1989

Across the grain

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Across the grain

by

Bret A. Ross

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English
Major: English (Creative Writing)

Approved:

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REVENGE OF THE FIFTY THOUSAND POUND MAN

I sell bull sperm.

I travelled the crazy international circuits out of Wisconsin where dairying is king and prize bulls give their all for one hay-filled room and three square meals a day. If bulls had brains they'd nearly be humans and would reap the benefits of their animal enthusiasms.

They could have my job.

Then they would make unjustifiable amounts of money moving five-hundred thousand units of their own freeze-dried futures daily. They would travel Europe and Africa. They would get wake-up calls in the best hotels. They would get used to cold toast in the morning, warm beer at night. They would learn to talk to livestock they couldn't stand. They would explore living rooms of the free world and come out smiling every time. They would, at parties, drink themselves into deeper and deeper levels of foolishness, but never appear more ridiculous than the creatures from the front office. They would be instantly recognizable as being exactly what they were: bad hoofers waltzing on the burned-out edge of someone else's senseless and savage nightmare.

So as the plane landed back home in Madison with the bulls stampeding in my head, I reconciled myself to some great and equally senseless act like quitting the whole shooting match--selling the
stocks, the car, the condo--blowing off my clients, and spending every last goddamned dime I had. And I had someone to spend it on too.

Her name was Connie and rather than going to the office to turn in the accounts, I took her out to the scary west-side where the sun sets over a million separate shopping-malls, a place where a lot of people are really never seen or heard but leave evidences of themselves. It's so scary.... But Connie liked the clothes, the fashion. Connie, you see, liked to be liked, so that she liked everything and everything liked her. That was the deal she had cut with life. That was her special gift. She flowed. And I needed that. I needed something.

We went to this dinner-bar thing in the parking lot of the Brentwood mall. A digital clock and "go Badgers!" There was dinner. There were drinks. Piano music, please. And there was bare-shouldered Connie, hair-up, legs crossed demurely, big eyes like silver dollars. She was a perfect model of herself.

"You look like sin. Are you sick?" she said.

"Tired."

"Long trip?"

"A vicious whirlwind experience."

"Good music, huh. I like the old stuff. I like the new stuff too, but sometimes it gets a little too--"

"Digital," I said.

"Not exactly that, but something else."

"What do you want to do?"
"Oh, I don't know. There are a lot of things, I s'pose. What do you want to do? I mean we could just talk. I mean I have something to tell you--

"I want to quit my job. You want to get married?"

"No," she said. "What brought this on?"

"It's the bulls. I'm dissappointed in them."

"Oh. I see."

She took a sip from her pink margarita, lit a cigarette, and looked at me hard and square. She blew one puff of smoke just above my head.

"I don't suppose it would do any good to ask you why you want to quit your job, would it?" She put the cigarette out.

"Oh the bulls, the bulls--where's my hump?"

"Why do you want to marry me?"

"Do you want to get married?"

"Not like this, I don't."

A marimba player got up from one of the tables and joined the piano player in a Latin version of *Mama, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys.*

"We could have separate honeymoons," I said.

"You're being a shit. I don't like you when you're like this."

"Like what."

"Like hating everything. Like me. Like your life. You think you know everything, but you don't. You don't know me; you don't know
yourself; you don't know anything, and you're going nowhere. You're nothing but a giant, immature, baby!" Connie looked for her purse.

"Anything else bothering you?" I said.

"Shut up. I want to go home."

The crowd began to clap to the beat and sing along with the song's chorus. A beefy-faced booster at the table next to us knocked a pitcher of beer onto the floor. It shattered in one loud complaint and not much else. The piano player sang:

Hey, hey hey...
That's okay--ay--ay
Babies don't let your
Mama's grow up
And get away--ay--ay.

It brought the house down.

"I'll drive you home," I said.

"I'll bus it."

"C'mon, I'll pay for a cab."

"Leave me alone, you shit, you."

And then she was gone, heels clicking in a perfect counter-rhythm to the music. As waitresses scurried to sop up the meandering beer, the booster's wife, a charming woman of indeterminate age, leaned over to me and said, "She's a very beautiful girl."

"Yes, she is."

"Well, if I were you, I wouldn't worry about it too much. Those kind are always high-strung."

"Thank you."
Beefy, her husband, looked at me like I was the next big disease so I excused myself, sat up at the bar, and murdered the next few hours or so. Conventional weapons. Plenty of ice. I was living the life of livestock after all. And sedation was the key....

So it went something like ConnethisandConniethat for quite awhile and ended with she was probably right and probably wrong about a lot of things, but all that just left me sitting at the bar. And I drank more.

The piano player sang a bluesy version of Hotel California that really wasn't half bad, and a honey-haired waitress began to twist slowly to the music.

It seemed the right time to make a move, so I slid off my stool, sidled up to her and said, "Howdy, I'm from France! Would you like to see some sperm? I got samples out in the car. A whole caseful." Then she gave me this screwed-up look that indicated that she had missed the humor of the whole situation, a point which was reiterated by the manager of the place who, between the popping of his finger on my sternum, asked me to leave. I, in turn, tried to explain the situation but only managed to communicate, "Look, you sack of shit-dust, I sell it, for godsakes!" He took the first swing. And that was pretty much the whole deal.

Now I'm not sure if I had help finding the door or it found me, but we met, danced briefly and went our separate ways: it, attached and secure--me, to night's open arms.

And in that darkness, I saw what I saw.
He was sitting in the parking lot in lotus position wearing a herring-bone blue suit, red tie, black shoes, no laces. The store's lights weren't bright enough to make anything out of his face, but the shadows there and the shape of his head indicated nothing too unusual. In fact, he looked like a million businessmen all over the world except for one outrageous detail—it was well over four hundred feet from his tailbone to the top of his head.

I rubbed my eyes.

He stretched, yawned.

I looked away, turned back, and refocused; I could feel eyes larger than me looking at me. "Howdy," I said as nonchalantly as I could, then looked down and headed for the car, hoping I wouldn't disturb whatever it was he was doing.

"Wait!" his voice boomed. "Who are you?"

I felt an obligation to respond: "My name is Johnson," I said. "I'm from the planet Earth. This is a parking lot on the planet Earth. Parking lots are for cars." I walked over to my car and pointed it out to him. "This is a car—no-sir, this is not a car exactly—this is a Ford. A Ford is a type of car. We use cars to communicate with on another. But, you see, the deal is I left my keys to my car, this car, in there, the bar, where I have to go now and get the keys to the car, the Ford, so I can communicate and be a normal human being—I mean, I'm not saying normal is necessarily a good thing. I mean, I know a whole lot of people who aren't normal, but boy-oh-boy are they nice—"
"Silence!" he said.

I did that easily enough. His voice shook the panes of glass on the storefronts.

"My name is Davis." He looked around the lot, at the cars motoring down the adjacent highway, at the moon. "You open your eyes and everything appears before you. That is how it works; is that not true?"

I was in no position to disagree, and besides, it seemed reasonable enough: "Yes," I said enthusiastically, "that's exactly how it works!"

"Good. You, Johnson, will attend me...."

"Mr. Davis, don't get me wrong, but I've got a job I love and a car and a house and several women who really, really hate me so I don't think I'll have enough time--"

"Silence!" His forehead, or what I thought was his forehead, glowed blue and the air smelled like rotten eggs. Suddenly, and I mean it too, three flaming pink thunderbolts flew from out of the blue, and the Honda dealership across the street exploded neatly in one monstrous fireball.

"Yes, I'll work for you!" I found myself saying. "I don't know what came over me! Such an opportunity! I'll--"

"Silence!"

And I don't know exactly why, but I began thinking about the pets I had when I was a kid. When I was four, I had a dog, a shepherd named Midnight. As Midnight is my shepherd, I shall not rant.

What a cuddly pup!
"All I know," Davis said, "is that I want things. You, Johnson, will make sure I get them."

As I enthusiastically agreed to Davis' terms, the bar door, my erstwhile dancing partner, flew open and the crowd spilled out into the parking lot headed by Beefy: "What in god-awful hell is goin on out here?" It didn't take too long for him or anyone else to figure it out. There were gasps, hollers, bleats, ooohs, ahhhs; one woman and several men fainted dead away. Most just stood gaping and uttering half-sounds like engines do when the battery dies.

When Davis stood up, several ran back into the bar screaming and tearing their hair out which is something I never saw before, but always heard about. It was one of those deals.

"This man a friend of yours?" Beefy asked.

"We just met."

"Oh, I see." Beefy took a couple steps forward. "Hel-lo there." He waved his arm in one exaggerated semi-circle of salutation. "You're about the biggest goddammed son-of-a-bitch I ever did see. Why, you must weigh over a thousand pounds, ain't that right?"

No answer.

"You think he heard me?" Beefy asked me.

"Oh, I dunno. Like I said, we just met."

Beefy's wife grabbed me by the arm, "Aren't you scared?"

"Shitless."

"So am I."
I had a cat once, but Midnight chewed it up. Never had one after that either.

Beefy went on: "My name is Arnold Vandenberg of Vandenberg, Heist, and Plum. I'm a goddamned lawyer!" Beefy Arnold reached into his vest pocket, pulled something out and began waving it above his head. "Here's my card!"

Car crashes. Sirens. Chairs flying through the bar window. And a giant in the Brentwood mall parking lot. It was too untidy for words. Connie wouldn't have liked it at all.

"The point is," Beefy said, "you people in the entertainment game need legal representation..."

"Arnie, is that any way to treat people?" Beefy's wife said. "I mean, really sometimes your way with people is so inelegant."

"Mary, let me handle this. This is business," Beefy said.

"This is not business," she said. "You're bullying him."

"And what do you know about business?" Beefy said to his wife.

"I know everything about business!" she screamed back at him.

"For your information, buddy boy, I've spent the last fifteen years of my life dealing with caterers for your parties, making your appointments, checking your books, and talking to your clients like they were people, like they were elegant!"

I saw just the faintest blue glow appear on Davis' forehead, then looked at the smouldering rubble of the Honda dealership. "I don't think we're dealing with people here," I hastened to interject.
"Mind your own business!" they said.

And they went on arguing about whose pot was being pissed in by who, apparently oblivious to the blue swell around Davis' head which revealed the dark furrow of his giant brow. At one point, they competed for Davis' attention: Beefy madly waving his card above his head, screaming, "tax loopholes, investment schedules, stock options;" his wife screaming, elegantly of course, "hors d'oeuvres, Russian ballet, the French Modernist View!" And I had just enough horse sense left to distance myself from them.

Then, when the night sky turned pink and Davis' full height was revealed in stark silhouette, Beefy stopped, she stopped, and I desperately wished that the whole of creation would split open and swallow me for good. Two pink thunderbolts flew from his forehead and vaporized the pair. Nothing was left of them except for a pair of high-heels and a pack of Marlboros.

Davis put his massive hands on his hips and scowled at me fearfully.

"Oh for godsakes, Johnson!" he bellowed. You actually knew those people?"

A few thunderbolts here, a few thunderbolts there and in no time Davis got everything he wanted—which was everything. The world was his. There wasn't anything anybody could do except pretend that
everything was going to turn out all right or wrap themselves up in the
good old days when the world was a wreck and nobody understood anybody.

And on top of all this were the strange occurrences that accompanied
Davis' arrival:

In Long Island, New York, a man divorced his wife so he could marry
his swimming pool's statue.

In the South, three thousand black stable boy carriage steps were
arrested for stealing lawn lanterns.

West of Mt. Rushmore, Thomas Jefferson's head was pulled over for
doing ninety on the Lewis and Clark trail.

A huge wall had to be erected around the Statue of Liberty because
she kept on lifting her skirt up over her head and smiling. Davis, of
course, climbed over that wall, and for a few minutes, the Earth moved,
shaking skyscrapers around the globe.

Sheep sang; olive trees danced; rivers had trouble deciding which
way to flow; horses talked airily of what "is" and "is not"; bulls went
shopping for shoes.

A lot of people couldn't cope. Churches and other mental
institutions were flooded with people who complained that the only
things they thought about were the pets they had as small children.
Scientists were completely baffled and either became drunks or
psychologists. Corporate executives, finally having realized that a
free market system couldn't survive when individual freedom was
determined by one selfish and careless and omnipotent tyrant, threw themselves out the window.

Some of them bounced once or twice.

As for me, I was too busy with paperwork to think about anything else. There were extraordinary accounts to manage, rents to collect, the media to lie to ("It's just a matter of reconstructing attitudes about money, livestock, trees, and statues, after all.... Everything is going to be all right. Don't worry. Be happy!"); there were debits and credits and taxes and stocks to manipulate so that nobody really knew what was happening, and the phones rang like there was no tomorrow. Then there was Davis himself who never ate, who never slept, who never changed his suit, whose furious temper I had to try to keep subdued.

And there was Connie who claimed that she was in love with him.

"What!" I yelled from behind the desk.

"I like his style...." she went on dreamily.

"What! He wears the same suit every day!"

"... I like the way he walks...."

"But he steps on people!"

"... I like the way he talks...."

"But he doesn't talk. He orders!"

"... I just think he's divine!"

"Look, he's too big for you. You're in love with the abstraction!"

"Johnson!" Davis bellowed through the Oval Office window.

"I'm busy."
"Ooooh, that voice," Connie said. "It's so dreamy...." And she fainted right on the Persian rug. Looking at her, I knew that something had to be done. You see for me reality had always been one real strange fandango, the secret boog-a-loo on the shelf behind the canned goods--but for Connie? This time Davis had gone too far.

"Johnson, get out here right now!" Davis said.

I leaped over the slumbering Connie and rushed out into the hallway, offering my howdies to everyone in passing. The president was there too. He had lost his teeth again and wandered aimlessly in his bathrobe, searching every room, holding his toothbrush out as a kind of denture diving-rod.

I strolled out to the rose garden and talked to Davis as he sat on his favorite stool, the White House roof.

"I want something," Davis grumbled.

"But you've got everything. There isn't anything else to want. Not here. If you want to go to another planet that has a lot of stuff to want, then by all means, go there because I'm completely swamped. I've got the Arabs on my back. South Africa is delinquent on their rent, and the Soviets still aren't convinced you're real. I haven't slept for two weeks! I haven't even--"

"For godssakes, Johnson, I'm bored. I want to do something."

"What about visiting your girlfriend--Miss Liberty?"

He thought about that for a moment. "Liberty? I am bored with her."
It figured. "Look," I said, "you can do anything you want. Use your imagination."

"I haven't got an imagination. I don't need one." Davis looked tired, confused, but then he got angry. "You are supposed to get me the things I want!" He got up off of his stool, took two giant steps over to my car, and stomped it flat as a dime.

"Why don't you play some golf," I said looking at the remnant of my Ford. "That's what men in your position do."

"Play?"

"Yes you take a little white ball and knock it around the woods, thrilling to your own energies until you get it in the hole. It would be perfect for you."

"Arrange it for me, then, Johnson."

"I will, and just one more thing--Egypt just called to say the Sphinx just crapped all over the president's lawn down there. I don't understand it--the Sahara's the biggest litter-box on the planet--but they blamed me, and I just want you to know: your cat, your responsibility!"

