noses smudging the invisible border, the perfect 54-40 border, smudged with a bunch of Canadian nose oil...

[Father has entered space earlier, and placed easel by table stage left. Lights come down on

Anticanadian and up on Father. Father is in painter's garb, standing in front of an easel. Protagonist directs the next line to the father, as if it were the continuance of the previous conversation.]

PROTAGONIST

It isn't arrogant to try to see the truth of the matter. It's arrogant to assume that some fabrication of your whimsy is the best case scenario. It's like pitting one little mind against the history of Mother Nature and natural selection. Believers have almost always perished unless their beliefs were secondary to "survival." Only systems whose primary goal is the perpetuation of the system, from biology to politics, have been successful, whereas any system that has made the mistake of positing a "good" or "truth" or "goal" beyond pure survival has gone the way of the Dodo bird.

FATHER

So...survival is our goal here?

PROTAGONIST

Isn't it?

FATHER

There are more noble things than survival, son. There's love. There's Beauty. There is faith. Things like a plopping softball hurtling to the earth very near an unsuspecting consciousness, and the ensuing hilarity of a scared tiny dog. Those things go far beyond simple survival, but it is those very things that separate mankind from the dinosaurs. You are so stuck in what's real, that you have completely abandoned the search for "what's possible."

PROTAGONIST

What's possible, and this is what I've been trying to say, "what's possible" is limited by factors of feasibility. OK? And feasibility can only be determined by a realistic look at cold hard facts. I can't believe we're having this conversation again. I mean, the only reason I came over here was because Mom wanted me to talk to you about Life Assurance. This is reality, this chair, this table, that easel, realness! Talking about what we should do, but can't, is a waste of time. It's entertaining--but it just doesn't matter.

FATHER

Yesterday we couldn't walk on the moon. Last week the world was flat. Who's to say what we "can't" do?

PROTAGONIST

Yes, but those were carefully weighed explorations based on previous experience. I mean Columbus didn't just say, "I think there should be these things called boats and we should go in them, and we will circumnavigate the world. Or was it Magellan who finally proved... but it doesn't matter! Each move, from the Wright brothers to the Russians in orbit to our trip to the moon, was based on careful extrapolations--or not so careful--but in any case extrapolations of previously explored or realized facts. I mean, this proves my point, a realistic look at what has been done points to what can be done next. But some people today would have you think that some things should exist for no

other reason than that they appeal to a certain way of thinking. They "sound" good.

FATHER

When dreamers dreamed, that set the standard for achievement. NASA piggy backed on Ford who piggy backed on whomever invented the wheel, but someone had to first dream, "I want to go to the moon" to make any of that possible. Dreamers of the impossible set the bar for all the inventors that come after. Humans accomplish great feats because of inspiration. What's been done before is a mere limitation to the imagination.

PROTAGONIST

OK, let us assume a certain amount of scientific advancement has to do with "imagining" new systems or ways of thinking. However, science as an institution is based on the thorough investigation of what comes before. Its dedication to 'reality' is at its core. It is the nature of science, I mean you can just waltz into the moon project and say, "Wait a minute, I have a more noble idea--Let's eliminate time!" No, you'd be laughed out of the building. But in the name of a few visionaries who create something new in science you seem to be willing to justify all the human wreckage in society? All the crazy beliefs people fall victim to, and ultimately what I'm afraid you've fallen victim to! Which is why we are having this discussion--your refusal to accept facts!

FATHER

So how do you explain art?

PROTAGONIST

Art? Wha - ? OK, now we're getting to it. You refuse to look at what's happening to you and now you want to discuss art? What could be further from mattering at this point in your life? I mean fine, art, what is art, it's a simple rearrangement of the elements of experience in a way that's pleasing to the eye, ear, sensibility, or whatever it's intended sensory aspect is, but art clearly is for those who have time and money to waste. Believe me when I say that art is the last thing on the mind of a person 100 yards from a charging Bull, or Lion, or whatever. And that, I mean really, is what you're looking at!

FATHER

But the human capacity for art is exactly what separates us, again, from the dinosaurs. It's like life is like trying to drown out the noise of a dying dog in the street. Son, it is the human capacity for art--our imagination if you will--that allows us the ability to stretch the laws of possibility. We have the yin and yang. We should celebrate it, not bemoan its limitations.

PROTAGONIST

This is maddening! I'm trying to help you. How can you sit there facing what you're facing and pretend to discuss whether I value the scientific method over and above whatever...I mean come on! You haven't said one thing about the fact that you are dying!

[The lights create a swirling effect suggesting chaos and confusion, Nurse / Barmaid hustles

across the stage, rings bell, the bar chaos continues.]

NURSE/BARMAID

The patient will be dead in three days!

[Protagonist is tumbling about in the confusion; he is looking behind him as if watching the end of the last scene. The swirling of lights comes into focus on a classroom setting, with Professor at a podium facing downstage, and Andrea in a seat facing him. There are other empty seats near her. On a chalkboard to the left of Professor the words "I am ugly, So I will Never Be Admired" are scrawled and underlined. As he approaches the Professor and Andrea, who are both fully immersed in their reality, he seems to gain clarity, as though comforted by the familiar scene and a situation in which he knows how to behave.]

PROFESSOR

Society puts a premium on desire. It's our basic instinct, and any attempt to "rise above" it is futile.

ANDREA

(Raising her hand, Professor nods at her) But, excuse me, but that seems like an incredibly irresponsible thing to say, even if it's true. Especially if it's true!

PROFESSOR

That is why you are here. It is my job to stretch the bounds of irresponsibility. If you have nothing more than that to add to the conversation, please be quiet so the other students can learn something.

PROTAGONIST

But how can we let you stretch our boundaries if you dismiss our contributions to the conversation?!

PROFESSOR

Again, it is my job to determine what of your input is either relevant or irrelevant to what I'm trying to teach. I am the judge, jury, and executioner of my classroom's discourse. If you don't like it, lodge a complaint with the school administration. I didn't come to your house asking to teach you, you came to me. You're paying me. On second thought, maybe you'd just better complain to your parents--they're the ones probably making you come here, anyway.

ANDREA

(Exasperated) Alright. So... I, because I lack desirability...what? Am I... I mean... am I doomed to a lesser position in society?

PROFESSOR

(Coaxing) That's it. See? Once you get over your childish desire to rebel against my right to teach you, then you start learning. Yes, does your lack of desirability predispose you to a lesser position in society? And furthermore, is it a lesser position? And furthermore, what is a lesser position?

PROTAGONIST

But you're saying that any attempt to rise above desire is doomed. So why do we

read all this stuff if everything comes down to simple desire? I mean, I desire to throw her down on your desk right now

PROFESSOR

And there you have it: the birth of the hedonistic school of thought. On this day, April 13, 1985, we have recreated exactly how that school of philosophy came into being. Miss . . . Jenkins, is it? When you told me what I was saying was irresponsible, you did exactly what all great philosophers must do when they first put pen to paper: Ask Why! And as to your question, my good man, the people that would reprimand you for ravishing Miss Jenkins on my desk, are simply another school of thought, as valid as your own. They have nothing to with right or wrong. How is it wrong for you to enjoy any basic instinct?

ANDREA

(under her breath) Unless it's bullshit.

PROFESSOR

I'm sorry?

ANDREA

Nothing.

PROTAGONIST

I don't know. I didn't even know her name before I walked into class today. I've just been told all my life that, well, that it's somehow wrong to do what you want.