"Oh, for godsakes, Johnson!"

California, west of Arizona, is rich in its cultural heritage and history. It is the story of Sutter's Mill and Hollywood, Richard Nixon
and Ronald Reagan and Bob Hope, Caesar Chavez and killer bees, the silicon valley, paranoia, Disneyland. And cars.

From its northern border, it's also a perfect dog leg to the left (see Figure 1).

But there were problems. The first thing was that the population of the fareway (the big valley between Redding and Bakersfield) fruit, nut and vegetable growers, business folk, and, you know, other people with names, did not take to the idea at first. They all wanted to know how well Davis played golf, fearing that too many misses would tear up the world's most complicated irrigation system, ruin crops, and wreck property such that everybody would have to live in Los Angeles. And nobody wanted that.

So I lied. Told them that Davis practiced every day by hitting balls from Camp David out into the Atlantic. Told them that they would be compensated at twice the insured rate of property. Told them taxes would be reduced. Told them everything that they thought they wanted to hear. There really wasn't anything anybody could do about the situation—they knew it and I knew it—but they took comfort in the lie anyway, and gave the okay.

The other problem was the equipment. Boeing made the driver out of jet fuselages which were welded together and fitted to sequoia trunks, cut into half moon shapes. U.S. Steel made the irons and the putter out of giant sand molds cut into the Mojave Desert. A blimp hanger was used for the bag; and the balls—good god—the balls were fashioned from four
miles of unwound truck retreads, rewound again for vitality, then surrounded by one layer of teflon, one layer of steel belts and an outside layer of surlyn. Two balls. No tees.

Nineteen thousand acres east of Bakersfield were bulldozed and re-sodded for the green, and we were ready to go—except for the biggest problem.

Davis.

I showed him films, showed him all the greats—Hogan, Snead, Nicklaus—taught him everything I knew about the game, but he wouldn't or couldn't listen. He would lose his patience, if he had had any at all, and during practice sessions, he'd miss the ball then throw his clubs out into the Atlantic and we'd have to wait until the Coast Guard returned them. Then he'd blame me and start snorting and stomping around like a great mad bull, so that the resale value of my cars (eight of them in a week) amounted to a little more than a cup of coffee, a piece of pie, and some polite conversation. And he was losing something else. He looked tired all the time; his orders turned into complaints, then into whines.

And Connie blamed me too.

"You're ruining him!" she wailed. "He looks so old!"

"He's doing just fine," I lied. "Everything is going to turn out all right." The same lie seemed to work over and over and over again. It worked on everybody, and when I realized that fact, I saw my way out.
One day, when Davis had shanked his practice drive into the Empire State Building, reducing it to the size of a Seven-Eleven, I told him, "What a marvelous shot! You're doing just fine! Everything is going to be okay!" So as Davis fired errant shots to all points on the coast, from Martha's Vineyard to Key Biscayne, I could see a new purpose in his stride. Davis was grooving his swing. He was grooving it badly.

All the media came to Redding. Radio, newspapers, television, teachers, publishing houses, rock-and-roll stars, ad consultants, movie moguls, politicians, clergy, loan officers—all were invited by me to witness Davis golf California (except the loan officers; they seem to follow me wherever I go). The networks called it "A Big Event," and, consequently, a carnival atmosphere prevailed. No kidding. Cotton candy, balloons, Pepsi, music, clowns, rides, dogs, kids running around with "Big Guy" dolls tucked under their arms, guess my weight contests: Redding came down like the Fourth of July, but I couldn't help wondering if I might have just bought the farm on this one. Things could get nasty.

He used a pine tree for a tee, stuffed his tie into his shirt pocket, and swung, the air following behind the club with such force that it knocked everybody to the ground. But when everyone had dusted themselves off and looked around, the ball was still on the tee. Davis had missed.
"Is he okay?" Connie asked me.

"Everything is going to be all right," I said.

A buzz of rumors, the static sound of static in a glass jar, began to emanate from the crowd.

Davis looked at me, eyes narrowing.

"It's all right," I said. "Everything is okay."

Davis addressed the ball again with the same result, and people began to laugh. "The guy's a comedian," an old miner chortled. I could see the media folks taking notes or rushing for the phones. I patted myself on the back for having been so clever to set and spring this little trap, but only for a minute or two.

An armada of black bottom cumulus clouds moved in and battled the sun for the sky. It began to rain. I looked at Davis' head which went from blue to red when his next shot went no more than ten feet. His eyes were on fire, and I mean it too!

"What's wrong with him?" Connie pleaded.

"What's wrong with him is that he doesn't have a sense of humor; that's what's wrong with him." I grabbed Connie by the arm and made for the helicopter, the crowd's hysterical laughter following in our wake.

Then all hell broke loose. The sky was filled with pink and green lightning bolts; hail as big as Buicks fell on either side of us; trees couldn't handle the wind and flew away. I couldn't see Davis because of the great divots he was churning in every direction, and then, suddenly, everything was flying in crazy circles around us. The helicopter had
exploded. We found a ditch and covered ourselves. Avocados, oranges, grapes, lettuce, cabbage leaves, snow peas and several varieties of nuts dropped on us in a bizarre raining salad. I damned near choked to death.

Not much longer after that the calm warmth of the victorious sun drew us out of the ditch, and we made our way back to the fareway. The other folks, too, climbed out of various holes, rubbing their eyes and yawning as if they had risen from a deep sleep. They got into their cars and drove away.

The wreckage was amazing. Bulls, sheep, pigs, and chickens grazed naturally among the great mounds of smoking vegetables and fruit, their suits and shoes having dropped off of them. Real trees were twisted and splintered along the sides of the fareway. Huge holes had been dug into the earth, and if I hadn't have known better, it looked like tornado storm damage, or that from an H-bomb, and not the tantrums of a giant with a golf club.

For ten miles Connie and I climbed and dug through the stir-fried valley looking for Davis. Connie spotted him first.

He was lying on a hillside of cabbages in the sun. His suit was torn, the tie was gone, the collar open, his shoes needed a shine, and as we drew closer, we could see that his hair had gone to gray. Except for his size, he looked like any middle-aged businessman in the full throes of a multiple burn-out, but he had just enough strength in him to
raise one hand, point his finger at me: "Johnson, I'll seek my revenge on you in a way you can't possibly imagine."

And, as his laughter echoed down the valley, I looked at Connie, and Connie looked at me, then we looked back, but there was nothing to look at. Davis had disappeared.

As near as I can recollect it, the next thing I heard was the jangle of keys at the cell door. I signed something at the desk acknowledging that I had been drunk and disorderly and that I would make good my on my responsibilities to society, specifically, some minor reparations owed to the Brentwood Mall. I recollect being blinded by the sun as I stepped out of Madison's finest; I recollect the sound of train wrecks in my head, and the feeling that someone was using a blow torch to cut his way out of that particular cavern and not having much success.

Then I recollect the sight of my Ford pulling up, Connie driving, and I recollect the angry edges of her face and the consequent gush of my apologies--my solemn promise to keep the job and my sanity. And I recollect something else.

"For godsakes, Johnson," she said. "I'm pregnant!"

So, you see, as I am writing this, he is knuckling around in his playpen. He, who looks like Winston Churchill in miniature--as all eight-month-olds do--is planning his next move, his next act of terrorism. He has already terrorized the cat into a state past the
normal cat psychosis, into a wild schizophrenia; it no longer can tell
the difference between a litter box and my shoes. He has strewn toys,
books, dishes, socks, food, and my business accounts all over the
apartment. He has tried to eat the inedible: dirt from the garden,
knobs off the television; he thinks the toilet seat is a teething ring.
He has taxed my imagination to the limit as I have become, depending on
his mood, a ducky, a horsey, and a moo-moo cow. And when he isn't
crying or screaming his disaffections with his surroundings, he's coming
up with such verbal gems as "smoosh," "bash," and "bye-bye."

Connie flows in from work, comes over to me, and leans over my
shoulder.

"Watcha doin there, sport," she says.

"Accounting."

"Is everything okay?" she says brightly.

"Everything is just fine. Everything is going to be all right," I
say.

She waltzes through the shambles of the apartment over to the
playpen and gives him his rattle—the only thing left in his playpen.

"There's our big man," she says. "Your daddy has some cleaning up
to do, doesn't he, Bo-bo.

"Daddy is just about finished...," I say.

She hoists him in the air, that big, gleeful smile spreading over
his tiny face.

"Oh, darling," she says to me, "isn't he just divine!"
"No doubt about it," I say.

At that moment, I couldn't have agreed with her more.
Figure 1: Hole #1 -- 433 miles
Par 4
FOR APPEARANCES' SAKE

::: Good Morning, Hank! And it's a great morning too! The sun is shining brightly, and there's just this darling little bird on my windowsill chirping his little heart out! It's just great to be alive, isn't it, dear? Gotta go. Talk to you later, okay?:::

Two days before Henry Pevitz died, he shook the rain out of his umbrella, twisted through the revolving door and was greeted by the security staff of the Time/Life building with the usual "good morning" and a smile. Henry nodded to the man and thought that this would be a good year to tip their staff at Christmas. And not just this security man, but the whole staff. He would be cagey about it too. He would come in different doors in the morning and at lunch instead of using the same door everyday. That way, he figured, he'd catch them all. He'd take them by surprise—which was what Christmas was all about after all; it really had nothing to do with money.

As the elevator door closed and the scent of perfume effusing from wall-to-wall secretaries bathed the air, Henry felt sure that he had reasserted his priorities in this Christmas idea. Real ones. Not some airy notions regarding the economic viability of this or that, here or there, now and then, but something with hard, hands-on consequences.

A secretary shifted, backing into him. "Oh, my.... I'm sorry," she said.

As Pevitz shifted in response, so did his umbrella, it poking her in her rather ample backside.
"Excuse me, but--" she said.

"No, really. It's quite all right," Pevitz said.

She righted herself, and Henry hoped he could remind himself to note this idea down on his December schedule. He tapped on his briefcase. Then he realization came in on him all at once: *Every morning is not enough!* All he had to do is come to work every morning and let the security staff themselves function as visual reminders for his idea. He chided himself for having been so foolish, and as the elevator doors opened and the crowd poured out into the hall, a silly little smile spread across his face. He held the elevator door open, allowing all to exit. It was a nice gesture and his smile grew to a defined grin.

The secretary whirled, facing him. "What are you smiling about?" she said.

"Excuse me?"

"I think you know what I mean, you pigshit, you!"

"No, I don't know what--" But before he could answer, an invisible knee caught him hard and square between his particulars, the pain scrambling in a mad riot up, down, then up again to the brainstem where it dragged on his sight, and he went down and laid there for a time in the manner of the injudiciously decked. The hallway went to blue-black and swimming purples.

He thought she had gone on about something: husbands, balloons, and karate or kerosene, he wasn't sure. Then she left--he was sure of
that—and the hallway returned in all its chrome and carpeted splendor, the wide doors of the elevator opening across the way. He scrambled to his feet.

"Pevitz, old man. You look like hell." It was Mr. Greene from Accounting. "Now I know it's none of my business, but good god, man, do you really think this kind of behavior is appropriate? I mean a nip or two here and there—I do the same—sometimes even more, but, really, all night long, and when you're up for promotion, son?"

"But—"

"Oh, don't go on. I won't tell a soul. I never tell a soul. It's the pressure that gets us. Why, the stories I could tell you about some of the people here, and I think we both know who we're talking about, don't we, Pevitz? Well, of course you do. I just hate to see a good man run down that same filthy trail: booze is just the beginning. Then comes gambling and bad women. Then bad women with big tits. Big as Cleveland, let me tell you! It's the big tits that get us in the end, isn't that true, Pevitz? Well, of course it is. And then you've got three alimony payments a month to make, and your daughters go suicidal on you, so you marry them off to some Harvard clowns in Commodities to get them off your back, and then—then you get old. You go to church, Pevitz?"

"Yes, sir. When I get a break that is, sir."

"That's a good man. Now straighten up, son."
Mr. Greene slapped him heartily on the back, and then there was the pain.

"And one more thing, Pevitz...," Mr. Greene lifted his chin and straightened his thin gray bow tie.

"What's that, sir?"

"Good morning, Pevitz."

"Good morning, sir." And as they walked into the main office arena, Pevitz reminded himself to make a note to call the secretary who had caused all the trouble. She would listen. He was sure of that.

Twenty-five or six "Good mornings" later, Pevitz had forgotten all about the incident that morning. He was up to his ears in phones, cradling two of them between neck and shoulder so they looked like big, black door-handles on his head. He was brokering.

On one line, Mrs. Steele was yammering for the latest on pork-bellies: "Down two-thirds, Lydia.... Big drought. Sit at six-and-a-half, but no less. Market will bottom-out at six-and-a-half, then take off.... You want to do what? It's strictly seller all the way, I'm telling you.... No recovery at ten, so its buy now, pay later. Okay. Okay. Okay.... Check in tommorrow. Right. Right. Same to you. Bye now."

Punched a winking button: "This is Henry--"
"You, pigshit, doolie-eyed creep! You think you got away with it, but I'm telling you, you, you penis, you--"

"Who is speaking, please?" A moderate decorum, Henry knew, was essential to the diffusion of the immoderate act. It was good business.

"You're just one real sick bastard! You're just like my husbands--"

All lines lit up just then. "For godsakes, get some help!" And, for a moment, he felt the weight of eyes from a sea of desks combine and conspire toward his one very organized, very even cubicle, but it was gone as soon as it had come. He punched line one: "This is Henry...."

He was talking soybeans now.

For the rest of the morning, Pevitz did exactly what he had done for five years. Hands flew over his computer keyboard for Board of Trade quotes on everything from acorns to belt-buckles. Sales and Prospects sought, ordered, filed (in triplicate), then retrieved, re-evaluated, returned or rejected in like manner.

But mostly there were voices. There were the voices of clients on the phone. Voices of the producers testing the market, of runners and reps on the floor, big voices, small voices, voices cool to hot, up-and-down voices: voices which formed the music of his community. And, in one way or another, he imagined them all as they were just then, looking for a hard edge between twin shadows of buy and sell, so that, for him and his immediate surroundings, time and space just didn't figure. His eyes, you see, had gone dead. His desk, the partitions of his cubicle, and the other brokers buzzing behind other partitions, simply
dissappeared because he was out there, his mind traveling the wild conduits of American commerce. "This is Henry...."

Until lunch, of course. It was halftime now, and the ordinates of his cubicle came into view. He flipped on his answering machine and elevatored down to the commissary where, after standing in line for much too much too much time, he bought two beefburgers, two carrots, and a lemonade (he used to get Cokes, but they were no good on the phone), then back up to his cubicle where he ate and read the *Journal*.

He was alone now, all the others having gone out to lunch (a real waste of time and money), and setting the paper aside, he thought about his meeting with Mr. Weathers tomorrow. Five years! He was up for a promotion, a front office job selling money to other overseas companies. He scripted the entire scene in his head: "Mr. Weathers, good morning, sir. How are things going, sir? Things are fine, sir. Can I call you 'Chuck'? Well, thank you, Chuck! You can call me 'Mr. Pevitz'! Hah, hah, hah! Yes, it's been a fine year--good for the tomatoes. Hah, hah, hah! No one can top you, that's for sure! That's what they all say! Yes, let's get down to business...."

He re-ran the scene a few more times with few variations; the outcome was always the same. Then he re-ordered his desk, notepads on the right side of his desk, accumulated stock reports back on the shelf in alphabetical order. He perused through the memos. One of them read:

You looked like hell this morning! This is probably due to a diet insufficient in basic nutrients.
Daily doses of Vitamins A, C, and all the B vitamin complexes are necessary to maintain maximum efficiency and fulfill your potential as a human being. Vegetables such as broccoli, carrots, and squash contain most of these essential nutrients. Fruits such as oranges, grapefruit, and apples also contain these nutrients.

Stop eating red meat! Red meat, or those foods high in saturated fat, clog up your system and is the number one contributor to the development of faulty thought patterns. Faulty thought patterns lead to a particularly gruesome and premature death!

Our committee is dedicated to the eradication of premature death on this planet. If you are interested in obtaining any of our literature, or if you have any questions about our program, please contact us at the number listed below.


Have a nice day!
Sincerely,

X X and Y Y

Mary and John Christian-Flood
Committee for People on the Serious Go.

Liberals! Pevitz tore up the memo and chucked it into his wastecan.

Fruits and vegetables, indeed! Those, those people are all fruits and vegetables!

As he continued to organize his desk, he wondered how such a thing could have gotten into the office arena. He would definitely ask someone about this. He would remind himself to make a note of it. He tapped the top of his desk with a pencil.
He ran the tape back on his answering machine and started it forward when Mr. Greene walked in. He stopped the machine.

"Well, Pevitz old man, I see you're still hard at it." Mr. Greene was positively aromatic. Gin? Whiskey? Pevitz couldn't tell. Pevitz was not a drinking man.

"Yes, sir. As always, sir," he said, forcing a smile.

"And I see you've recovered from last night's li'l adventure. You must have amazing recuperative powers, Pevitz old man."

"Well, yes, sir. I suppose I do."

Greene leaned forward. His bow tie was at a crazy diagonal like the prop of a grounded plane. The air had also taken on a strange new quality: like a gas chamber. "Confidentially, Pevitz, I'm soused! Now I know I can trust you. I mean, we've got to stick together on this li'l matter, don't you agree? They're out there, y'know. The creeps...."

"Yes, sir. Mum's the word."

"Good man." Greene punched him on the shoulder. "I'm still young; y'know that?"

"You bet you are, sir!"

"You bet I am! Young as you, by God!" Greene began to sway back and forth. His eyes rolled up into his head, then back down. He looked at Pevitz, eyes shiny with the patent-leather glaze of a lunatic.

"Wanna see my card?"

"I really must get back to work. Maybe some other time...."
"Aw, work, work, work. All's anybody does around here is work. Here's my card!"

Greene handed him a photograph of a naked woman, hanging upside-down from a ceiling. Her large breasts, Pevitz could see, hung lower than her head, blocking her face. 'Hanging Tough' was scripted in an elegant style at the bottom of the photo.

"It's a good joke, no?"

Pevitz forced a chuckle and handed back the photo.

Greene laughed, stuffed the picture back into his suitcoat. "I knew I could trust you," he said. He laughed again and stumbled back to Accounting, repeating "It's a good, good joke!"

Idiot! Pevitz hit the play button of his answering machine. There were the usual queries on prices and whatnot, and call such-and-such at such-and-such time and place.

:::Don't think I don't know who you are either, you loser, you! And I'll have you know, I've got dobermans who'll chew your goddammed balls off!

Pevitz fast-forwarded to the next message, thinking he really should do something about this horrible woman. For now, though, he was glad that nobody was around. It would have been too embarrassing to explain that one, especially since he had no idea why it had happened. Pevitz hated that more than anything, the explaining. It just wouldn't do, there were appearances after all.... He reminded himself to make a note to find out who the woman was.
He ran the tape through and Stephanie hadn't called. She usually called him at noon, her soothing, sparkling voice massaging the rigors of the morning, so he called her at home and got her answering machine:

:::Well, hello there! How y'doin'! This is Stephanie, of course. Who else would it be? Anyway, I'm not at home right now, otherwise I would be, I think, so please leave something pretty to hear after that obnoxious beep thingy:::It's Hank, hon. It's been a wonderful morning! The kind of morning where everyone seems to be wearing bright, clean clothes like on your first day of school. You remember that, don't you? I just called to see what's up, is all. Call me later. Bye, now:::

The rest of the afternoon went pretty much as the morning had, his cubicle disappearing then reappearing with the closing of the Board of Trade. Twenty-five or six "Good nights" and Pevitz was still at his desk, alone now, organizing and re-organizing for tomorrow morning's assault. Everything had to be perfect tomorrow. He wanted to be fresh and alert for his meeting with Weathers, and one thing out of place, just one, could thwart the whole deal. Then out the door, down to the lobby and through the revolving doors to the street.

A cold fog had rolled in from the lake, soothing his flushed face. A taxi trumpeted nearby, and he wandered if he should hail it. But no. It felt good to walk, and he was a true blue El-man. So he walked to the train. Pevitz was on his way home.
Hot steam had fogged everything over in his bathroom, and he had to towel himself off in the kitchen where it was cool, where he wouldn't sweat. From a kitchen drawer, he pulled out a pair of gym shorts and a t-shirt, neatly folded of course, and put them on. Then he went out into the living room, no stereo, no television, no, no, no, sat down at his coffee table and went to work.

He was working in two areas: the Western Theater and the Eastern Theater. The first problem which would affect the market, he knew, was the consolidation of the EEC in 1992. A unified Europe could seriously cut out the American competitive edge in a lot of areas, especially in Central and South America, our back door. The other ongoing dilemma was how to compete with the Japanese without imposing trade restrictions on Japanese imports. Speculation on a macro-scale had definitely run its course, so the answer lay in Commodities and price-support systems. The key was in food. He knew it, but he couldn't put his finger on what to do.

After three hours looking through a volume on the history of price support fluctuations, his eyes went dead, and he couldn't read anymore. He was quite sure, though, that Weathers would be impressed tomorrow.

He played the tape on his answering machine:

::: Howdy, Hank! This is Stephanie of all people! My day went great too! And you know what? With every single day, I'm beginning to hear more and more color... in everything! Isn't that a crazy idea! Colors I've never seen, I'm beginning to see... colors I can't explain:::
::: Guess I got cut off there, Hank! Why don't you get a bigger machine? That way I could talk a lot longer. Well, I gotta go... Think about me, okay? Give me a call. See you later, Hank. Take care:::

He called her and got her answering machine:

:::Stephanie? This is Hank. You're right. I've been thinking about getting a bigger machine anyway. I'll remind myself to make a note of it. And I think about you constantly, hon. I really miss you; so much so, that I'm afraid I'm gonna bust a gut:::

::: I love you, hon:::

The receiver went down with a click, her voice still lingered in the air somewhere, and he thought about her. Some time ago, he had made a call to a Japanese buyer to dig for some more information and had dialed the wrong number. He had gotten her answering machine, and something was there. It was something in her voice that transcended the wire and the tin of his receiver. He left his name and his number on her machine.

She had called him 'Hank' the first time. He hadn't allowed anyone at all to do that. Not even his parents who, he suspected, had named him after Henry Fonda. They would call him 'Hank' and the name conjured up images from the movie The Grapes of Wrath, images of being poor and broke and dirty and criminal, and it had embarrassed him. He had always equated the name with the great kings of England: Henry II, Henry IV, and Henry VIII. But when she had said it that first time, it had sounded so right, like everything else she said. And after that first time, he remembered thinking in a way he never had before.
He was thinking that way now—in whispers of the color and the feel of things—like he was in some extraordinary dream and not dreaming but it was as if the things were doing the dreaming for him. And he yawned.

He looked at the books and papers scattered around the living room. He thought briefly that he might be able to put in another hour or two, but no. It was much too much too late to continue. He went into the bedroom. Did the usual twenty push-ups. Put on his flannel pajamas.

Then he sat on his bed and checked his boom-box tapes, nine of them exactly, arranged in chronological sequence. Number three for tonight. He inserted the tape. Shut the lights off:

:::Y'know, sometimes when I'm walking home, and I see all the trash and stuff, I wonder if there's concrete all around me, or if it's just in my head. Y'know what I mean?:

:::I bought a plant today. I bought a fern. I'm trying to think of something to name it. I think I'll name it, hmmm... 'Vern.' Vern the fern. Do you think that that is entirely too stupid for words? Naming a plant, I mean?:

:::The Beatles are so entirely cool. I can listen to Sgt. Peppers and see something different every time. I like the blues too. We'll have to go see a show sometime, but I don't drink much, but hmmm, I might:

:::I was at work today and thought that the world is the most beautiful place it could possibly be. And I hate negative people. They can't see it, can they, Hank? And, hey, thank you for the flowers. I'm crazy for flowers. They smell so sweet:

:::And I'm crazy for you, Hank. I really am! Call me, okay:
And not much later, he was way, way out there in a swimming purple realm where all voices, just like hers, made sense. Henry had fallen asleep for the very last time.

The next day went almost exactly as Pevitz had imagined it would. There were no vile phone calls, no drunken apparitions; it was strictly business as usual. So at twenty-five or six to four, Pevitz walked into the old man's office, as fresh and alert as he could be. He sat down in the suede chair facing the desk and waited.

The office itself was something out of one of his dreams. The room had been done in walnut and crystal. There were no visible seams in the rich, wood walls—the only separations were the recesses: a plaque case to his left, containing photographs and the signatures of the last four presidents, and the bar where gin, bourbon, whiskey, and more gin were highlighted by blue lights coming from some secret place. An ornate chandelier hung in the center of the room. And the carpet! The lush carpet was so thick and clean that it left ephemeral footprints. Pevitz sat in amazement and watched as his disappeared one by one—like magic!

But the center of attention was behind the great oak desk. Two suits of armor stood: one, gold, to the left; one, silver, to the right facing Pevitz, who swayed there in his chair and thought: I'm finally home!
"Afternoon, Pevitz." Mr. Weathers walked in carrying his briefcase. He shook Pevitz's hand and smiled. There was just a hint of shine on Weathers' great bald head.

Pevitz sat down, and Weathers sat behind his desk, opened his briefcase, the perpetual smile never leaving his face.

"Been working hard, my boy?"

"That's right, sir. Everyday. I've also been reading up on a few things. Things about international trade. Some things you might be interested in. Some very interesting material there."

"Very good." Weathers coughed and sneezed a little. "Excuse my cold.... Now let's see what we have here...." Weathers opened the folder in front of him and scanned it, face close to the text; then without taking his eyes off the material: "Been keeping out of trouble, Pevitz?"

"You bet, sir!"

"Greene from Accounting says that you came in stone drunk yesterday morning. Is that true, Pevitz?"

"Well, no sir. That's not exactly what happened at all."

"Not exactly, huh...." Weathers smile had faded. He coughed.

"In fact, not at all. There was a definite misunderstanding...."

"I see.... But, y'know, Transportation says that on that same morning you assaulted one of their secretaries--"

"No, sir!"

"In the elevator--"
"First of all, it was out of the elevator, sir."

"Which was it? Were you in the elevator or out of the elevator?"

"I was out of the elevator."

"And that's where you attacked her."

"She kicked me in the balls, sir!"

"Before or after."

"Before or after what, sir?"

"The attack."

"There was no attack, I tell you. She kicked me in the balls!"

"And you were drunk...."

"I never drink, sir! I tell you, she kicked me in the balls!"

"Then why is it that you are raising your voice? Is that any way for a good man to act?"

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Like what, Pevitz?" Then Weathers sneezed. "Excuse me...," he said.

"Look, what happened was this.... I walked out of the elevator, and the woman kicked me in the balls."

"Now that's a more reasonable tone, but I'm afraid it's not a very reasonable story. Why did she kick you in the balls, Pevitz. What possible reason could she have for kicking you in the balls."

"I don't know. Because she wanted to, I guess. Because she's crazy, I suppose."
"There are crazy people working here, Pevitz? We hire crazy people? Who else is crazy, Pevitz?" Weathers coughed mightily and his right eyeball flew out of its socket, rolled across the desk, and plopped in Pevitz's lap.

"Excuse me, Pevitz, but could I have my eye back. Old war wound, y'know."

Pevitz gave him back the eye, and Weathers tilted his head back, then pressed the slimy marble back into the dark cave of his socket.

"The point is," Weathers said, wincing, "We fired her; did you know that?"

"But, sir, nothing really happened."

"Nevermind." Weathers leaned back in his chair, took out a handkerchief from his coat pocket, and mopped up around his eye. Then he sneezed. "What it comes down to, Pevitz, is that I'm not sure—we're not sure if you really know how things operate."

Weathers' eye had cocked itself off to the right, and Pevitz resisted the temptation to look in that direction.

"I do have some good ideas, sir, about the way things operate, Pevitz said hesitantly. Would you like to hear some?"

"That's what I mean. You see, Pevitz, ideas don't mean anything anymore. We've got more answers than what we can deal with. Any more ideas would just gum up the works." Weathers' eye shifted left.

Pevitz was silent for a moment. He turned his attention from the eye rolling around in Weathers' head and noticed that the suits of armor
looked different. There were dents in them here and there; the silver one now looked more like tin, the gold one, more burnished brown.

"If it'll make you feel any better, I know that Greene is a crackpot. And just between you and me, he'll be let go very soon. And this is just between you and me. Are you with me on this one, Pevitz?"

Pevitz nodded.

"I can trust you then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. Now, the other thing is you'll have to attend a few meetings, seminars, really, group discussion sort of things.... Here's the schedule." He handed Pevitz a list of times and dates. 'All meetings under the auspices of The Committee For People on the Serious Go,' was at the bottom of the card.

Weathers went on: "Oh, it's just a series of lectures on attitude, really. Nothing much more than that. Y'know, for appearances' sake. Buries this ugly little matter." Weathers' eye rolled completely around, showing nothing but white. And then he went on about how Pevitz reminded himself of himself when he was young; how much he really liked Pevitz, and that after all was said and done, Pevitz was really headed for a fabulous career--if he would keep his nose to the grindstone of course. "Any questions?"

"Just one really...."

"What's that?" And Weather's smile returned.

"Why don't you believe me, you bullet-headed goon?"
Before he was hit by the Volvo, before he went through the revolving door for the last time, before he had taken anything of any consequence from his desk, before he had left a message on Stephanie's answering machine telling her that he had gotten the promotion and the world was even more beautiful than ever, before all that, he had gone over to the watercooler, poured himself a paper cone of cool water and told the secretaries standing there that Greene was going to get canned. Now, though, he was walking to the train, absorbed in the music of the street, the rhythm of clicking, rush-hour heels, the mean squeals of tires, of policeman's whistles, of sirens, and of voices big and small asking directions: Is there concrete all around me, or is it just in my head? He looked up into the dim twilight where the great buildings of the city had cut the sky into rectangles and squares.

And just before everything went into swimming purples and great pools of blue-black, before the wild pain and the sight of the homicidal secretary bending over him screaming, "asshole!" just one last time, he had decided that 'Hank' wasn't such a bad name. His parents had been right, and he had wanted to go home.