ANDREA

Of course it is. Professor, just because Hedonism is some big fat school of philosophy, what does that have to do with . . . (*Checking her notes*) the elevation . . . of desirability . . . to the nexus of the human condition. (*Beams proudly*)

PROFESSOR

Miss Jenkins, do you have any idea what you just said?

ANDREA

(*Smile fades*) No, not so much.

PROFESSOR

Look, don't lose yourself in scholastic redundancies. Do you really care what the human condition has to do with who you "desire" to bang on Friday night?

ANDREA

Oh well I certainly think that's inappropriate. (*Looks around for approval*)

PROFESSOR

The point I'm trying to make is that you people want me to give you an excuse for your respective desires. Well I'm not gonna do that. It is not my job to make you excuse yourselves, or reprimand yourselves, as the case may be.

ANDREA

Is this like one of those Socratic dialogues? (*Professor rolls his eyes*) So . . .

(Checking notes) any attempt to rise above desire is futile? I don't get that.

PROFESSOR

Remember what I said. I said society puts a premium on desire, so any attempt to rise above that is futile. So what is rising above desire? Is it not rising above what society is putting a premium on? What is that called, children?

ANDREA

I don't see how talking down to us helps your case at all.

PROTAGONIST

So any attempt to rise above what society puts a premium on is futile? That sounds even worse! What kind of college is this?

PROFESSOR

(Slowly) Folks, I am asking you what it is called to rise above what society puts a premium on. Think people. There's a word for it. People do it all the time. It's the entire reason I began this discussion.

ANDREA

(Raising her hand) Is it too late to drop this class?

PROFESSOR

Yes.

PROTAGONIST

Is there a test on this?

PROFESSOR

Yes.

ANDREA

(Fed up, almost crying) Look, you said it's futile. Now are we going to discuss futility because I don't think we're going to make any progress trying to figure out society puts a premium on.

PROFESSOR

(Reacting to her word "progress") Aren't we?

ANDREA

Wha . . . but . . . oh. Oh duh. Progress is the only thing...

PROTAGONIST

...that ever changes society.

ANDREA

Wow that was totally cool. Professor, you are so smart. Can we engage in an inappropriate liaison?

PROFESSOR

No.

ANDREA

Why not?

PROFESSOR

It would be inappropriate.

PROTAGONIST

Do we have homework?

PROFESSOR

Yes. Read chapters two and three in your textbook. *(he begins to leave)* Also remember the midterm is in two weeks and, *(getting louder as he's leaving)* oh yes, office hours have been moved back one hour so arrange your schedule accordingly as the patient will be dead in one week!

[Professor exits, Andrea stays behind and begins to undress, revealing showgirl outfit, she gets placard and headdress from her backpack. She pauses and begins procession from stage left to stage right, displaying the "This is happening now" sign. Protagonist appears to be writing notes from board, then looks at notes to perfect them. He checks his notes before delivering the next speech. He becomes conscious of the audience. He goes to them to try to make sense of what has just happened.]

PROTAGONIST

Oh my God, excuse me. Did you guys just see tha . . . Okay, so I think I've got this thing sorta-kinda figured out. I'm starting to sense this, like, pattern, right? It's like, just when you learn something . . . yeah . . . in fact, this...this...thing is just like life. It is life, see, every time we learn something, and we think to ourselves, Okay, now that I know this thing, I'm ready for something else to happen where I can apply my new knowledge. But that never happens. Like, nothing we learn ever has anything to do with the next challenge. It's like life never throws you a pitch you know how to hit, you know?

For instance, we figure out this thing about sales, right? Like how everyone is trying to sell you something. And so then you expect that someone or everyone will be trying to sell you something. But then, wham, life pitches you love. And you're thinking Okay, well, what is this person who says they love me trying to sell me? And you sense that must be what they're doing because something is scaring you, right? So you figure if you know what's being sold or how someone is trying to sell you, you can steer clear--you're in the know . . . and safe. *(he is becoming agitated)*

But you see, this is real love. This isn't sales. And you're not prepared. So you end up playing the wrong game and you screw up love, one of the greatest things life's got going for it, because you think it's sales. So then when love comes again, you treat it like love, but then you get fucked because it's sales! And you knew sales and you knew love, but you didn't know they could be the same goddamned thing and by the time you've figured that out, you aren't presented with either of these pitches. Fucking perfect.

So . . . I don't know. I guess the only thing you can do is just realize that nothing

you learn can really prepare you for actually living, there, in the moment. Wisdom, when and if we finally get a glimpse of it, never turns out to be the accumulation of knowledge and experience, like they always say. Instead it just becomes the ability to “be” in a situation and be fully aware of the ignorance or folly that your previous knowledge and experience represent. In fact, wisdom could be simply believing that you have the tools to figure out new things as they happen. It’s like having the ability to see in real time. And if you can’t fully see through the requirements of the moment, at least maybe you can just BE without fucking yourself up with what you thought you knew.

[Protagonist returns to the bar and orders a drink. Lights come up on a small BOY at the extreme front of the stage in a focused spot. He is staring over the audience into space. GIRL walks onstage and puts her hand on BOY's shoulder.]

GIRL
Hey Kiddo!

BOY
Hey.

GIRL
We thought we'd lost you. Mom was scared silly.

[Silence.]
What ya been doin'?

BOY
I was on the roller coaster.

GIRL
Oooh, was it fun?

BOY
Yeah . . . but . . .

GIRL
But what?

BOY
It was scary. There were twists and loops and there were people screaming. I thought the car was gonna let loose and send me flying right into the air.

GIRL
Oh, don't be silly. You got that big ole bar that goes across your chest, and a seat belt, and they have people that come in and double check it to make sure it's safe.

BOY
But it was going so fast.

GIRL

Well I know but . . . but that's the fun part. That's what makes it a ride. You don't have anything to be afraid of.

BOY

It was scary all the same. It was going so fast. Do you mean to tell me that there's absolutely no chance of one of those cars spinning off into the sky?

GIRL

Of course not! Then no one would ride it.

BOY

But how do you know for sure? No one's perfect! What if someone made a mistake and forgot to check a screw one day? Or what if this place got overrun with giant termites and that ate up all the wood? Or the operator sneezed right before he was supposed to check my seat belt and the ride started?

GIRL

Well . . . I mean I suppose there is the eentseeist bitseeist chance, but . . .

BOY

Then how can you tell me there's no chance? There's a kabillion things that could go wrong! How am I supposed to trust you when you're always treating me like a little kid? I'll never grow up right that way. You're s'posed to be my big sister. You're s'posed to look out for me. I can understand Mom and Dad lying to me but . . . but . . . kids are supposed to stick together. We're all we have to make sure we grow up right. At this rate, I'll never turn eight.

GIRL

(Pauses) Gee, I didn't mean it like that . . . I just . . . I just wanted to make you feel better.

BOY

I don't need you to make me feel better. Dad's taking my training wheels off next Saturday, just like on a grownup bike. Before you know it, I'll be flying up and down our street like a motocross racer.

GIRL

Sure you will, sport. Listen, I'm sorry. But you don't have to go on the big old roller coaster again. They're never as good as they promise, and they always give you a crick in your neck. Say, what do you say you and me talk Mom into giving us some money for cotton-candy, they've got the best cotton-candy here, and candy, and chocolates.

BOY

The Your-opian kind?

GIRL

You bet. The best in the county. Whudduya say?

BOY

(Pauses and looks back up at the roller coaster) I dunno . . .

[*Lights come up on lovers at center table.*]

LOVER 1

Well, it seems painfully clear to me now that you have absolutely no interest in my feelings whatsoever.