::: Hank! It's so great that you got promoted!
Maybe we could go out; have a real time for once. It's about time we met, dontcha think? Call me when you get home, okay? It's just so great to hear your voice at the end of the day:::
EMCEE: Good evening ladies and gentlemen and welcome to Smilin Bob’s Comedy-O-Rama. My name is Bob Roberts and I’ll be your host tonight--introducing you to some of the brightest young comics in America today.

Tonight, right here on this stage, we have for you from Jackson, Mississippi, Jimmy Ferris.... From Hong Kong, China--Sammy Yoo Lin.... From Missoula, Montana--Ezra Pitts.... From, uh, (LOOKS OFFSTAGE) where are you from, Gordo? (TO AUDIENCE) From Lost Hockey Puck, Arizona--
Gordon Eaton.... And, as a special treat, and to show you that comedy knows no bounds—a very, very funny man—from San Quentin Prison, on a prison-release program—Craig "Diablo" Smith.... But before we get started, let me tell you about some of the specials we have going tonight here at the Comedy-O-Rama. We got tufers on all fruit drinks until ten o’clock, delivered to you by our bountiful, beautiful, barmaids here at the Comedy-O-Rama. (LOOKS LEFT) Bebe—wave for us, Bebe.... (LOOKS RIGHT) and Bobbi—

BARMAID: (OFFSTAGE) That’s 'Roberta,' you asshole, you!

EMCEE: As you can see, Rob-er-ta is a recent graduate of the Name-Raising Consciousness Center just down the street from the Comedy-O-Rama—

BARMAID: (OFFSTAGE) When are we gonna get paid, you shit, you!

EMCEE: And remember to tip your waitress. Quality help like Rob-er-ta is hard to find. Why, you have to go all the way to Bill’s Bowl-O-Rama to find a real winner like her—

BARMAID: (OFFSTAGE) You slimeball, you!

EMCEE: (HOLDS UP A T-SHIRT) We also have here at the Comedy-O-Rama, Comedy-O-Rama T-shirts. Made out of a special kind of latex, the Comedy-O-Rama T-shirt is perfect for home, school, and the office.

(THROWS A GLASS OF WATER ON THE SHIRT) As you can see, the shirt is waterproof, but also (PULLS OUT A SUB-MACHINE GUN) as an extra-special feature, the Comedy-O-Rama T-shirt is also bulletproof.... You want to
model one of these for me, Rob-er-ta, so I can show the people just how
bulletproof the Comedy-O-Rama T-shirt is? (TRAINS THE GUN ON HER)
BARMAID: (OFFSTAGE) Not right now, creepo. I'm busy.
EMCEE: That's the spirit. (TAKES THE GUN OFF HER. TRAINS IT ON THE
AUDIENCE) Anyone else like to test the Comedy-O-Rama T-shirt. It'll
make my day. (PAUSE) Nobody? Well, in the words of Napoleon
Bonaparte: 'C'est moi!' (PINS THE SHIRT TO THE BACK WALL. RETURNS TO
MICROPHONE) Some of you in the front row might want to keep your heads
down during the demonstration. Sometimes the bullets bounce straight
back, and, well, the financial implications of killing customers—the
fines, the hassles, and whatnot—are pretty much murder, so if you
wouldn't mind.... Thank you. Now if I can remember how this thing
works-- (FIRES A WHOLE ROUND AT THE SHIRT) As an extra-extra special
added feature, the Comedy-O-Rama T-shirt is also grenade-proof. Let's
see, is it three seconds or nine seconds before these things go off?
Oh, what the hell.... Hit the deck!
(HURLS GRENADES AT THE SHIRT. THEN DROPS TO THE
STAGE, COVERING HIS HEAD. THE GRENADES EXPLODE
AND DEBRIS FALLS FROM THE RAFTERS)
EMCEE: (HOLDS SHIRT UP TO AUDIENCE) See? Not a scratch! And as an
extra-extra-extra added special feature... (PAUSES, SMILING MENACINGLY)
...one size fits all! (PUTS THE SHIRT ON) Enough of this silliness....
(TO OFFSTAGE) Come on out here, Neil, and clean up this mess.
(ENTER NEIL, THE CUSTODIAN, CARRYING A PUSH BROOM
AND A WASTEBASKET. HE BEGINS TO CLEAN UP THE
MESS)
EMCEE: Ladies and gentlemen, a warm hand for Neil, the custodian....

Say howdy to the folks, Neil.

CUSTODIAN: (TIPS HIS CAP) Howdy to the folks, Neil.

EMCEE: Funny Neil. (TO AUDIENCE) Here at the Comedy-O-Rama, everybody's a comedian.

CUSTODIAN: Damned straight. Got to have a sense of humor to work here, by God. When are we gonna get paid?

EMCEE: (LAUGHING) Hoo, hoo--who writes your material, Neil? That's the best one I've heard yet.

CUSTODIAN: Yeah, laugh it up, you ingrate. Hah, hah, hah....

EMCEE: (TO AUDIENCE) You must forgive Neil. He's had a case of the brown bottle flu for three years--or is it four, Neil, since I pulled you out of the gutter and gave you something to live for?

CUSTODIAN: Something to live for? Cleaning up an exploded stage night after night is something to live for? What happened to Honolulu, the condos, apres ski in Aspen, lunch at Maxim's? You said you'd get me on the Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous. You said I'd go duck-hunting with Robin Leach and the goddammed Queen of England. What happened to that, Mr. Big Shot?

EMCEE: Later, Neil. We got a show to do.... Finally, tomorrow night, here at the Comedy-O-Rama, people who show a toaster to the doorman will be admitted free, and there will be no drink minimum for those who bring a toaster to the show....
CUSTODIAN: (TO AUDIENCE) And you'd better hold on to them toasters too cuz this deadbeat'll take 'em to the pawn shop fast as you can say, 'money.'

EMCEE: Neil?

CUSTODIAN: What?

EMCEE: Tell them that you're kidding, and that it's all just part of the fun.

CUSTODIAN: You're kidding, and that it's all just part of the fun.

(LOOKS DOWN AND PICKS UP SOMETHING) Look! I found a quarter!

EMCEE: Gimme that!

(EMCEE POCKETS THE QUARTER. CUSTODIAN IS EXASPERATED)

CUSTODIAN: Next time, I keep my mouth shut! (GOES BACK TO CLEANING)

EMCEE: And so, without further ado, let me introduce you to our first performer here tonight at the Comedy-O-Rama. He hails from Jackson, Mississippi. He has appeared at Catch A Rising Star in both New York and Los Angeles. He has also worked Zanies, The Last Laugh, The Clout Club, and Crosscurrents in Chicago, as well as The Comedy Cabaret in Minneapolis, and several college campuses. In fact the only time he isn't doing comedy is when he's lost on the freeways of this fine country. Ladies and gentlemen, Jimmy Ferris! (LEAVES)

(ENTER FERRIS WHO PAGES STAGE LEFT TO STAGE RIGHT-- EXACTLY OPPOSITE OF THE CUSTODIAN WHO PUSHERS HIS BROOM STAGE RIGHT TO STAGE LEFT. BOTH ARE SHAKING THEIR HEADS AND MUMBLING. THEY STOP AND LOOK AT EACH OTHER. THEY SHAKE THEIR HEADS AND CONTINUE TO MOVE IN EQUAL AND OPPOSITE DIRECTIONS UNTIL THE CUSTODIAN PUSHES HIS BROOM OFFSTAGE, INTO THE WINGS. AS THE CUSTODIAN DEPARTS INTO THE WINGS, FERRIS LEAVES THE STAGE,
GOING INTO THE AUDIENCE WHERE HE IS MET BY THE EMCEE WHO LEADS HIM BACK TO THE STAGE

EMCEE: Ladies and gentlemen, Jimmy Ferris! (LEAVES)

(FERRIS PACES THE LENGTH OF THE STAGE TWICE THEN STOPS CENTER STAGE, TAKING THE MICROPHONE FROM ITS STAND. HE CONTINUES TO FACE THROUGH MOST OF THE ACT)

FERRIS: I parked my car in a tow-away-zone today. Went inside a building to take care of some business. Two minutes later, I come back to where my car's parked and the whole area was gone.... I was paying a parking ticket at the time.... I guess they really nail you for that second offense up here, boy.... Take away part of reality like that.... Some people say I have a problem with reality, but I dunno.... When I was a kid in Mississippi, I used to go up to our attic and listen to this weird kinda radio.... (PANTOMIMES TURNING A RADIO DIAL) Turn to any station and you'd get big band music and World War II troop movements.... Yeah, like I said it was weird, so I tole my brother about it, and he comes up to the attic, takes one look at the radio and tells me, he says, Jimmy, that ain't no goll durn radio! Thet's Uncle John! He jest thinks he's a radio is all.... So you see the problem.... I ain't kiddin neither.... One time Uncle John and me went down to Tupelo to do some sort of somethin such when we ran outta gas near this farmhouse--

HECKLER A: Where's Tupelo?

FERRIS: Tupelo? (BEAT) Right next to One-below.... Anyways, the car's busted down and we goes to the farmhouse there, and this farmer comes
out carryin a shotgun--yes he did--and asks us, "What you boys want? Y'all ain't duck hunters is you?" And we says, 'no, we ain't, and our car's outta gas, and could we get some, please?' And Uncle John scuses hisself cuz he's gotta piss real bad, so he goes off into the woods, and this here farmer tells me, he says, "Had this duck-hunter feller come up hear an' kilt two ducks on my property. Well, sho-nuff, I caught him an' tole his ass that he were gonna go to jail. Well, he were from the big-town, y'know, an' said he cain't rightly go jail on account of his bi'ness, his wife, and seventeen little chillun' what were all dependin on his ass. So I gets kinda tendry-hearted bout the whole deal and tole him, 'Look, we got ways a-settlin disputations like this round here.... We gonna take turns a-kickin each other in the nuts, and if you is the one left standin, you kin keep them ducks. On the othery hand, if I beat you, then you goes to jail.' So he says okey-dokey, an' I starts first cuz it's my land. So I kicks him a good one there, an' he drops to the ground; face commenced to boiling a bright red, tears commin outta his eyes, an' carryin on like he'd been kicked in the nuts which he had. Finally, after bout three or six minutes of this, he gets up--big smile on his face--says, 'Now it's my turn.' That's when I start smilin, y'see.... Tole him, 'Look, I changed my mine. You kin keep them ducks.'" No fooling! That's what he said! So I'm standin there with this crazy farmer--then I see this dog come round the corner of the farm house, lifts his leg, pisses, then comes tearin right for us, wagging his tail.... I ask the farmer if his dog bites. The farmer
says no, and I reach down to pet the dog. (PANTOMIMES PETTING THE DOG) And the damned dog bites me! He did! Right on the hand! So I say to the farmer, 'I thought you said your dog doesn't bite.' Farmer says, "Thet's not my dog. Dog's in the house.... Thet thar is yer friend. He jest thinks he's a dog is all--and you--you must see what he thinks he is, so get the hell off'n my land! Don't want no loonies round here!" Then blasts his shotgun in the air a couple times, and all these ducks start fallin all over the place! No foolin! Then Uncle John and I start runnin and dodgin them ducks--runnin down to the car cuz that place was crazy, boy! So you see the problem.... Reality.... Like how do we remember the alphabet? Must be that song.... (SINGS) a, b, c, d, e, f, g.... (DROPS TO THE STAGE. PUTS HIS EAR TO THE GROUND AND LISTENS A MOMENT)

FERRIS: Just checkin.... (GETS UP AND PACES, THEN STOPS) Yeah, I had sex once....

BARMAID: (OFFSTAGE) Too bad there wasn't anybody else there!

FERRIS: That's definitely a matter of opinion, and I'll take that drink now, Roberta, you crazy woman, you.

BARMAID: You're drunk!

FERRIS: That maybe true, but in the morning I'll be sober and you'll still be crazy.... Aren't relationships fun? Nothin crazier than relationships these days, boy.... Nothin crazier at all....

(SHADOW PLAYER ENTERS STAGE LEFT. STANDS AT THE BACK OF THE STAGE)
FERRIS: So what do you want to do tonight, Jane?

JANE: I want to talk....

FERRIS: That's where it begins, I s'pose. Urges give way to actions. Actions give way to mistakes. Mistakes give way to inaction. Inaction gives way to talking about actions. And talking about actions gives way to--

JANE: Will you please, please, please--

FERRIS: Okey-dokey.

JANE: I said I wanted to talk talk.

FERRIS: Not just talk.

JANE: Yes, talk talk.

FERRIS: I see.

JANE: Well, I hope so....

FERRIS: One of those things?

JANE: When did you become insane?

FERRIS: Gradually, then suddenly.

JANE: You're such a baby....

FERRIS: Baby talk? Goo-goo, Da-da?

JANE: What's the use--

FERRIS: I'm sorry. Go ahead. Talk.

JANE: I've been thinking....

FERRIS: I thought you wanted to talk.

JANE: That's where it begins.

FERRIS: I know. I said that.
JANE: No. I said that.
FERRIS: That's what I thought you said.
JANE: So, you agree?
FERRIS: Yes.
JANE: At least we got that settled.
FERRIS: Yes. Whatever it was, is settled....
JANE: It doesn't matter.
FERRIS: Everything matters.
JANE: And that is my point.
FERRIS: I see.
JANE: How can you?
FERRIS: Well, for one, I do have eyes....
JANE: No, no, no....
FERRIS: I'm sorry. I don't have eyes.
JANE: What matters is that you think everything matters.
FERRIS: Well, it does. Or, it do. Or whatever you just said.
JANE: It's just not possible....
FERRIS: Everything is possible.
JANE: See?
FERRIS: See what?
JANE: You did it again!
FERRIS: Wha'd I do? What is it?
JANE: You said it again.
FERRIS: Well, I'll say it again.... It. It, said and done.
JANE: No, no, no!

FERRIS: I'm sorry.

JANE: You don't know what I mean....

FERRIS: Now we're getting somewhere....

JANE: You see my point, then?

FERRIS: I see the possibilities.

JANE: That's it!

FERRIS: So we're back to 'it' again.

JANE: But you said you saw.... Liar!

FERRIS: I'm not a liar.

JANE: I heard you say it....

FERRIS: Say what?

JANE: It.

FERRIS: It would be easier if you just killed me. A heavy object would do, or a .45, or why don't you just impale me on a Russian pike. They're 'in' these days. Very stylish.

JANE: Now you're angry....

FERRIS: I never get angry. I'm the happiest man alive.

JANE: You're going to kill me, aren't you?

FERRIS: No. I gave that up last week. I tell you what--why don't we back this thing up somewhere beyond 'it.'

JANE: How can you back something beyond it?


JANE: But you said--
FERRIS: Forget what I said. I got it--I got it. It has to do with possibilities, right?

JANE: Yes, that's it!

FERRIS: Okay.

JANE: Okay what?

FERRIS: I thought it was settled. Now I'm not sure....

JANE: That's it!

FERRIS: What--again?

JANE: You're never sure. Ever! There are all these possibilities, but that's all. I want a man with possibilities. There's a difference between him and you.