LOVER 2

How can you say that?

LOVER 1

With words. There, I just said it.

LOVER 2

You can be so hurtful

LOVER 1

(*Sighs*) I don't mean to be. It's just that sometimes...

LOVER 2

It's just sometimes when you get hurt you lash out.

LOVER 1

Wouldn't you?

LOVER 2

Look, everybody knows relationships are difficult. It's just that I always thought...

LOVER 1

Thought what?

LOVER 2

I just always thought that someone that cared for me--that really cared for me in spite of themselves--would take pains to not hurt me, even if I did something that indirectly hurt them.

LOVER 1

Can you understand my pain?

LOVER 2

Not better than you can.

LOVER 1

Exactly. That's what's so infuriating. Your lack of ability to see how I feel. Or even care.

LOVER 2

So now I don't care.

LOVER 1

Did you ever?

LOVER 2

What if I told you that I care more than you know but it still wouldn't change my behavior.

LOVER 1

Then I would think that you really didn't care more than I knew.

LOVER 2

Even if I had just prefaced the statement with, as I had stated, that I cared more than you knew.

LOVER 1

Apparently not.

LOVER 2

SO I could make a statement about how I feel right to you--to my lover's face, and it would somehow register to you as something other than the truth.

LOVER 1

(Getting nervous) That would seem to be the case, yes. But it's not because...

LOVER 2

Do you know why I took you to my bed that first time?

LOVER 1

You had run out of options?

LOVER 2

Compassion. I fell in love with your compassion.

LOVER 1

I think we're going off the subject, here. We're supposed to be having a lover's quarrel and I'm getting the distinct feeling that...

LOVER 2

You can't have a lover's quarrel without love?

LOVER 1

Precisely. As I was saying...

LOVER 2

I'm sorry.

LOVER 1

I'm sorry?

LOVER 2

I changed the rules. While you were in mid-stride. I apologize.

LOVER 1

Not at all. As I was saying...

LOVER 2

I don't think that it's true that if my actions cause you pain that that means that I don't love you or care about you.

LOVER 1

Do you think it's true that if your actions cause me pleasure, then that means that you do love me?

LOVER 2

Do you know why I took you to my bed that first time?

LOVER 1

Compassion?

LOVER 2

Trust. The only reason to enter into an intimate relationship is to finally find someone with whom you don't have to keep proving yourself. You can just say something to them, and automatically someone else knows the truth just like you do. That's what intimacy is.

LOVER 1

That's what intimacy is?

LOVER 2

So you can finally have someone that will take what you say for granted.

LOVER 1

Then why . . . what does it mean to say you want to take care of me when you want to sleep with other people?

LOVER 2

I don't do it to hurt you.

LOVER 1

I think that you really don't care.

LOVER 2

But I do.

LOVER 1

No, you don't. You like my familiarity or my convenience or some sick thing, but you don't give a rat's ass about me.

LOVER 2

I do.

LOVER 1

If you loved me, if you even liked me, you would share my dreams, visions,

desires. I would be enough.

LOVER 2

Do you hear what I'm saying? I DO.

LOVER 1

So you're saying you can love me but lust after others?

LOVER 2

Do you know why I took you to my bed that first time?

LOVER 1

Trust?

LOVER 2

You listened to me. I had finally found someone who actually listened to me. Do you know what it's like to search your whole life for that?

LOVER 1

Of course I do. I'm listening to you right now.

LOVER 2

No, you're not. You're barely listening to yourself.

LOVER 1

The thought of me with someone else doesn't hurt you?

LOVER 2

Oh, I can't bear it. I'd hate to think of you with someone else.

LOVER 1

And yet, that's what you're encouraging me to do.

LOVER 2

But not in the same way. We sleep with people for different reasons. You sleep with people to cum. I can make you cum. I sleep with people for intimacy. I can't bear the thought of you being intimate with someone else.

LOVER 1

If you loved me, I would be enough.

LOVER 2

(Pause) I have absolutely no interest in your feelings.

LOVER 1

Is that a question?

LOVER 2

No, it's a statement. I have absolutely no interest in your side of the story unless it supports my own.

LOVER 1

I think we're going off the subject, here. We're supposed to be having a lover's quarrel and I'm getting the distinct feeling that...

LOVER 2

No, you can't have a lover's quarrel without love.

LOVER 1

I think we're getting off the subject here...

LOVER 2

The funny thing is, when you came here today, I did care. If you would have proposed to me, I was ready to say "I do." But now, I won't.

LOVER 1

Well. Well I guess this is it, then. I guess I'll be going.

LOVER 2

I guess you will.

LOVER 1

It's over just like that?

LOVER 2

That would seem to be the case, yes. But it's not because...

LOVER 1

And there's no chance you'd take me back.

LOVER 2

Not if I thought things wouldn't change. You're barely listening to yourself.

LOVER 1

I love you.

LOVER 2

All the stuff that used to make me happy- the thought of a life with you, your undying love...

LOVER 1

I understand.

LOVER 2

You do?

LOVER 1

Yes. When it comes down to it, THERE IS ONLY ONE MARK AND ONE HUSTLER, AND YOU LOOK AT THEM BOTH IN THE MIRROR EVERY MORNING. And eventually all there is in the world is our ability to sell ourselves to ourselves. I understand. I would have done the same thing under similar circumstances.

LOVER 2

So you do understand.

LOVER 1

I would have done the same thing under similar circumstances.

LOVER 1

I love you.

LOVER 2

I know.

LOVER 1

Have a wonderful life.

LOVER 2

Is there any other kind to have?

[Slow fade to black. The lights remain down as the narrator speaks, he should sound like a radio personality.]

NARRATOR

You'll Always Have Pizza

[Lights up on Mother speaking to prostrate form in hospital bed.]

MOTHER

When I was seven
I know you don't understand
And that may be the problem

But when I was seven
You see, I can't even
Find the words

Seven, if you could only . . .
Perhaps it wasn't seven really
But I'm sure that's not important

When we were seven
We dropped our lollipops
And cried, and were pulled away

But we wanted to go back
And retrieve them
It did not matter, the dirt

But we were not allowed

Dirty lollipops are . . .
We were pulled away

And I'm sure we could
Though it's so long ago
And our lollipops... well

When I was seven
I lost something
And you know

I will not rest till I find it.

SALESMAN

(Knocks at hospital door) Excuse me, Ms...? I'm so very sorry for your tragedy. I know this may not be the time, and please tell me if you'd like me to come back later. I just wanted to take an opportunity, because time is of the essence, to introduce you to Immortality Inc., and our unrivaled line of life assurance tools. You see, now, while your loved one is foremost on everyone's mind, is the perfect time to establish a life assurance program. Our studies reveal that life assurance programs begun immediately after the patient is admitted result in an SQ rating (that's Satisfaction Quotient) 76% higher than for those who wait until the fate of the patient has been decided. Of course that is based on a random sampling of negative survival customers approached in a pre-resolution setting.

MOTHER

(Softly) Not now...

SALESMAN

I won't bother you anymore, but please take a look at what I'm offering. *(Tries to hand a pamphlet to Mother)* If your loved one lives --which we are all praying happens--then you have the confidence of permanent assurance. If anything does happen to the body, in the future, you are assured the soul survives. And if, god forbid, this accident should prove fatal--and it need not ever, that's the point--you'll have the advantage of having pre-arranged immortality. Our studies show that every hour of post mortem indecision corresponds to a .27% decrease in the likelihood of a 100% SQ rating. Now that may seem like a small number, but I remind you that it's cumulative, every hour! And really, why risk any form of doubt. Why even allow for .00007% chance of a less than perfect SQ rating? It takes so little of your time, 3 x 1000 question personality surveys are all that's required.