FERRIS: Who him? Who is this him?

JANE: Why the hypothetical him, of course.

FERRIS: A-course! It's Hypo-man again, isn't it? By day, he's a mild-mannered doctor. By night, he's every woman's wet dream--

JANE: Don't make this any more difficult than it already is. Seeing through the game is not winning the game, Jim.

FERRIS: Now we're playing tennis.

JANE: Well, haven't we been?

FERRIS: Game, set... love?

JANE: Everything is not possible....

FERRIS: I guess I left my racket at home.

JANE: It's the mature view.

FERRIS: It's the manure view. Anyway, we were talking tennis--

FERRIS: (PAUSE) I guess that's it then, huh.

JANE: That's it.

(Shadow player fades and departs)

FERRIS: I think I have a problem with my sexual identity.... Friend of mine told me that he spiced-up his sex life by putting a mirror above his bed.... Well, in a way, I tried that. Above my bed, though, I got a picture of another couple.... So you see the problem.... Reality.... Blues players have a real problem with reality. Don't get me wrong--I like the blues--but I was up to Chicago last year--

(Scattered applause)

FERRIS: Oh, you people from Chicago? Good town.... Don't you hate it when comedians ask the audience, "Anybody here from Texarkana or some such place? Drives me nuts, man. I mean everybody's from somewhere, right? Well, almost everybody.... Guess it has something to do with that alphabet thing.... Anyway, I'll try it.... Anybody here from another dimension?

(Uproarious applause)

FERRIS: Yeah, well, I thought so.... Anyway, I was up to that-place-where-they-gots-the-Sears-Tower, and its Christmas time and the whole town is decked-out in Christmas lights and other mirth. Santa Clauses are everywhere ringing a bell in one hand, carrying a .45 in the other.... And so I go into this blues place cuz it seemed like the thing to do. And they're playing the blues there cuz that's what
they're supposed to do--no kidding. So the leader of the band gets up there says, "Hey, dudes, like it's Christmas time and de blues, too! De blues an' Christmas. De blues. Christmas. Christmas an' de blues. Green and red and blues--haw, haw, haw. We gonna play de blues at Christmas for y'all right now. Y'know de blues? Christmas an de blues. We bin workin on it.... (PULLS OUT A HARMONICA AND PLAYS A STANDARD BLUES RIFF) Woke up Christmas mornin.... And my wife was dead.... Reindeer come down the chimbley.... And jumped on her head." So y'all see what I mean? Scientists, scientists too have a problem with reality--otherwise they wouldn't be tryin to figger it out all the time.... Like Einstein.... According to Einstein, time runs faster at your head than it does at your feet. Well, that explains it. (RUNS ACROSS THE STAGE. STOPS) "Sorry I was late, boss, but I had to wait for my feet to catch up to the bus!" Or... (RUNS ACROSS BACK ACROSS THE STAGE. STOPS) "I know it's five in the morning, honey.... I left at midnight like I said I would, but I had to wait for my goddamned feet to get outta that bar and catch up to me! And put that lamp down! It's not my fault! It's Einstein's fault!

(REturns to center stage, takes an egg out of his pocket and drops it on the stage)

Ferris: Just checkin to make sure gravity still works.... Well, you never know.... Galileo had that problem.... Four hundred years ago, Galileo runs up the leaning tower of Pisa to test the age-old question of what falls faster, an ounce of prevention or a pound of cure.... So
he drops them off the tower.... (PANTOMIMES THE ACTION) Two days later, he's on the corner dressed up in a Santa Claus suit, ringing a bell, cuz its Christmas time--well, he was! And he's all depressed, and someone comes up to him and asks how the experiment went, and Galileo says, "I dont-a know. I couldn't get down-a the stairs fast enough to tell!"

Here's a scientific question for y'all.... What separates mankind from all other mammals?

HECKLER B: We do!

FERRIS: (LAUGHS) Got to give credit where credit is do when some jerk in the audience comes up with a better punchline than what you got! My father was a scientist.... He was a particular kind of chemist of sorts.... He'd say, "Now let's see, is it two parts gin to one part vermouth--no, three parts to a jigger--no, four parts to a jigger-- no, five parts to--no, screw the parts. Just give me the damned bottle....

(SHADOW PLAYER, IN A WHEELCHAIR, ENTERS STAGE RIGHT)

FERRIS: How are you, dad?
FATHER: How am I doin? I'm dyin--that's how I'm doin.
FERRIS: I talked to the doctors....
FATHER: You can't talk to doctors. They talk to you. Then they bill you for it. I'd rather watch T.V. It's cheaper.
FERRIS: They said that there's a chance that--
FATHER: That's what they said the last time.
FERRIS: They said that it's possible that, if you took care--I mean, if things settle down, and if you took care--
FATHER: Not everything's possible, son.

FERRIS: But they said--

FATHER: They said that for your benefit. A man don't know a helluva lot, but he does know when it's time to check in his hat.

FERRIS: You never wore a hat.

FATHER: As far as you know.... Anyway, the next time a doctor tells you about possibilities this and possibilities that, just grin and nod like an idiot. And keep your hand on your wallet! Even if they think there's a chance to get cab-fare outta you, they'll do it. Then they'll try to stiff the cabby! Buncha chislers.

FERRIS: Well, okay....

FATHER: Good. Now that that's settled, how're you doin? How's the girl? How's Jane?

FERRIS: Things didn't work out.

FATHER: That's the way it goes. Just remember that women are like buses. The ocean's full of them.

FERRIS: Thanks, dad.

FATHER: Hey, what are fathers for if they can't impart a little wisdom upon their progenialogical extendibles?

FERRIS: You mean 'progeny.'

FATHER: That's what I said.

FERRIS: Sometimes I don't know what you mean.

FATHER: Now we got that one settled.

FERRIS: Yes, but--
FATHER: There ain't no other 'but' about it. You know that. 'Sides, there are plenty of 'buts' in the world already.

FERRIS: I give up.

FATHER: A day will come when you won't.

FERRIS: What does that mean?

FATHER: Nevermind. How's the comedy going?

FERRIS: Awful. I'm trying on somebody else this week. A Canadian. The bit isn't workin.

FATHER: Awful?

FERRIS: Terrible. I can't make them laugh.

FATHER: I wouldn't worry. People have no sense of humor. They only laugh at what's funny.

FERRIS: Then I'm not funny.

FATHER: That's not the point.

FERRIS: What is the point?

FATHER: Don't you know?

FERRIS: No.

FATHER: Good. Not knowing is the perfect place to start.

FERRIS: I see. Look, I want to say somethin to you, okay--

FATHER: The only other thing I can tell you is beware of hecklers.

FERRIS: I know that much. I can handle them.

FATHER: Well, I hope so. 'Course they never bothered me, but Sonny Simpson had a problem with hecklers. Now he's molding clay pots in Delaware.
FERRIS: Delaware?
FATHER: Delaware.
FERRIS: Oh, my God. That's awful.
FATHER: So be careful.
FERRIS: I will.
FATHER: Good. Now that's settled. (PAUSE) I want you to do me a favor....
FERRIS: You're not supposed to drink.
FATHER: I know, and it's a damned shame, too. But it's not about that. It's your mother.
FERRIS: Don't worry. I'll take care of her.
FATHER: She's got this thing about tombstones. She wants to put, "Here lies Johnny Ferris, beloved husband, beloved father and on and on, blah, blah, blah.... May he rest in peace." I don't want that. It just won't do, and there's no talkin to your mother either. When she gets her mind made up, all I can say is but--but--but, and, like I said--
FERRIS: The 'but' bit.
FATHER: Righto. What I want you to do is to have whoever the chiseler is who does such things--I want you to have him put something else on the damned thing.
FERRIS: Let me guess--
FATHER: Don't try. Have them put, "I'm dead, and you're not." It'll save money.
FERRIS: But--

FATHER: Now don't argue with me.

FERRIS: But--

FATHER: I don't care if you have to lie, cheat, steal, kill the dog and leave the country....

FERRIS: But--

FATHER: It was either that or, "Don't open until X-mas," but--Oh, my God! Oh, my God! I gotta go! Oh, my God!

FERRIS: Dad, please don't go! Don't die on me like this!

FATHER: Oh, my God! The pain!

FERRIS: No! You can't die!

FATHER: Oh, my God! Who said anything about dyin'? I need a bedpan, quick!

FERRIS: I'll get the nurse! (PANTOMIMES OPENING A DOOR)

FATHER: That's the closet! Go in there and you won't get far! Oh, my God!

FERRIS: I'll get the nurse! Stay right there!

FATHER: (LAUGHING) What a dummy! Where am I gonna go? This is good news, son! Means the plumbing ain't completely shot yet! I may make it 'till June!

FERRIS: Be right back! (EXITS INTO THE WINGS)

(AS THE LIGHT FADES ON THE FATHER, HE TAKES A BOTTLE FROM UNDERNEATH HIS BLANKET AND DRINKS)

FATHER: That's my boy....
FERRIS: Thanks, Roberta. I needed that.... Actually, I otta let y'all in on a little secret.... I've been ordered to perform a hundred hours of community service, and if it's okay with y'all, I'd like to do them all right now.... We'll take a break--what--about eighteen hours from now.... I mean, I know there are certain functions that have to be tended to now and again.... Like pissing--

HECKLER C: What you get busted for? Your material?

FERRIS: My God, is that original.... No, I was busted for throwing up into a U.S. mailbox.... Used to be a major felony, but they reduced it to a misdemeanor, so it was no big deal--'till I went before the Judge. The judge said that I had a right to defend myself.... So I hit him....

(CENTER THE CUSTODIAN WHEELING A TUBA WITH A LEG STICKING OUT OF THE BELL. FERRIS TURNS AND WATCHES FOR AWHILE. THE CUSTODIAN STOPS, CENTER-STAGE)

CUSTODIAN: What are you lookin at?


CUSTODIAN: Look, he just got a little carried away, okay?

FERRIS: Carry on....

CUSTODIAN: I think they're in love. (EXIT THE CUSTODIAN)

FERRIS: Any old porthole in a storm, I guess.... Sorta like reality.... Like statistics. They say you can make statistics say anything, and that's true 87% of the time.... Statisticians are
middlemen, and I'm all for eliminating the middleman.... One way to
eliminate the middleman is to leave cows out in the sun.... Let them
make their own damned cheese.... Went to The Return of Dracula the
other night, y'know, with Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing--

HECKLER C: Did you sit between them, or what?

FERRIS: Well, there goes that joke--

EMCEE: (OVER P.A.) Excuse me, Ferris....

FERRIS: Oh, my God! It's God! (GETS TO HIS KNEES)

EMCEE: (OVER P.A.) Yes, my son, it is truly me. The one and only
reality and I'm more than a little p-oed over that cow joke.

FERRIS: It was a bad joke, God! God, I'm sorry!

EMCEE: (OVER P.A.) Damned right! And don't forget to tell the people
about the specials on well drinks that can be had here at the Comedy-O-
Rama. Tell them also that there still are plenty of Comedy-O-Rama t-
shirts available, and tell them that anybody that brings bread with
their toasters tomorrow night can have their bread and heat it too.

FERRIS: Well, thank you for interrupting my routine with those
incredibly important revelations....

EMCEE: (OVER P.A.) And there have been phone calls for you. Annoying
phone calls. Got it? I have spoken....

WAITRESS and
CUSTODIAN: (OFFSTAGE) When are we gonna get paid!

(PAUSE)
FERRIS: I guess God runs away from answering the big questions.... Money, the future—that sort of thing. But he is damned good at interruptions and ruining a show.... But there are others who do that too.... Y'all know what I mean?

(SHADOW PLAYER ENTERS, STAGE RIGHT)

FERRIS: Tell you what—I'll do the shopping today. What do we need?

MOLLY: We don't have any money to go shopping. I want to talk....

FERRIS: Let's see. Last week it was the Morroccan food theme thing. How 'bout Chilean this week? I'm nuts for Chile. All them beans....

MOLLY: You're just nuts. We're broke, Jimmy....

FERRIS: And you could—this is if you want to—dress like Juan Valdez. I'll be the donkey, of course, but there's a problem....

MOLLY: Jimmy--

FERRIS: Problem is how to get the food through the head of a donkey without making an ass of oneself.

MOLLY: Jimmy--

FERRIS: But, on the other hand, if I were to eat before I put the donkey's head on--

MOLLY: Jimmy, Juan Valdez is from Columbia, so drop it!

FERRIS: He is?

MOLLY: He is.

FERRIS: Well, I guess that's his problem....
MOLLY: That’s not the half of it.

FERRIS: Maybe another country, another theme.... Vietnam!

MOLLY: Maybe you ought to listen to me.

FERRIS: If you want to do the shopping this week, it’s fine with me. Still have a problem with the cart. Ran over a couple of casabas the other day....

MOLLY: Jimmy!

FERRIS: Boy, was she upset! (PAUSE) Is there something wrong, pooh-pie, darling-baby-goo-goo-mama, sweet kinda thang?

MOLLY: I love you, Jimmy.

FERRIS: I love you too, Molly. That’s why we got married.

MOLLY: But I can’t take it anymore....

FERRIS: But--

MOLLY: Let me finish. It’s just impossible to live with someone who doesn’t know who he is.

FERRIS: Okay, who is he?

MOLLY: Who is who?

FERRIS: Who is he who is this other guy?

MOLLY: What?

FERRIS: I may not be a lot of things, but what I’m not, is not dumb. No, that didn’t come out right, but see?

MOLLY: You’re changing the subject....

FERRIS: Don’t lie, Molly....
MOLLY: You're the other guy! You're always the other guy! One day you're from Chicago. The next from Mississippi or California or Maine. And now you want to be Juan Valdez's ass from Chile. And they don't even live in Chile!

FERRIS: Don't lie, Molly.

MOLLY: Then there are other things. I opened the medicine cabinet yesterday and paper snakes jump out at me. It's no way to live a life. People talk. They know. There are whispers everywhere!

FERRIS: How did you get those scratches on your back?

MOLLY: You're the liar! You lie to yourself! You are always onstage, and I'm tired of it! And I'm tired of being broke!

FERRIS: How, Molly?

MOLLY: How what?

FERRIS: The scratches. Two of them. On your back.

MOLLY: (PAUSE) I fell on a rake.

FERRIS: Before we go on, let me write that down. (TAKES OUT A PAD)

"She fell on a rake."

MOLLY: What are you doing?

FERRIS: Writing.

MOLLY: Why?

FERRIS: You never know when something like that is gonna come in handy. Like rakes....

MOLLY: See? You're blind!

FERRIS: Back to the matter at hand. We don't have a rake!
MOLLY: Most husbands think their wives are only good for one thing. And so do you. But in your case, I'm only good for material! It's just too weird!

FERRIS: That's because you're crazy! You--look, no. I'm not gonna do this! I love you; you love me, and that's all there is to it!

MOLLY: I am not a fiction!

FERRIS: I never said you were....

MOLLY: You don't have to! I know it!

FERRIS: Look, Molly. You can't leave. You can't. You're the only person I know who eats more than me.

MOLLY: I don't want to laugh. Please don't make me laugh. This is not a laughing matter.

FERRIS: Come on, Molly....

MOLLY: No. Whatever comedy is in you, you hate like anything! I can't live with a man who hates me! I can't take it anymore!

FERRIS: No I don't!

MOLLY: You do too! You're just blind to it!

FERRIS: This is absurd!

MOLLY: Right. And that's your fault. To you, everything's absurd.

FERRIS: Well, it is!

MOLLY: No. You make it that way....

FERRIS: You can't leave.
MOLLY: Yes I can. Look, you either leave the stage for good, or I leave you. I'll be at my sister's.

FERRIS: Molly, don't open that door!

MOLLY: I love you, Jimmy. Only you. But I want a real life.

FERRIS: But--

MOLLY: Leave the stage.

FERRIS: But, Molly--

MOLLY: I can't take it anymore! (PANTOMIMES OPENING A DOOR AND GOES INTO THE WINGS)

FERRIS: But--

(THERE IS THE CLATTERING AND CLANGING OF WHAT SOUNDS LIKE A THOUSAND SMALL PIECES OF JUNK. MOLLY SCREAMS)

FERRIS: It's the closet, Molly!

MOLLY: (OFF, SCREAMS AGAIN, THEN--) You--you--you incredible asshole!

FERRIS: I tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen! I've been meaning to clean out that closet for months!

MOLLY: (OFF) LIAR! Goodbye, Jimmy!

FERRIS: But it's what I do!

MOLLY: (OFF) Goodbye, Jimmy.

(LIGHT FADES)

FERRIS: Don't--bye, Molly....

(DURING A FIVE-SECOND BLACKOUT, HECKLER X YELLS, "WHEN ARE YOU GONNA START TO BE FUNNY!" LIGHTS UP)

FERRIS: (DRINK IN HAND) Soon as I finish this.... (FINISHES DRINK)

Another goner.... Went downt to Disneyworld last year....
(SCATTERED APPLAUSE)

FERRIS: (PEERS INTO CROWD) Y'all from Disneyworld? Well, looks like it.... (POINTS TO HECKLER Y) Look! There's Goofy! Yeah, anyway, I comes round to this here map. Got a big arrow that points to a spot that says, 'You are here.' Well, what I want to know is how the hell do they know where I am? And they were right too! There I was! Right there! And I'm lookin around to see the guy who knows where everybody's at, but a-course there was no one there so who could tell? It's a mystery to me.... Just remember, no matter where you go, well, there you are, and somebody knows it too! Or somethin like that....

HECKLER Y: Your pants aren't pressed!

FERRIS: What the hell--

HECKLER Y: Look everybody! His pants aren't pressed! They're wrinkled!

FERRIS: (PICKS UP HIS GLASS. STUDIES IT) What the hell are they puttin in these drinks?

HECKLER Y: (LAUGHING) Look at his pants!

FERRIS: (PULLS OUT A SMALL NOTEBOOK) I got a book of snappy comebacks here. Let's see.... (FLIPS THROUGH SOME PAGES) odd animals, old jokes, old people, oxymorons, pants not pressed--here it is.... (READS IT AND LOOKS UP) Fuck you.... I'm thirty years old today.... Yeah, well I don't know what to say about it either.... Last time I went to a birthday party was for a hundred and two-year-old woman.... She looked bad.... Looked more like a hundred and forty or fifty. They got her
this cake—big smile came on her face. But somebody’d put them candles that don’t go out, and she tries to blow them out (BLOWS QUICK PUFFS INTO THE MICROPHONE), and, shonuff, pretty soon she’s a-spittin' (MAKES SPITTING NOISES) 'till the cake turns into pudding—

HECKLER X: Hey, buddy! You got my wife all upset now!

FERRIS: Your wife is a hundred and two years old?

HECKLER X: No, this is my wife!

FERRIS: (PEERS INTO AUDIENCE) Mrs. Permanent Press? Well, buddy, we all make mistakes....

(ENTER SHADOW PLAYERS)

HECKLER X: You ain't funny, buddy!

FERRIS: Boy, I think I need another drink about now.... What are you drinking there, sir?

HECKLER X: None of your goddamned bi'ness what I'm drinkin.

FATHER: People have no sense of humor. They only laugh at what's funny.

JANE: Not everything's possible....

MOLLY: Leave the stage!

HECKLER Y: And your pants are still wrinkled!

(FERRIS DROPS HIS PANTS AND FLINGS THEM INTO THE CROWD)

FERRIS: Now that's funny, goddamnit!

HECKLER Z: Nice legs!

FATHER: Someday you'll make a stand....

MOLLY: You hate like anything....
JANE: No, no, no....

FATHER: Delaware. It's a damned shame too....

MOLLY: I love you, Jimmy....

JANE: No match today. Not ever....

FATHER: Get the nurse!

MOLLY: Call me....

JANE: I want a man with possibilities....

FATHER: It's your mother....

MOLLY: I can't take it anymore!

JANE: That's where it begins....

MOLLY: You're blind.....

FATHER: You mean, you don't know?

JANE: You only see the possibilities....

MOLLY: (TO JANE) That's what I said....

HECKLER Z: I said, 'Nice legs'!

FERRIS: Oh-oh. Sounds like a funny boy.... Naw, really. I don't hold anything against gay people.... (PAUSES) Thank God!

HECKLER Z: Hey, buddy, I ain't no homo! I got a wife and she's one goddamned fine lookin chick too!

HECKLER X: Yeah, like who the hell do you think you are anyway?

FERRIS: Not you! ... You people know each other?

MOLLY: Who is who?

FATHER: Who are you this week?

JANE: Everything is not possible....
FATHER: Not everything is possible....

MOLLY: You're changing the subject....

FATHER: (TO MOLLY) You're damned right I did!

MOLLY: (TO FATHER) Not you! Who are you anyway?

FATHER: (TO MOLLY) Who are you?

JANE: (TO BOTH) Let me introduce you two. Molly, this is Mr. Ferris, Jimmy's father. He's a drunk who's dead.

FATHER: I'm a dead drunk....

JANE: And Mr. Ferris, this is Molly, Jimmy's wife. She's a bitch.

MOLLY: (INDICATING FERRIS) Did he tell you that?

JANE: No. But I know what he thinks.

FATHER: So do I.

MOLLY: And so do I.

JANE: Anyway, my name is Jane. I am made of ice.

MOLLY and FATHER: We know! And you're boring too!

HECKLER Z: What'samatter, hotshot? Cat got your tongue?

FERRIS: (LOOKS INSIDE HIS SHORTS) Oh my, God! My dick is gone! Who stole my dick? Now I remember--I left my dick in my pants! Give me back my pants, dammit! I need my dick!

WAITRESS: (OFF) Please give it back to him. It's one of his most cherished mementos....

FERRIS: Get my drink, Roberta, or I'll find a new trophy case for it, if you know what I mean.

WAITRESS: (OFF) You wish, you lush, you!
HECKLER Y: You can't have your pants back! They ain't pressed yet!

FERRIS: (PEERS INTO CROWD) What the hell do you do for a living?

HECKLER X: She's my wife--that's what she is!

FERRIS: I'm forming this picture in my mind.... I see a pair of pants, my pants, in a wig bank and being chewed at the knees by a rabid, and rapidly balding female clerical worker--

HECKLER X: Are you suggestin my wife is bald?

FERRIS: Well, she certainly has been balled, now, hasn't she, sir? And maybe once by you!

HECKLER Z: Who the hell are you to tell us who the hell we are?

FERRIS: (DROPS TO THE STAGE. PUTS HIS EAR TO THE FLOOR. GETS UP)

John Phillip Sousa, that's who I am! Where's my tuba? I want my tuba!

(ENTER CUSTODIAN. HE WHISPERS SOMETHING IN FERRIS' EAR. "WHAT?" FERRIS SAYS. CUSTODIAN WHISPERS SOMETHING ELSE)

FERRIS: They got married? Oh, my little tuba.....

CUSTODIAN: Sorry, boss. That's the way it goes.... (EXITS)

FERRIS: You're tellin me....

HECKLER X: Hey, buddy! I want you to apologize to my wife!

FERRIS: Ma'am, I am deeply, deeply sorry that you got married to an asshole. My condolences.... (CONTINUES TO PAGE)

MOLLY: You hate like anything!

HECKLER X: You're the asshole, man!

JANE: Everything is not possible....

HECKLER Y: And you'll never get your pants back!

FATHER: "I'm dead and you're not."
HECKLER Z: Who the hell do you think you are?
MOLLY: You—you—you incredible asshole!
HECKLER Y: And I'll have you know I'm one foxy chick!
MOLLY: I love you, Jimmy.
HECKLER X: You're not funny either!
JANE: Not today! Not ever!
HECKLER Z: How 'bout them apples!
FATHER: I need a bedpan, quick!
HECKLER X: And I think you're a yellow wimp!
MOLLY: To you, everything's absurd....
HECKLER X: So whaddaya gonna do about it?
FATHER: Get the nurse!
HECKLER Z: Yeah, bigshot, go ahead. Try to do something funny now!
MOLLY: Leave the stage!
(FERRIS PULLS A GUN FROM HIS SPORTCOAT AND SHOOTS IT IN THE AIR. DUCK DECOYS AND RUBBER CHICKENS FALL FROM THE RAFTERS)
FERRIS: All right, stop it!
HECKLER A: Hey, everybody! The comedian's got a gun!
EVERYBODY: No shit!
FERRIS: Okay, I am not from Mississippi. I am from Iowa City, Iowa.
In Iowa City, Iowa everybody reads books. Babies read books, dogs read books, and even the books read books. And because I have misjudged the intelligence level of this crowd, I'm going to read to you William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! in its entirety! Anybody that tries to
leave or tries to stop me gets shot! (POINTS THE GUN) Is that clear?
Okay, page one.... "From a little after two oclock until almost sundown
of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon they sat in what
Miss Coldfield still called the office because her father had called it
that--a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for
forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed
that light and moving air carried heat and that dark was always
cooler,..."

(HECKLERS AND SHADOWS GRADUALLY BECOME MORE AND MORE UNRULY)
HECKLER B: This is bogus!
FERRIS: What's wrong with you people? This is one of the greatest
novels ever written! "... and which (as the sun shone fuller and
fuller on that side of the house) became latticed with yellow slashes
full of dust motes which Quentin thought of being flecks of the dead old
dried paint itself..." (INTO CROWD) What the hell do you think you're
doing?
HECKLER A: I have to go to the restroom.
FERRIS: Sit down! I'm not finished yet!
HECKLER A: But--
FERRIS: Sit down or I'll make sure you never have to piss again!
"...blown inward from the scaling blinds as wind might have blown them.
There was a wisteria vine--"

(CROWD IS PRETTY LOUD AT THIS POINT)
FERRIS: "There was a wisteria vine blooming for the second time that summer on a wooden trellis before one window, into which sparrows came now and then in random gusts, making a dry vivid dusty sound before going away." (TO AUDIENCE) Have you people have no appreciation for this great work of art! "... and opposite Quentin, Miss Coldfield in the eternal black which she had worn for forty-three years--" Look, I've upped my standards! Now up yours! (MAKES A FAMILIAR GESTURE)

(Shadow players are rolling around with their hands over their ears. Hecklers are booing, throwing ice on the stage and, finally demanding to get their money back)

FERRIS: "... now, whether for sister, father, or nothusband none knew, sitting so bolt upright in the straight hard chair that was so tall for her that her legs hung straight and rigid as if she had iron shinbones and ankles,--"

EMCEE: (OVER P.A.) All right, Ferris. That's enough! Get off my stage!

FERRIS: Not this time, by God! "... clear of the floor with that air of impotent and static rage like children's feet,--"

EMCEE: (OVER P.A) Get him, Neil!

(Custodian wanders out on stage)

CUSTODIAN: But he's got a gun!

FERRIS: Good man, Neil.

CUSTODIAN: Don't mention it, boss. (Exits)

FERRIS: "... and talking in that grim hazard amazed voice until at last listening would renege and hearing-sense self-confound and the long-dead
object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration would appear, as though by outraged recapitulation evoked,--"

(Blackout. Ferris flips his lighter and continues to read until the lights come back on)

Ferris: "... quiet inattentive and harmless, out of the biding and dreamy and victorious dust."

(Enter Emcee. Hecklers quiet)

Emcee: (Points up) Those were my ducks!

Ferris: From my joke! You were going to use my material without telling me!

Emcee: That's my business. That's why we're here. To make money.

Ferris: No, it's not, you slime!

Waitress: (Offstage) You tell him, Jimmy!

Emcee: What is it gonna take to get you outta here?

Heckler X: Hey, when are you guys gonna start to be funny?

Heckler C: Yeah, I want to hear some more Faulkner!

(Loud boos)

Emcee and Ferris: (To audience) Shut up!

Emcee: So, what's it gonna take?

Father: He is not a comedian at all, is he?

Molly: More than you know, Dad....

Jane: Everything is not possible.

Father and Molly: (To Jane) Oh, shut up!

Ferris: It's been a month. I want my money now. And the interest....
EMCEE: Take a check?

FERRIS: Not from you.

EMCEE: (TAKES A WAD FROM HIS SUITCOAT) Okay, take the money. Take the money and know that you'll never work again anywhere. You won't even be able to get a goddamned job in a bowling alley!

FERRIS: That's fine with me cuz this business sucks. It's the slimiest business on earth. It's like throwing the slaves into the lion's pit. Nobody wants to see anything funny. They just want to see abuse--and that's easy--

EMCEE: Sounds to me like you've lost your sense of humor.... (THROWS HIM THE MONEY)

FERRIS: No, I've just lost your sense of humor. (PUTS THE GUN AWAY) I just found mine.... It's only a phone call away.

(EXIT SHADOW PLAYERS EXCEPT FOR MOLLY AND FATHER)

EMCEE: Go on then! Get the hell off my stage!

FERRIS: One moment. (TO AUDIENCE) You've been a good crowd. Thank y'all very much. (BOWS AND EXITS WITH MOLLY'S SHADOW)

EMCEE: (LOOKS AT HIS WATCH) Now that that rat's gone, it looks like I got some time to kill.... Tonight here at the Comedy-O-Rama we have specials on all mixed drinks until--what the hell--until closing! There are still plenty of Comedy-O-Rama T-shirts available, and, remember, tomorrow night at the Comedy-O-Rama is a special night. Bring a toaster and get in free.... So how we all doin tonight.... Anybody here from Philadelphia?
FATHER: (WHEELING TO CENTER STAGE) Yeah, I'm from Philadelphia, and sick to death of that opening, you chiseler!"

EMCEE: Where did you come from? (LOOKS OFF) Where'd this bum come from, Neil?

NEIL: (OFF) Uh, that's Jimmy's father, and uh, he just appeared from the, uh, everlasting everything, so he's like dead and I wouldn't fuck with him if I were you. If I were you, I'd--

EMCEE: --Freeze up with fear, crap in my shorts, and leave the stage? What do I look like, an idiot?

FATHER: (TAKES OFF HIS ARM AND HANDS IT TO EMCEE) Boo....