MOTHER

What... What are you?

SALESMAN

We can provide you with guaranteed *(produces a very long disclaimer)* immortality for your loved one at a reasonable price.

MOTHER

Listen...haven't we been through this before? I have a solid plan with my...

SALESMAN

No Ma'am, I'm afraid you don't understand, I'm appealing to one of the few sentiments that make our company different. We can guarantee...

MOTHER

No you don't understand! My son is dying! Nothing will ever be able to replace him. He is a noble, caring, giving, unique, corrupt, temporary, made-up...Oh God, what am I saying? He's a...how will he behave? What will he say? Don't you see?

SALESMAN

Ma'am, we have affidavits from countless individuals who will swear that our product is indistinguishable from the real McCoy.

MOTHER

But...Oh please, please, don't do this. He won't...I mean how will he...will he be late? Will he be slow? Will he forget to...

SALESMAN

No Ma'am, you see that's the brilliance of Immortality Inc. He doesn't have to be late or slow or misunderstand things, we can selectively program...

MOTHER

Then it won't be him! Please go away.

SALESMAN

I'm sorry I've intruded. I know the pain of losing a loved one, my own wife...

MOTHER

(Pause) What was her name?

SALESMAN

Her name? Sarah, a beautiful soul. So full of life and excitement...she...

MOTHER

I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude, but...well...I am the grieving mother.

SALESMAN

Of course, as I was saying, Immortality Inc. can write a program that is extremely detailed to fit the parameters, er-uh...personality profile, of said loved one. In your case, the dearly departed.

MOTHER

He's not departed yet!

SALESMAN

Of course not. As I was saying, Immortality Inc. has happened upon a new technology in which your loved one can, in essence, come back to you new and improved.

MOTHER

New?

SALESMAN

And improved! Devoid of flaws! Without, as they say, defects. Because, well, isn't that what we'd all really prefer? A loved one without those pesky character defects?

MOTHER

I suppose...but is your Sarah still with you? I mean did you get one of these things for her?

SALESMAN

Sadly, I couldn't afford it. But I assure you--

MOTHER

And if you could go back? Why don't you go back and do it. There must be the kind of information you require out there.

SALESMAN

They say my SQ rating would be around 53%.

MOTHER

And you think that's not worth the risk? 53% chance of having your loved one back and you won't take it? You are a sham sir! You have never loved! What 20%, 10%, 1%, point Oh, Oh, Oh, what did you say, .00007% chance wouldn't be worth taking? That's what you pray on, but there isn't any chance you're telling the truth. Come here and look me in the eye. (*He does so reluctantly*) I would walk across a ravine on a thin piece of plywood that had a 99.999% chance of breaking, if I thought there was a chance it would save this boy. And you see that that is true. Now if you had the chance to save your Sarah you wouldn't take it!

SALESMAN

Well...I...I don't know you see...

MOTHER

Yes.

SALESMAN

Sarah wasn't what you'd call...faithful.

MOTHER

A mattress-back huh?

SALESMAN

Precisely, Every time we moved to a new town--for work of course--she would get to know the local triple-A team on an intimate basis.

MOTHER

Yeah, I know the type. Tell ya what we can do...How about you and I go off to some Caribbean Island?

SALESMAN

(Hesitating) And for a reasonable price we can offer a 100% SQ rating....

MOTHER

SShhhhhhh...see what you want. NO, stop...stop selling... stop...STOP! Now listen! OK...ready...see what you really want. Look at me, see that you don't want to peddle your lies any longer. OK? Now what do you want? What? Answer now, what?

SALESMAN

I

MOTHER

What?

SALESMAN

I want...

MOTHER

Yes.

SALESMAN

I want to, to see, I want to be able to...

MOTHER

Shhhhh! Slowly now, your mind is searching the past for previous discussions about what you may or may not want out of life. Stop...Stop! Now just be here, and tell me what you want.

SALESMAN

I want to...to...sell you this program.

MOTHER

No, that's what you think you want. Now ask again...what do you want?

SALESMAN

Can I go home?

MOTHER

Yes, you run along now...

[Salesman leaves, lights transition attention to table stage right where Robeson and Burroughs are in their original positions, still talking, still engaged in the never-ending dialogue.]

ROBESON

Well, you old fool you've done it again.

BURROUGHS

I haven't the foggiest idea what you're talking about.

ROBESON

You've let me dominate the conversation.

BURROUGHS

Don't be absurd. People come from miles around to hear you talk, Robeson. They always have. The only thing people come from miles around to do to me is gawk.

ROBESON

Fine, then. For me. What are your last words?

BURROUGHS

My last words are boring. I have, however, a story. Entirely fictional of course, that my illiterate, infanticidal, pederast of a publisher might think would make a far more commercial epitaph than my own.

[As Burroughs tells his story, he weaves in and out of the players/mimes conducting and directing their actions as if it were the physical embodiment of creative writing. Intermittently, actors voice lines of dialogue or exit/enter at Burroughs behest.]

I knew a couple once, a while back. They were very much in love. The first five or six years of their marriage went swimmingly, as they say--though I don't know why. It was a kind of wonderful, complimentary relationship that made you think of peanut butter and jelly. Anyway, the first smudge on the window of their marriage...their bliss, became noticeable when Sarah, they were Jim and Sarah Stevens by name, had trouble leaving their 2-year-old son alone with Jim. She would become very worked up and anxious about every possibility. She would repeat to Jim, or make him repeat to her, endless catalogues of behavior in case any of a thousand potential emergencies should arise... I am fabricating this, of course.

Anyway, this became a source of constant tension between Jim and Sarah. Darling Celine was born a year and seven months after little Jimmy, and as she grew it became obvious to Jim that Sarah's anxiety wasn't just a first child thing. So they struggled in this tug-of-war, this teeter-totter of a relationship, that seemed perfect outside the realm of child rearing. Please understand that there is no Jim and Sarah.

When little Jimmy reaches 8 and darling Celine 6 ½ the situation becomes unbearable for the couple. It was actually the evening of the birthday party for little Jimmy's friend Michael...something...the birthday party that little Jimmy had been looking forward to since the last one the year before, that things came to a head. Jim managed to calm his son before arriving at the Donaldson's. Oh yeah, that's what it was Michael Donaldson. Although, none of this is true mind you.

When Jim returned home his wife, whose eyes were streaked red with too much crying, told him how he was subtly killing his children. She had long known that her kids would be particularly susceptible to catastrophic accidents, she told him.

And that the only reason they were alive today was due to the Herculean effort she was putting forth to overcome, by a mere act of her own will, their fate. Each time Jim encountered his wife's beliefs on this subject, in whatever form they manifested, he would swallow the gorge that surged in his throat from her suggestion that he was responsible for damaging their children and calmly announce that statistically such things were unlikely though they were entirely possible. This absolutely drove Sarah to the most impossible ends of panic and devotion. Though there was no little Jimmy, of course, nor was there a darling Celine.

Sarah carefully explained that it was her unhappy duty to monitor every possible fate that her children could encounter and come to a state wherein she believed that said particular fate could not befall her children. If on any occasion she were unable to accomplish this, she stared intently at her husband as she spoke with the uttermost clarity, then that fate would befall their children and it would be fatal. She focused on the most important part and said slowly, "And every time you tell me how it's statistically unlikely but possible, it makes my job that much harder." She also, though choked with tears and heaves, explained that she was beginning to doubt she could carry on until the kids reached adulthood. Well, assuming that there was such a thing as adulthood to be reached.

Jim explained, with a naive innocence that wasn't readily apparent based on what he actually said, that it was statistically very unlikely, though not entirely unprovable, that her beliefs were having any real impact on the kids. Then he explained, and this was the part that Sarah found most morbid because he had never spoken like this in all the time she had known him, that her fixation on that reality was likely to create a subconscious, or even spiritual if she would rather, need for them to manifest just the kind of disaster that she was preoccupied with. This was most likely Jim's most connected moment, but all Sarah could see was a most inconceivable 'final assault' on her capacity to protect her children. It was almost precisely at that moment that both Jim and Sarah realized separately that they hadn't heard a peep out of darling Celine in what was almost certainly "too long." Though, and this is very important, none of this really happened.

And it is because of that last fact, that it is inconsequential to continue with the story of Jim, Sarah, little Jimmy, and darling Celine. How little Jimmy returned from Michael's eighth birthday party and what, if anything other than the Steven's imaginations, kept darling Celine from creating her usual ruckus. None of that is of interest, because the only fact that matters at this point is that it was less than three months between little Jimmy's eighth birthday and the divorce. That is really all I'm trying to say.

[During the previous scene Protagonist has taken a seat stage left and Jack has positioned himself at the bar. Jack walks over to Protagonist, who is sitting, slowly drinking a beer, with one spot above him. His bearing is heavy. He is deep in thought.]

JACK

Hey dad.

PROTAGONIST

Hey son.

JACK

How are you doing?

PROTAGONIST

Can't complain, I guess. I'm just having a beer before I go out and finish painting that fence. Your mother's had enough of me putting it off.

JACK

Yeah, she doesn't take any shit.

PROTAGONIST

Watch your language.

JACK

Dad, I'm 28 years old.

PROTAGONIST

Oh, I'm sorry, I thought adults had to have manners also. Guess that was just in my day.

JACK

This is your day, dad.

PROTAGONIST

Then watch your fucking language!

[Jack looks over Protagonist's shoulder.]

How's the writing?

JACK

You know me. I'm always exploring something new. On a Saturday morning after waking slowly, I'll pick up some William Carlos Williams. "Pictures from Brueghel"

PROTAGONIST

Back on that? Jackson, I have to tell you something...

JACK

(Nodding and laughing) I'll imagine a world wherein I can set about to make a poem in response to each of Brueghel's paintings. It is such a beautiful world! I long to open the doors of this imagined world and walk in as to a movie or a good book.

PROTAGONIST

Son, I've never had the chance to impart to you the most precious pearl of wisdom I own. There is a cruel irony to letting your optimism fly too high.

JACK

(Continuing, oblivious) But instead on this Saturday I'll continue to look for a job I don't want. Again I'll set my mind on that undesired object of my intention, and go about trying to achieve it in the same old distracted way. Yes, that should be sure to bring me no closer to the abhorred job I abhor not having. You know, maybe I should just write something this summer that will **change the world**...or, sometimes I think I should write something that will change the world **this summer**. *(Jack laughs shyly at his silliness)*

PROTAGONIST

Jackson, if you've ever listened to me, listen to me now. I had the same designs. The world has a cruel trick for you. You must---*(lights over PRO start to go down)* No! Wait, wait! I'm not done yet! *(lights flicker back on)*

JACK

Sometimes I think my life is like trying to drown out the noise of a dying dog in the street. That reminds me of a poem by William Carlos Williams...

To a Dog Injured in the Street

It is myself,
not the poor beast lying there yelping with pain
that brings me to myself with a start-
as at the explosion
of a bomb, a bomb that has laid
all the world to waste.

I can do nothing
but sing about it
and so I am assuaged
from my pain.

A drowsy numbness drowns my sense
as if of hemlock
I had drunk, I think,
of the poetry
of Rene Char
and all he must have seen
and suffered
that has brought him
to speak only of
sedgy rivers,
of daffodils and tulips

Why should I think of that now? The cries of a dying dog are to be blotted out as the best they can. As though Rene Char suggests that with distraction and imagination we shall evade the fate of the pitiful dumb beasts. Like a tiny Shitzu of a dog, a boy lobs a softball high into the air. When the plopping softball hurtles to the earth very near an unsuspecting consciousness *(at this point, Protagonist starts speaking in unison with Jack, his light slowly fades in as Jack's fades out)* the ensuing hilarity of scared-tiny-dog should be all that is

required on a lazy summer day before dinner. However the skull-crushing projectile of intended hilarity comes a-plopping directly on tiny dog's head. The shock arrests his breath, his eyes gape. What will happen?

PROTAGONIST

(Speaking as if he's repeated this a million times before, tired and frustrated he has to do it again. he gets angrier and louder with every sentence.) Tiny dog straightens a rear leg out in a sort of bounding way, but there is no bounding and the leg keeps stretching back- most unnaturally back. *(yelling now)* Don't you see, Jack? I've lived this! I've been down this road! HAHAHAHA! Jokes on you, Jack! Don't believe me?! With a sort of twitch to the right tiny dog begins convulsing. A flurry of shouts and confusion bring a car to drive tiny dog to the veterinarian. He strokes the fur and mutters incomprehensible soothing into a tiny dog's ear as it convulses into rigid death.

[By now Jack's light is completely out, and he has stopped speaking.]

Yes, that seems alot like life: A big joke intent on passing the time away crushing our skulls so that we may convulse our way to rigid death. Everything you remember about Brueghel's painting reminds you of the power of beauty. You hold on to that thought as you look for a job to distract yourself from the hurtl-plopping softball of intended hilarity coming to put the final touches of 'reality' on this your erstwhile life! I've got it, Jack! I've been there! THIS IS MY MEMORY!

[Protagonist stops, exhausted, and slumps into a chair.]

PROTAGONIST

None of my lessons matter...

[The lights fade to black, and out of the darkness the Judge begins his indictment. By the time he's finished the lights have come up hard on the Judge, who is behind the bar. The lights continue to fill and dim throughout the scene. Creating the effect of a large space with various secrets.]

JUDGE

It's just when we find our deepest sense of comfort that life slips us that unexpected event. Life's like that. There are some who'd speculate that there is no omnipotent 3rd person, that just sets the earth like a grandfather clock and lets it tick to infinity, having cocktail parties to watch the goin's on. No, They'd venture that God throws us curves-as-whimsy.

PROTAGONIST

Does it matter, in the end, if we posit a God throwing us...or life throwing us...or The Devil, or Leprechauns, or any other fictional, temporary, made-up, anthropomorphic character who represents what in our lives seems beyond us? I mean who cares?

JUDGE:

Well there's the problem. It seems this generation has flatly decided to give up

on any attempt to understand the unknown or take responsibility for it.

PROTAGONIST

No, not just-it's just that I refuse to create a fictional concept about persons throwing shit to affect our lives. Look we know the reverence of religion. It's a very affecting experience. We know the joy of the thought of eternal happiness. And we're not gonna refuse the possibility and profundity of the idea that life is a game. Hell, we'd all like to play. But we can't just let that concept lead our lives. We must be practical; nothing has ever been accomplished by blindly following the herd.

JUDGE

Well sir, that is the most naïve sentiment I've ever heard expressed. To think it's all beyond your ken and you have no responsibility greater than monitoring your own "position" in response to all that is not your doing.