(EMCEE FREEZES UP, CRAPS IN HIS SHORTS, AND EXITS)

FATHER: Well, it's good to be back here at the--(STOPS, PAUSES) Take my wife--(STOPS, PAUSES) I know this guy who went to the dentist and he says to him, he goes, 'doc, I got this terrible pain in my mouth, and the dentist says--(STOPS, PAUSES) I went shopping for vegetables one day, and this woman with really big--(STOPS, PAUSES) Knock, knock--(STOPS, PAUSES AND LOOKS UP) Not even a knock-knock joke? Please, please, let me tell just one joke! Just one! (PAUSES) A sailor runs into two midgets, one with a duck on its head, the other with a chicken, and the sailor--(STOPS, PAUSES) Ah, the hell with it! (RAISES HIS BOTTLE IN THE AIR) Take it from a dead man.... To the comedy! To life!

(TAKES A SWIG FROM HIS BOTTLE AND FADES AS THE CURTAIN FALLS)
Characters:

BUCK EXLINE: A good ole boy
PETE-THE-COAT: A young bum
OLD MAN: an old man
WILLIAM WENTWORTH III: a rich guy
A POLICEMAN
TWO ATTENDANTS

Set: A jail cell, more commonly known as the "tank," somewhere in the midwest. There are two cots, stage left and stage right. A NO SMOKING sign is displayed prominently on the back wall. To the left of this is the cell door.

It is night. It is the middle of summer.

Scene: As the curtain rises, BUCK EXLINE, in a preoccupied way, wanders around the cell, looking at and beyond the walls.

The OLD MAN sleeps on one of the cots. He snores.

PETE-THE-COAT huddles in a corner and bobs his head, alternating between consciousness and unconsciousness. He is in some sort of a stupor. It is difficult to tell whether he wants consciousness or unconsciousness to win out.

No one is wearing shoes.

EXLINE discovers, or redisCOVERS, the NO SMOKING sign. He simultaneously shakes his head, mumbles a few low epithets, and pads around the pockets of his flannel shirt for a pack of Marlboros.
EXLINE: Took my shoes. Took my wallet. Took my cigarettes. What kind of man is one what ain't got them things on hisself. Not much of one, if you know what I mean, and I think you do.

(GOES TO THE DOOR AND MAKES SURE THE COAST IS CLEAR. THEN RETURNS TO THE NO SMOKING SIGN, SITS, AND ROLLS UP HIS PANT LEG WHILE HUMMING AND SINGING, "HOME, HOME ON THE RANGE...")

EXLINE: There you are. Hoo-hoo, hee-haw, oh yeah, baby. (UNSTRAPS A MASHED PACK OF MARLBOROS HE HAS TAPED BELOW HIS KNEE) Which is to say, what a man is, is the kinda guy what is always prepared for what-you-call the extravagant sitchyashun, which a-course, this be. (PUTS A BENT CIGARETTE IN HIS MOUTH; PADS HIS POCKETS) Cept a-course fer matches. Took my matches too--case I get the notion to burn up myself, I s'pose.

Got to remember them next time. Have the secretary put it on my calendar right next to brunch with the queen o' Egypt, or some such place.

(PETE-THE-COAT LAUGHS)

EXLINE: What you laughin at, rubberhead?

PETE-THE-COAT: (SQUINTING, AND SETTING HIS BEARINGS) What's up, dude?

EXLINE: I said, 'what you laughin at?'


EXLINE: Figgers. You got matches, boy?

PETE-THE-COAT: (AFTER RUMMAGING THROUGH WHAT SEEMS TO BE THE COUNTELESS POCKETS OF HIS COAT) Got a sandwich. (OFFERS IT TO EXLINE)

EXLINE: Well now, that's a start. Now how 'bout some matches?
(PETE-THE-COAT STANDS UP, SEARCHES THROUGH HIS POCKETS AND MUMBLES "MATCHES" TO HIMSELF. FINALLY, HIS EYES WIDEN. HE TAKES OUT A BOOK OF MATCHES AND HANDS THEM TO EXLINE)

EXLINE: Now you're talkin. (EXLINE TAKES THE MATCHES AND TRIES TO LIGHT ONE) Hey! These is all wet! What you been doin, boy? Swimmin?

PETE-THE-COAT: (PULLS OUT AN OPEN CAN OF COCA-COLA AND POURS A LITTLE OF IT ON THE STAGE) Sorry, dude.

EXLINE: Sorry is right. You bout the sorriest son-of-a-bitch I ever did see.... You got any beer in there?

PETE-THE-COAT: Right, dude. Like they're gonna let me carry some beer in here.

EXLINE: They let you carry in a sandwich....

PETE-THE-COAT: Like I'm gonna kill myself with a cheese sandwich.

EXLINE: I dunno, boy. I seen that sandwich.

(PETE-THE-COAT SLOUCHES DOWN AND BEGINS TO EAT HIS SANDWICH)

EXLINE: It's green, boy. Sandwich is green! (TO THE OLD MAN) Hey! Old man!

(THE OLD MAN SNORTS)

EXLINE: Hey you ole man! Got any matches, old man?

OLD MAN: Shhhhh. I am dreaming. I am dreaming about the Queen of Egypt....

EXLINE: Screw the Queen o' Egypt! I want a match! (MOVES TOWARD THE COT)

EXLINE: (STOPS) Y'know, I've jest about had enough outta you, boy.

OLD MAN: I am dying, Egypt!

EXLINE: And that's not all you're gonna be, old man.

(EXLINE GOES OVER TO THE COT AND SHAKES THE OLD MAN DOWN FOR A MATCH. THE OLD MAN CONTINUES TO MOAN, 'I am dying, Egypt. I'm dying, I'm dying....)

PETE-THE-COAT: Like Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers played in Egypt once. I saw it on MTV.

(THE CELL DOOR OPENS. A POLICEMAN AND WILLIAM WENTWORTH III WALK IN. WENTWORTH, LONG HAIR AND BEARDED, IS WEARING A LONG WHITE GOWN. HE CARRIES HIS HANDS IN FRONT OF HIM AS IF IN PRAYER)

POLICEMAN: Exline! Get off of it!

EXLINE: Hey, whoa there chief. This old guy was jest a-layin here scream min he's dyin and such, so's I go over to see that if he might be a-needin the what-you-call the heart-to-mouth deal, if you know what I mean.

PETE-THE-COAT: He means mouth-to-mouth.

EXLINE: You'd like that, wouldn't you, boy?

POLICEMAN: All right, that's enough. It's likely to be crowded in here tonight so I would appreciate it if you boys would cut out the garbage. If you boys don't cut out the garbage, you won't be let out in the morning. You won't be let out until I'm damned good and ready to let you out--and I'm lookin at you, Exline.

EXLINE: But he was dyin.

POLICEMAN: Stow it! You okay, old man?
OLD MAN: I was just dreaming, sir.

POLICEMAN: Okay. (TO WENTWORTH) Now until I find out who you are—and I don't care who you think you are, or what you think you are—this time just keep your goddamned clothes on, okay?

WENTWORTH: If it pleases you, my son.

POLICEMAN: Right. As for the rest of you gentlemen, I'll be down the hall making calls and knitting a shawl for my poor ole mom. If I miss a stitch because of you guys, it could be a long, long time until tomorrow. Are you with me?

OLD MAN: Yes, sir. And thank you. And I hope that your mother will be fine.

EXLINE: He don't have no mother, you old clown. He was jest sayin' that.

WENTWORTH: Fear not, for we are all created equal from the womb of woman. Even I, descendant of the cosmic vibe, the Prince of the universal harpsichord, the--

POLICEMAN: Stow it! Just keep it down you guys, all right? (LEAVES MUTTERING)

(WENTWORTH MOVES TO THE CENTER OF THE STAGE, LIFTS HIS ARMS UP, AND TILTS HIS HEAD BACK IN A WAY THAT SUGGESTS HE IS EITHER TRYING TO LOWER THE ASTRAL PLANE, OR RAISE HIMSELF UP TO IT. IT'S HARD TO TELL. PETE-THE-COAT LOOKS UP AT WENTWORTH AND FREEZES IN MID-DRINK OF HIS COCA-COLA. THE OLD MAN, NOTICING WENTWORTH, FIRST BEGINS TO LOOK UP TO WHATEVER WENTWORTH IS LOOKING AT, THEN BEGINS TO IMITATE WENTWORTH, BUT ONLY FOR A SECOND OR TWO)

EXLINE: So... you from out of town? Or just out to lunch?
WENTWORTH: I am the Prince of Peace, the King of the Cosmos, the Lord of Light! I am Yahweh, Jehovah, Mohammed, the Buddha, and the boy at the five-and-dime! I am the seeker of lost souls, the wizard of warmth, the eternal starch of the universe, the babble in the brook, and the one and only. I am the light and the hope! I am the lord-God of the New Age. I am the fizz in every carbonated beverage ever made!

(THE OLD MAN AND PETE-THE-COAT, SANDWICH HANGING OUT OF HIS MOUTH, MOVE TO CENTER-STAGE, AND PEER UP TO WHATEVER HOLE WENTWORTH IS LOOKING THROUGH)

EXLINE: (WALKING TOWARD CENTER-STAGE) Welp, now ole buddy, in yer almightiness, could you deliver unto this poor, wretched excuse fer a human, which I is, a single match?

WENTWORTH: I am without a match, my son. Have faith.

EXLINE: Figgers. (looks up) It's the ceiling, y'know. Not much to that, by God.

(OUT OF ONE OF HIS POCKETS, PETE-THE-COAT SLOWLY WITHDRAWS A BIC LIGHTER AND LIGHTS EXLINE'S CIGARETTE)

EXLINE: Thank you, boy....

(CATCHING HIMSELF, EXLINE TURNS HIS ATTENTION FROM THE CEILING TO PETE-THE-COAT AND STARES AT HIM MENACINGLY. AS IF NOTHING HAS HAPPENED, PETE-THE-COAT RETREATS TO HIS CORNER, SLOUCHES DOWN AND FINISHES HIS SANDWICH. EXLINE RECIPROCATES BY RETURNING TO HIS ORIGINAL POSITION UNDERNEATH THE NO SMOKING SIGN WITHOUT TAKING HIS EYES OFF OF PETE-THE-COAT)

WENTWORTH: What is a ceiling, but another level, a stairway to that ethereal plane, its own ceiling and floor? That is the thing which binds! The thing that keeps! The thing that can be peeled away like
some dastardly handiwrap locking in the freshness of the soul like so
many leftover par-boiled potatoes and meatloafs and macaroni-and-
cheeses-with-little-sausages that tastes real bad, all burning
indigestible toward that unmentionable pit, irreducible and cold!

(PETE-THE-COAT BELCHES RATHER LOUDLY)

OLD MAN: I think I can see! So help me, I think I can see it!

WENTWORTH: (CHEERLEADING) Knock 'em in the cauliflower!
Knock 'em in the coleslaw!
Let's hear it for the little Lord Almighty,
Raw, raw, raw!

OLD MAN: Rah, rah, rah--sis-boom-bah!

WENTWORTH: Mary had a little lamb! Its fleece was white as snow!

OLD MAN: ... And everywhere that Mary went...

EXLINE: ... The lamb bought a Toronado--will you two put a lid on it?
I'm tryin to figger somethin out here. Tryin figger out that boy there.
(POINTS TO PETE-THE-COAT) Tryin to figger out his mind--what must be
filled up with somethin near to wax, or somethin else, if you know what
I mean, and I think you do. Tryin to figger why he ain't got the
accommodation to light a poor man's cigarette when a guy asks for it.
You thinkin bout what I is sayin, boy?

WENTWORTH: What is a thought, but dreaming awake, a matter of hue and
of shape, a bridge from matters of light and shadow, an ink blot that
makes sense?

OLD MAN: Ink blots?

EXLINE: Blots of ink, old man.

PETE-THE-COAT: Everything's an ink blot.
OLD MAN: What's an ink blot?

PETE-THE-COAT: Everything.

EXLINE: A blot of ink.

WENTWORTH: Thoughts.

OLD MAN: Oh.

EXLINE: It's fer crazies, you dope. Like your buddy there.

OLD MAN: You don't understand.... This is the lord of a New Age!

EXLINE: You old drunk, he ain't no more a lord than I is the king o' the moon.

WENTWORTH: Ah, the moon. Floating. Majestic. Harbringer of houses; ocean lording eye of the soul. The keeper of music--my romantic sister. "Moon over Miami." "Harvest Moon." "Moon River." (STUMBLES A MOMENT) Moon, moon--Keith Moon, Moon Martin, Moon Mullins, Moon pie.... (RECOVERS) "Fly me to the moon! Let me sing among the stars!" (TO EXLINE) It's very nice to meet you, my king.

EXLINE: What a loonie. I ain't no king, and I ain't your son neither, and I sure as hell ain't nobody's goddamned sister.

WENTWORTH: Brothers then.

EXLINE: Brother lives in Toledo, you kook! Name of Ed. Runs a car wash.

WENTWORTH: We are all brothers, my son. Harmonic vibrations in tune with a knowing universe, energy being matter, matter being energy, matter, energy... being!
OLD MAN: "Let me see what love is like on Jupiter and Mars--" see, I told you he is what he is.

EXLINE: Shut up! (GETS UP AND PACES) Ten-thousand jail cells in all the world and you losers have to show up here. More losers from a line what never ends. One joker after another in one real strange parade, let me tell you. My wife.... I trucks around the country to support her.... Every goddammed time I comes back she's different.... Last time, she gets this weird beehive hairdo deal, buys herself two pink poodles, names 'em Yvonne an' Yvette.... Walks in, pink poodle crap on the rug a-course, 'Call me Elaine,' says she, which would be okey-dokey, ceptin her name is Jane.... And if it ain't enough that she's terrorizin me, she's terrorizin the rest of the town, them two damn mongrels out in front of her polluting the community with their products, scarin the little kids, and generally causin misery. I mean when she goes shoppin, stores close, and houses is bolted shut fer the duration. (PUTS HIS CIGARETTE OUT IN THE 'O' OF THE NO SMOKING SIGN) Bullseye! Damned stupid rule, anyhow.... So's anyway, I don't go home this time, but head straight fer the beer-joint to figger my next move. Then I goes home to kick her out on her big red rump, and almost afore I can get my foot in the damned door, she calls the cops, and I ends up here with an old fool, a kook-flasher what thinks he's God-almighty...

(WALKS OVER TO PETE-THE-COAT)
WENTWORTH: I am the fusion of science and spirit! I am the lord of light! I am the sound and the fury! The hope! The truth! The thrill of victory, the agony of defeat, and the toll-booth collector on highway five!

EXLINE: ... and this rubberhead—a loser among losers. The king of the losers. What else you got in the coat, boy?

PETE-THE-COAT: What's mine is mine.

OLD MAN: (TO EXLINE) Now hold on there, young man. I'll have you know that at one time, and not so long ago I might add, that I was the number one brush salesman for the whole northwestern district of the Fuller Company.

EXLINE: Oh, Christ!

WENTWORTH: But I am the New Christ, my son.

EXLINE: Not you, and I ain't your son—and that's the last time, got it?

WENTWORTH: If it pleases you, my brother.

EXLINE: I told you he's in Toledo, idiot!