PROTAGONIST

I think that is oversimplifying...

JUDGE

We are all involved, participant or abstinent, in the creation of whatever meta-fiction governs us. If you simply...

PROTAGONIST

What? So you're saying that 2 billion people believing in God makes God or...

JUDGE

NO, I am saying that whether or not God exists, you are living in a society which believes God exists, and you must conduct yourself accordingly. Now if you will kindly come with me into the execution chamber.

PROTAGONIST

No wait, I'm still unsure about his idea of a society which I've grown up in and which is now condemning me to die. Do you really mean to tell me that the ideas of an individual are only as priceless as they don't prove an illegal counter to society's mindset?

JUDGE:

Assign any value judgment to it you like, Sir, the fact is you lived in our society. You drove on our roads. You sent your children to our schools. You lived as one of us for 28 years, and you still have no personal relationship with God. And you know that is illegal. It is anti-social to engage in the undermining, disproving, or castigation of any proper object of society!

PROTAGONIST

But what about love? Do you really think love can "fall in" and "play ball" with any old thing society floats out to assuage its misunderstanding and pain? You see, love does not compromise simply because everything else does. This society, no forget about this society, we all need absolutes to serve as parameters. One is death, or pain, or hurt but the anathema is love. Love will not abide a fiction which, however functional, useful, and beloved it is to society, does not

return the love of the individual.

JUDGE

But this leads to a pantheon of misadventure Sir. What you haven't seemed to grasp is that society depends on order. You cannot have one without the other. There is no such thing as an anti-social law, because law is what creates society. Your argument is registered. Your fight was made in earnest, and difficult to fight. And yet, here you are still. Take the prisoner away.

[Protagonist is thrown through a door and into a room where a slight man sits quietly smoking a pipe. He is deep in thought. Protagonist stumbles in and is becoming quite panicky.]

PROTAGONIST

What? What's this....

[The man with the pipe tells his story slowly, contemplatively]

CHANCELLOR:

Passing along another theorem has nothing to do with standing still. See? That sounds silly at first... Let me start again: When I first came upon adulthood, the possibilities were endless. The potential for manhood was manifest. I licked my chops-eager for the slake of experience. My tongue wagged excitedly. My tail shook with such force. I was such an earnest boy. But later on, the pangs took on a different bent. I felt my desire for individual realization sublimating itself to that of well-wishers and Johnny-Come-Latelys. There was nothing engaging emerging from there. I picked up my satchel-a good little schoolboy-and got my wife and my job, but nothing touched me the way the first wave of manhood did as it swept over me. I dwelt in stagnation. I yearned for those lost days of youth. I should leave it at that, but my will commands me, beckons truth.

I spent years achieving in any venue I could enter. My results, you ask? How did I fare? Well...what if I said I was better than some but not all that I could. Would that answer satisfy? Ultimately (I hate that word. It suggests a divine or merely disconnected third perspective wherein all things are judged by a fictional universal mark); but here's the difference, my exploits returned to me as the comforting toys of childhood-like soft stuffed animals--rabbits and ducks and bears. Does that make any sense? I pounded a would-be villain into the ground, and it returns to me as a tattered bunny, stuffing billowing out of its side, one eye drooping loosely.

Isn't perspective something? In history's eye, I conquered the world. But in God's eye, I made Franz the Rabbit conquer Fritz the Tiger on my little canopy bed of mortality. And that is the hell I live in--I'm finally given perspective on my actions. Though I thought I was making an impact, the firmament barely noticed my machinations. They commented lushly at divine cocktail parties on my self-absorption. So how do I answer when the millions I made suffer look down and ask, "Why?"

NARRATOR

(off stage, in radio voice) That Was Chancellor Adolf Hitler, Prisoner of Hell, Child of God.

[*A man in a straight jacket comes running on.*]

MAN IN STRAIGHT JACKET

I gave a watch, once, to a fish. My father owned it. But what really bothers me today isn't the fact that the fish had no use for the watch or that the watch immediately stopped, ceased, ended its ticking, and began to rust after I gave it to him. No, that's not what bothers me at all. It's that no one understands. When I try to share my story of giving my father's watch to a fish, people just stare at me as if I'm speaking gibberish. I mean, it's a simple act of expression. I'm not asking anyone to understand why!

But then they say, "Arguably, that is the reason you are insane. Do you see? It wasn't at all about the fish. The simple act of giving a watch to a fish is neither sane nor insane. In a social vacuum, it's just an act. No, the problem comes when we cannot remove our perspective from the social vacuum. When we cannot see why our actions are deemed "insane." You are not insane because you gave a watch to a fish; you are insane because you don't understand that society thinks it's queer. As long as we are aware of society's ever-leering eye and act accordingly, we are fine. But in fact I suppose in a vacuum, all of us are psychopaths."

NARRATOR

---The Life and Times Study

Dr. Yves Michel LaFontaine

Institute for the Theological, Philosophical, and Anthropological Studies,
Philadelphia, PA

Now this might not be the most profound of Dr. LaFontaine's work, but it might be the most useful part of it. You see, we are all driving ourselves insane because we are looking for external validation for our most instinctual impulses. Rather than listen to the beat, if you will, of our own drummer, we spend hours programming ourselves with TV, radio, news, and movies. While the most wonderful act ever committed might have been the giving of a watch to a fish, this pathological desire to have one's act validated by society leads to our downfall.

Vegas, Baby

The twinkle of lights

And the little yellow and blue white sparkle

Flash

A parade of gaudiness across my pupils.

The tinkle of the city

Beating underneath.

A human swell

And fleshy promenade.

I need your worship.

My neural pathways
Can't handle sensory submersion.

What happens is . . .
I sort of float in a trance
Waiting for someone to tell me
I'm acting eccentric.

You see,
I'm part of the mass.
The human swell.
I can't listen to my own drumbeat

My hands are too small.
They don't make enough pound.

Just feed me the lights
And the glare
And the numbing redundancy
And the reassuring pangs
And let me float.

[The Narrator returns to the podium after the poem, and announces.]

Life in the playground.

[The Narrator walks off.]

[Protagonist encounters a group of people in conversation; we see that it is Robeson, Burroughs, and Beatniks sitting around enjoying drinks. In comes Crazy Homeless Guy, muttering the subtitles of the play. It is the same actor that played the Professor.]

PROTAGONIST

Who's that?

BEATNIK 1

It's a crazy homeless guy. He hangs around here sometimes.

PROTAGONIST

How do you know his name?

BEAT 1

He told it to me.

PROTAGONIST

He's coherent?

BEAT 1

As can be expected. He's crazy.

PROTAGONIST

So you said. (*Addressing Crazy Homeless Guy*) Excuse me.

CRAZY HOMELESS GUY

Who told you there was any peace in the psychological whudduyou want from me, you get near the fourth wall and I'll cut your ass.

PROTAGONIST

Um, er, I just wanted to know if you might be able to help me out with a little problem I have. Well it's really more of a puzzle actually.

CRAZY HOMELESS GUY

Getting all kinds of reports can't make hide nor hair of them I'll help any way I can, of course, as long as you realize this is only a working title.

PROTAGONIST

Oh. Well. That's very considerate of you. It's just that I came here expecting--well, I don't know what I was expecting, but it seems we've been left out of a certain aspect in that we haven't been told exactly who that is in the bed there...

CRAZY HOMELESS GUY

Of course, you know she's just a trophy wife, you know. He really didn't care for her at all barring of course for mutually respective benefits, that is, mutually beneficial respect that they both gleaned from one another--if you get my meaning. But that goes without saying. There's no doubt in anyone's mind about the real affair involving that affair, they just assumed, as it were, certain a priori assumptions that were in fact de facto quite low on the priority list. No one asked the real questions: where were her mink coats? Did she have an orgasm during intercourse --you know, the really pressing issues that surrounded that issue and so forth I suppose it speaks to an even more profound psychosomaticism.

PROTAGONIST

I'm sorry?

CRAZY HOMELESS GUY

Of life.

PROTAGONIST

Oh. Well, as interesting as that is I don't think it really answers...

CRAZY HOMELESS GUY

I suppose you're prepared to simply accept that life ends in death. Because we weren't given a choice, maybe? Doesn't it make more sense that that is the choice of religion, hmm, and maybe not the truth?

BURROUGHS

Following one religion is like trying to see an orange van as green.

CRAZY HOMELESS GUY

It has nothing to do with what is, so much as it does with what we demand "is" to be. It's the most available solution out there. But imagine this: Life Is the

Playground! We've anesthetized and narcotized ourselves for so long we've completely missed the point! Life isn't just a warm-up for heaven or hell, or the "afterlife." The afterlife is just a way station for those wanting to get back to living. They're just sitting there, noses pressed against the window, waiting for their turn to get down here! This is the playground! Who wants to sit in heaven and live in paradise for eternity! You don't think that gets old after awhile? You wanna jump back in the sandbox, baby! You want another shot on the roller coaster. And that's the evil of some of your "religions!" they'll tell you to suffer quietly for some big reward--this IS the big reward! Live it up baby, cuz who knows when you'll be able to get back on?!

BURROUGHS

The idea that God has a vested interest in enslaving us with the illusion that we die, is interesting, what if he's afraid of what we could become if he allowed us that knowledge?

ROBESON

It would certainly replace the notion of an omnipotent God, with one of a paranoid deity trying to guard universal secrets. Lord, have mercy on us.

PROTAGONIST

You said it.

CRAZY HOMELESS GUY

Some men have escaped this illusion, Lord have mercy on us, but God co-opted their lives by making their deaths seem like supernatural ascensions. He inspired legions of their followers to create faiths surrounding them. Buddha, Jesus, Joseph Smith, Hubbard--this sort of thing isn't uncommon, you know.

BURROUGHS

Tell me, friend. If you have this knowledge, why is there no religion based around you?

CRAZY HOMELESS GUY

(Looks around at all the people looking at him) How do you think these things get started?

PROTAGONIST

So Earth is the great reward, not heaven.

CRAZY HOMELESS GUY

Precisely.

PROTAGONIST

Thank you.

CRAZY HOMELESS GUY

You're welcome. Everybody on board for comprehensive philosophy for beginners. Sign up quick, classes are filling up! *(Starts walking out)* Check your syllabi! The patient will be dead next semester! Carpe Vitae! Carpe Vitae!

[Protagonist stares after CHG as he exits, he notices Anticanadian sitting by himself smoking, drinking, and lost in thought.]

PROTAGONIST

So are you just going to sit here...

ANTICANADIAN

You got a better idea?

PROTAGONIST

Well, it's a beautiful world outside, maybe you ought to take a shot at enjoying it.

ANTICANADIAN

Enjoy it huh?

PROTAGONIST

Yeah, is there something wrong with enjoying life?

ANTICANADIAN

You ever been in love kid?

PROTAGONIST

I thought I was, once. I think I will be again. What do you think of that?

ANTICANADIAN

You want to know what I think of that? Don't get your hopes up, that's what I think of that.

PROTAGONIST

I think you've been on this stool too long my friend.

ANTICANADIAN

Son, I've only begun to rule on this throne, let me tell you a story. I call it "Never Trust a Billboard," though sometimes I call it "Don't Kidnap Your Wife." Jesus, was she beautiful. We had been married about eight months, you know just long enough for the honeymoon to wear off--or at least for the thought of the honeymoon wearing off to cross my mind.

I was driving home from work when I saw this billboard for those weekend escape packages. You've seen 'em where you go on vacation without leaving town by just checking into a hotel for the weekend? Well the sign said, "Kidnap someone you love for a weekend getaway." I wish I had never seen that goddamn sign.

I started thinking about that, and about eight months of marriage, and I thought I'd do something really wonderful--very romantic. So I got Friday off of work and spent the whole day arranging everything. I rented a car, I checked into the hotel under a fake name, I put chocolate and champagne and caviar and some little presents in the room, and I bought a wig for my wife.

Every so often, I get haunted by the idea that this was a joke, specifically played by the universe--or some obvious force within the universe--on me. A joke, an intended event displayed for the joy, merriment, and laughter of those who would observe it--and not the accident that it seemed to be at the time.

So I waited outside my wife's office building and as she walked out I came screeching up in the car, yelled "Get in," and tried to act scared and agitated. She got in and began to ask questions, but I just threw the wig at her and said, "Put this on!" She sat there and said, "Honey...What is it?" I screamed, "Just put it on please, there's no time!"

I turned the radio up loud and looked around outside as if there might be something or someone after us. I mouthed over the loud music, "I'll tell you everything later," then looked around again to confirm my suspicions. She was starting to look a little worried and scared in her wig. I thought she was so beautiful at that moment I almost had to stop the whole charade right there and kiss her. I suppose we should obey those instincts, but I stuck with the plan.

I remember passing--God I remember this so clearly--we passed the very billboard that had inspired me and I half-winked at it in collusion. I felt so cool and in control and boy wouldn't my wife be surprised when I revealed my ploy and our great weekend getaway. I'd burn that billboard to the ground if it were still around.

We pulled into the parking lot. I was wearing a trench coat and sunglasses. I pulled up the collar and grabbed my wife as we scuttled to the entrance. "Just be calm, just blend," I said, "We'll be there soon." "We're the Martins if anyone asks. OK? OK?" she said it was OK. She was buying it hook, line, and sinker. It was very hard for me to disguise my delight.

I held her close as we snuck into the hotel. I asked for my key, "Martin-room 2713." When we got in the elevator, she began to ask again. But I shushed her and pointed eerily at the ceiling. I held my finger up...like it'll soon be safe.

I opened the door while holding her back. I looked in as if to check for intruders. Then I ran into the center of the room and grabbed the champagne and flowers. I stood there--arms wide apart and welcoming--Oh, if you could have seen her move. She locked every part of the door and then walked just to where she could see me. She moved so carefully and slow.

But she just stood there--frozen. I couldn't understand why she didn't get it. She looked as if she were in shock. I got scared, perhaps I'd over done it. "Honey," I said, "you've been kidnapped for the weekend--by me! It's just us and a little champagne, chocolate, caviar, and...you...me." But it just wasn't registering. She just stared at me with these far off eyes. "Honey..." I said. She said, "So this is all a joke?" Oh god, I knew right then the tone wasn't right. Something was wrong, "Not just a joke I said...you know it's a kind of playful, romantic, uhhmmm getaway--you know.

Well she didn't. I couldn't understand why she didn't get it. I did everything perfectly, just as the brochure said, "Kidnap your wife" it said, but instead of

ending up on some tropical island you could do it in your very own city. If I saw that billboard now, I'd drive my car right through the damn thing.

She explained to me that while we were arriving at the hotel she had become convinced that something unspeakable had happened. Something she could not even imagine. She said she had a great realization. She imagined that we would have to spend the rest of our lives on the run or undercover, that we would have to abandon our lives and families and that none of this fazed her. The only fear, the only thought she could not reconcile, was that she would have to spend the rest of her life with only me. She said the thought of spending the rest of her life with only me filled her with dread.

She left me. Not right then, not that moment, but we never recovered from that instant. And the thing is...you just have to believe me on this...we were happy before that. Really, I'm 100% certain that if I had not faced her with that conundrum at that particular juncture in our lives, we would still be married today-and happily. I don't know if either of us will ever recover from that, that, that...hmmmmmm. So all I'm sayin' is don't kidnap your wife--and never, ever, under any circumstances trust a billboard.

[Lights out on Protagonist and up on Salesman at the table stage left, delivering his manifesto. He is more self-confident and well groomed; he is now a salesman who knows his business, a consummate professional. Protagonist remains at seat with Anticanadian.]

SALESMAN

You see I listen to that guy speak, and it just ratifies every unfortunate truth I've ever suspected about mankind. Listen to him spouting invective, trying to convince himself of the truth of this or that thing--so he can look at something, and use the words he's conditioned his mouth to play. What people never seem to figure out, especially this guy lurking around here, is that he's his own billboard. You can say I exploit people, but in the final analysis there is only one mark and one hustler, and you look at them both in the mirror every morning. All I do is let you sell the product to yourself. Sure, the sales pitch is mine to control, but eventually all there is in the world is you and your ability to sell yourself a bill of goods. I just find out what people want, and then show them how what they've spent a lifetime selling themselves is exactly what I happen to have. I don't sell people, they sell themselves.

[Lights down rapidly on Salesman and up on Professor/CHG who is pacing and slowly evolving from "Professor" to "CHG" by tearing hair, pulling off clothes, and generally coming apart/emerging from the chrysalis.]

Professor / CHG

There once was a boy named Jack who told stories to people, except Jack only told these stories to people who seemed to lack the capacity to see the world his way. Jack wanted to get people to see what kind of a world they were living in, and what kind of a world they **could** be living in. As such, he had two different stories for each occasion, but he would never tell both stories to the same person. There were people who had heard his, "How the world is" story, and those who had heard his "How the world could be" story. But whenever he tried to tell one

story to someone who had heard one of his other stories, they would grow angry and throw projectiles at him--just anything that was at hand: fish, flags, feathers, crumpled up pieces of paper with words like "fanatic" or "freak" written on them, feces, flowers, fans, fortune cookies, fluffernutters. But this stubbornness in no way tamped his resolve. In fact, these people merely excited them to try harder, though he would never be able to find someone who would listen to both stories, and that, as they say, is that.

No, that isn't that, no, no, no...I don't like the word "tamp." What is tamp? Do you eat tamp? Is it wet and kind of peaty dirt? Why wouldn't someone use a word like pat, press, nudge, tip, slip, tweak? (Now tweak, I like) Scurip -- now that should be a word, "Just scurip that right into place." Maybe I don't like tamp because I associate it with tampon, I wonder if that's how tampons got their name? Because you tamp on the end of them, to get them in the right place. "Excuse me, I have to tamp on my tampon." "Leggo my eggo!" But I don't think "tamp" accurately describes what one does with this product. It should be called a "push-in" or a "slide-in" or a "slip-in" or a "stuff-in." Actually "stuff-in" might work best, because it has the connotation that you're "blocking up" stuff. Of course, I believe the Partnership for the Furtherance of Thanksgiving Joy and Profit has copyright-protection over the word stuffin. And I don't think they'd want delicious thanksgiving food and feminine hygiene product to carry the same name. That's almost certainly why the initiative to rename cranberry sauce, monostat-7, failed. The PFTJP has many friends.

But I digress, now, let's see, what are some alternate uses for the word tamp. Hmmmm. "Honey, be sure you've tamped everything into just the right place." "Excuse me sir, would you like your potatoes tamped, squashed, or mashed?" Who would offer "tamped" potatoes? Maybe people in Tampa Bay? How does one "tamp" a bay? It's not surprising some words aren't used often.

[CHG exits as he says his last line. The spot on him disappears; it transitions to Protagonist and Vegas Showgirl doing a shot together. Showgirl seems unaware that she is "on," she affixes her headdress, picks up placard from beside the table, and gets back to work with cross-stage promenade. Protagonist is also "caught unaware" by the light, and consciously delivers his "last lament."]

PROTAGONIST

Okay, so, here it is. The world, this universe, isn't what we think it is. We actually exist outside of it, beyond time, space, physical matter. *(Takes another swig)* Our bodies were made so we could have something to dump our consciousness into, but in doing so we were required to forget the fact that our consciousness existed outside of them. As soon as we're dumped into bodies, we let go of everything we know. You see, I'm not supposed to know all this. And I'm sure as hell not supposed to be telling you guys. But I figure, What the hell, we're all in this together, right? *(Takes another swig.)*

So anyway, those are the rules of the game. As soon as you get flesh, you forget. Because, really, who'd wanna play if we all came with the knowledge that it was just a game?. We'd all yell, "Ollie, Ollie, oxen free!" and quit before we learned any of the hard lessons. 'Cuz the game is tough. *(Getting visibly soused)* It can be brutal. Some people get the holy hell kicked out of them as soon as they step onto

the field. So then they go back to the sidelines with no intent of ever playing again--but it's like you're fucking compelled to. You see? The game is all that there goddamn is. And the game will always go on. And it's funny, because the kinds of games we're familiar with are meant to "end" with a winner and a loser. But looking at the big picture you realize that the only "victory" is death. And only alternative is "being." So the whole point is the game. And the only way to win is to enjoy playing.

But, see--and here's where things get really fucked up--one of the things we do is invent other rules to the game. So imagine the tragedy of someone who adopts another person's rules and successfully plays a game that's been outlined for them--in spite of the fact it's made them miserable. At the end of the game, they realize that playing was the whole point. They were playing by somebody else's rules, and now the clock has run out (*Swig, hiccup.*)

Here. I'll let you on a little secret. (*looks left, then right*) Shhhh. (*Giggles*) If you can enjoy playing enough, you can make time, space, and physical matter (*Looks both ways again, whispers*) stand still. I know, hunh? You can freeze up the game clock. Isn't that a bitch? You can become the playing. And sometimes you get those moments--when you're eminently aware, those transcendent moments--but the next second you start worrying about the past or the future, and it's gone.

So how 'bout that? Aren't I the asshole? So much time to make up for. So many moments wasted. Well, there's no use bitching about it all day. Gotta get back in the game sometime.

[The lights quickly fade to reveal a small boy, on the opposite side of the stage from Robeson and Burroughs, stage left and down towards the front. The boy is dressed in white, and a spot is shining on him from overhead. A Girl identically dressed walks onstage and a spot follows her over to the Boy. She puts her hand on Boy's shoulder.]

GIRL:

Hey champ.

BOY:

Hey.

GIRL:

We thought we'd lost you.

[Silence.]

How was the ride?

BOY:

It was fun . . . but . . .

GIRL:

But what?

BOY:

It was scary. There were twists and loops and there were people screaming.

GIRL:

Yeah, it's scary. It's never as good as they promise and it always gives you a crick in your neck. Whudduya say you and me go get some cotton candy? I know a great place.

[Boy pauses and looks back down.]

BOY:

No, I wanna go back on.

[Lights fade slowly on boy and come up on hospital bed, as machines beep. All of a sudden, the beeps turn in to one long beep. Protagonist sits up from under the covers and slides legs over, he stands up awkwardly and walks toward the audience, he ponders silently and exits through the audience.]

Curtain