WENTWORTH: ... And I am everywhere! I am the hole and the worm! I am the cosmic Waring Blender! I am the roto-tiller on sale at True Value for 59.99!

PETE-THE-COAT: Or at the church of your choice, right dude?

WENTWORTH: My church is the holy church of time and timelessness without ceilings or floors, that dastardly handiwrap that locks in the freshness—
EXLINE: Shut up you! Enough of this kitchen magician baloney. I want some peace.

WENTWORTH: I am the Prince of Peace.

EXLINE: Then shut up.

WENTWORTH: As you wish, my--

(EXLINE GIVES WENTWORTH A QUICK, MENACING LOOK)

WENTWORTH: ... my friend.

EXLINE: You ain't my friend, neither. I ain't got no truck with friends. Friends is fer losers an' fer babies.

WENTWORTH: I am the hope!

EXLINE: Well, by God, you're close.... You is the dope! (LAUGHS)

OLD MAN: Twenty-five? No... twenty-seven years.... Twenty-seven years selling the best brushes, brooms, dust-pans, dust-bins, sponges, mops, waxes, lint removers, and other fine products designed to make every American household clean and safe and warm and, well, more American. That's what I did, I'll have you know. And what's more, it was all door-to-door! I worked hard for my money....

PETE-THE-COAT: Like I'm impressed, dude. Like when I get outta here, I'm gonna get me some brushes and some other cool things and start sellin junk to little old ladies. Yeah, I can see it, dude! Little old ladies with all that makeup on their faces, varicose veins, brown teeth, lonely pale eyes that are so happy to see somebody... and that little dog! That little dog that always humps your leg at the door! That
little dog makes the job what it is—makes you get up in the morning. I can't wait, dude. I can't wait.

OLD MAN: (RETURNS TO HIS COT) Ten years ago I might've been able to set you up, but the supers are all dead by now.... (SITS DOWN) Twenty-seven years!

EXLINE: Fer chrissakes, old man. He don't mean he wants to work. He's just sayin that he's a lazy, two-bit, punk-kid is all....

WENTWORTH: For my sake? Not for my sake entirely, my friend. For the sake of heaven and of earth, I have risen from the dead! I, who lives in heaven, Howard be my name! My kingdom come, my world be done on earth as it is in heaven!

PETE-THE-COAT: Howard?

OLD MAN: Howard? I thought you said you were—

WENTWORTH: In that blissful state, everybody is Howard, my son. Heaven is everything that anybody has ever dreamed of. The heaven of dreams is in that place displaced by energy through time. It is a field. It is a meadow, electric. It is time and timelessness, the up and the down, the beginning and end in a line where souls never have to wait! It is without the dark where darkness lurked before, cold and haunted and damp with fear in a tunnel somewhere when you were a child. It is an ocean, powerful and deep. Rhythmic. Everlasting. Moving quiet and victorious under the armada of the self, the flotilla of the flesh! It is the in-and-out and the all-around! It is soul-food on Fifth Avenue! It is
Gerald McBoing-Boing, Howdy Doody, and Quick Draw McGraw all in the same boat! It is doors number one, two, and three without the doors!

EXLINE: I think you mean without hinges, dontcha Howie?

WENTWORTH: As you wish, my friend.

EXLINE: You ain't my friend, Howie. Ain't it clear enough, Howie? I ain't got no friends. Only got losers. Everywhere....

OLD MAN: Twenty-seven years... and then I finally scraped enough money to build something on my own. So I did. Invested everything in food additives for livestock—you know, pigs and chickens and cows—

PETE-THE-COAT: And, like sheep too?

OLD MAN: Yes, and sheep too. Invested the whole kit-and-kaboodle. The whole ten thou. Everything I had because that's the way to build a dream....

PETE-THE-COAT: Dreams are for kids.

WENTWORTH: Everything is a dream.

OLD MAN: I had a dream. I was going to be rich. I was going to buy a house.... In my dreams, I am always... younger.

EXLINE: There ain't no goddamned point to it, anyhow. I hate to admit it, but the rubberhead is right. He's makin sense which is what you guys ain't got a lick of, by God. I need a smoke. (PULLS OUT ANOTHER BENT MARLBORO)

WENTWORTH: As I am my witness, nothing is right or wrong. It is only thinking that makes it so.
EXLINE: Horseshit, Howie. What the hell you doin here, then? (TO PETE-THE-COAT) Gimme a light, boy, and a drink if you got one. I need a drink.

WENTWORTH: I am here, and I am there. I am everywhere and nowhere. I am the hope, the truth, the light, and the answer to the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question! I am host to the game show that never ends!

EXLINE: Can it, Howie!

OLD MAN: How was I supposed to know that sheep won't eat wood pulp? I was going to buy a boat.... Twenty-seven years!

WENTWORTH: You can win the boat, the summer house in Spain, the expense-paid weekend in Barbados, and a condo full of success if you can answer this question correctly in thirty seconds--

EXLINE: Can it, Howie! Where's that light, boy?

PETE-THE-COAT: Like the dude says, it's in your mind. It's all in your mind, dude. It's all just one hellish dream.

EXLINE: Like hell it is.

WENTWORTH: ... And the question is... Where is that pit, abominable and wretched, that chews up the soul and spits out sour grapes one, two, three in a beginning, middle, and end? A place of eternal fire that melts all sense like an m&m in the sun? Remember, you have thirty seconds--

EXLINE: I said, 'can it!' (PUSHES WENTWORTH TO THE FLOOR)

WENTWORTH: Wrong answer!
OLD MAN: Hey! You should not be treating the New Christ like this. It's not nice, and you'll end up paying for it in the long run.

EXLINE: He ain't no New Christ, you old fool! (TO PETE-THE-COAT) Now are you gonna give me that light and whatever else you got, or is I gonna have to knock you around a bit too.

PETE-THE-COAT: I ain't afraid of you, dude.

EXLINE: You otta be, boy.

PETE-THE-COAT: Dude, I got a black belt. Trained in Hong Kong, man. With the same dude who taught Bruce Lee.

EXLINE: Oh yeah? What was his name?


EXLINE: You think yer pretty funny, dontcha punk?

PETE-THE-COAT: It's the truth, dude. Don't mess with me. I got a black belt. I ain't kidding! (BOLTS UP ABRUPTLY, AND GOES INTO A KARATE STANCE)

EXLINE: You got a black coat, and that's fer sure, boy. And I think I know what's in it now... and I want what's in it now, and, by god, I'm gonna get it. (SLOWLY MOVES FORWARD) I is tired of bein pushed around by a buncha losers. Pushed around by the damned job.... Pushed around by a buncha stupid rules. This time I'm gonna get what I want--me, Buck Exline.

OLD MAN: Give him what he wants, son. Let's have no trouble.

PETE-THE-COAT: Nobody tells me what to do, old dude.
WENTWORTH: Cast out your lendings, my son! Material goods only form the walls of a common existence, and it is from these walls, that dastardly handiwrap which locks in the freshness of the soul--

PETE-THE-COAT: Fuck off, flake.

EXLINE: Shut up, Howie, or I'll twist yer holy head off! That is, after I get through removin the face from this punk-clown....

PETE-THE-COAT: Just like you did to your wife, dude?

EXLINE: (GRABS PETE-THE-COAT AND THROWS HIM UP AGAINST THE WALL) How the hell would you know, anyhow, you goddammed mouthy, punk-kid! Never been married, never had a job, never been broke cuz you ain't never had no money, goddammit! We just was fightin like we always done! I ain't never touched her, punk! She's jest crazy! She jest wouldn't listen! I ain't never touched her--you got that, punk? (SLAMS PETE-THE-COAT AGAINST THE WALL) You got that? (SLAMS HIM AGAIN) You got that, punk?

... You goddamned loser, you got that?

(ASS EXLINE CONTINUES TO SLAM PETE-THE-COAT AGAINST THE WALL, WENTWORTH RISES FROM THE FLOOR AND JUMPS ON EXLINE'S BACK)

WENTWORTH: Peace, brothers! ... Heaven can't wait any longer!

EXLINE: Wha...? Get off!

PETE-THE-COAT: Someone call the cops!

WENTWORTH: Peace! The whole world is watching!

(THE OLD MAN RUNS TO THE CELL DOOR AND LOOKS OUT)

OLD MAN: You guys better knock it off! Somebody's coming! (RETURNS TO COT)

EXLINE: Get off my back!
(EXLINE BREAKS AWAY FROM PETE-THE-COAT AND FLIPS
WENTWORTH ONTO THE FLOOR. WENTWORTH LIES MOTIONLESS.
PETE-THE-COAT KNEES EXLINE. EXLINE DOUBLES OVER.
THE POLICEMAN COMES IN FOLLOWED BY TWO ATTENDANTS
DRESSED IN WHITE WHO RUSH TO WENTWORTH'S SIDE)

POLICEMAN: Mother of a twisted god.... What the hell is going on here?

Exline?

EXLINE: Chief?

POLICEMAN: That's another day, Exline.

EXLINE: What fer?

POLICEMAN: (PICKS UP A BROKEN CIGARETTE) For smokin and for litterin.

PETE-THE-COAT: And for being an asshole, dude.

OLD MAN: Sir, I just want you to know that I didn't have anything to do
with this. I was just sitting here minding my own business.

WENTWORTH: (COMING AROUND) Peace, brothers! The storm is upon... us--

oh, I... I-- (HOLDS HIS HEAD)

POLICEMAN: Are you all right, Mr. Wentworth?

WENTWORTH: Yes, I--

(WIPES HIS FOREHEAD AND LOOKS AT HIS HAND.
BECOMES CONFUSED AND AMAZED AT WHAT HE SEES)

WENTWORTH: What is this? (SHOWS HAND TO ATTENDANTS; GETS UP AND RUNS TO
THE POLICEMAN) What is this? (TO OLD MAN) What is this? (TO PETE-
THE-COAT) What is this? (TO EXLINE) What is this?

EXLINE: Blood, Howie.

WENTWORTH: Blood? ... Blood!

POLICEMAN: You've got a scratch on your head, Mr. Wentworth.
WENTWORTH: A scratch? A laceration! From what plane does this come? From the whole? Some unspeakable rain fallen from the meadow, electric? No. It's mine. (LOOKS AT EXLINE) What's mine is mine! (TASTES IT) A bitter wine at best, more body than spirit. (PAUSE) And what of me? The same. The same.... I am food for worms not yet made. Not spirit. Not dead. Not risen. Not alive. I am a machine with parts. I am the result of a DNA program. And I am a part made up of parts. The universe is a machine, a system of relationships--a spring sprung--a notdream, a noheaven, a notlove, it's a knot (PUTS HANDS ON THE SIDES OF HIS HEAD AND REPEATS 'It's a knot....' THEN STOPS SUDDENLY) But no! (RUSHES OVER TO OLD MAN) Father, tell me who I am! Tell me what to do!

OLD MAN: I don't know Mr.-- uh. I'm just a bum.

ATTENDANT: It's time to go, Mr. Wentworth....

WENTWORTH: Quickly, Father. I'm all out of time--

( THE TWO ATTENDANTS TAKE WENTWORTH BY THE ARMS AND LEAD HIM OUT THE DOOR)

WENTWORTH: (OFF) Father! Tell me what to do! Father! Sing me a song! Make me real!

( THE OLD MAN GETS UP FROM HIS COT AND LOOKS OUT THE DOOR)

POLICEMAN: He has the best care.

EXLINE: I tole you he was nuts.

PETE-THE-COAT: Like you otta know, dude.

EXLINE: What do you know, punk.

POLICEMAN: That's enough! The garbage stops now, damn it!
THE OLD MAN GOES BACK TO HIS COT. PETE-THE-COAT SLOUCHES DOWN INTO HIS CORNER)

OLD MAN: (TO HIMSELF) I never had a son....

POLICEMAN: You feelin better now, Exline?

EXLINE: I'll do.

POLICEMAN: Well this will make you feel better. Something you ought to know....

EXLINE: And what's that.

POLICEMAN: ... Something the attendants told me. That guy there--Wentworth?

EXLINE: Yeah, Howie-the-loon?

POLICEMAN: Yeah, well it turns out this guy Wentworth went crazy bein a doctor, and, well his family had him committed--

EXLINE: You is an amazin man, chief. I can't hardly wait to hear what happens next.

POLICEMAN: ... Had him committed, but not because he was crazy.... but because he was givin all his money away to anybody who asked. And I mean millions, Exline. That crazy son-of-a-bitch is the richest man in the county.

(EXLINE RUNS TO THE CELL DOOR AND STARTS POUNDING ON THE BARS)

EXLINE: Howie! I didn't mean anything I said! You was right! I am yer son an' yer brother, an' yer friend! Especially yer friend! I was always yer friend! We go way back! An I believe the whole bit about you bein the New Christ 'an all! I were jest funnin aroun' cuz I knows
how much you like to laugh! Well, I'm laughin now, boy, cuz the joke's on you this time! Haw, haw, haw! You out there, Howie? Howie, listen.... I live in a trailer court out on Highway 30! The one behind the drive-in! Number 32! It's the one with the tonka trucks, and the big-wheel-trike deal in front! And, and--(LOOKS AT OLD MAN) I've got a son, Howie! Imagine that! There's a bird bath there too, and some ole rusted tire innards--

POLICEMAN: (LAUGHING) He's long gone by now, Exline.

EXLINE: You son-of-a-bitch. You didn't have to go and tell me that. I coulda got by not knowin that. You jest wanted to see me act like an ass! You son-of-a-bitch--now I is gonna be up all night thinkin about it!

POLICEMAN: That's another day, Exline.

EXLINE: Fer what?

POLICEMAN: For showing disrespect to the uniform. (HEADS FOR THE DOOR) 'Night gentlemen. I've got to get to that knitting....(TURNS TO LEAVE)

EXLINE: (TO POLICEMAN) Look, you! You can't do this! I ain't a-spendin the rest-a my life in here! I got rights! Did you here that? I got rights! If you think I'm spendin another day in here, yer crazy! Why the hell are you ridin me, chief?

POLICEMAN: (TURNS) Everyday I see someone like you in here, Exline, and I'm tired of it! Everyday some joker gets a hard-on for somebody or somethin, then gets all dunked-up and decides he's the goddamned king of the whole goddamned universe--
EXLINE: I ain't no goddamned king, chief--

POLICEMAN: No? You sure act like one. Struttin around, smashin up whatever or whoever you want--

EXLINE: I ain't smashed nobody. (PAUSE) 'Sides, there are rules about that, anyhow. Someone hits you--you hit back. Someone messes around with yer wife--you let 'em know about it. Ain't that right, fellas?

PETE-THE-COAT: (CLAPPING) Rah, rah, rah.... Sis, boom, bah....

POLICEMAN: You talkin to me about rules, Exline?

EXLINE: What do you know about rules, chief? You don't live by them, anyhow. You live behind them is what you do....

POLICEMAN: (PAUSES, THEN TURNS AND LEAVES) Save it for the judge, Exline....

EXLINE: (TO NO ONE IN PARTICULAR) Is everyone on this goddamned planet a goddamned loser? (REALLY LOUD) LOSERS!

(EXLINE PACES, MUTTERS TO HIMSELF AND OCCASIONALLY BELLOWS 'LOSER,')

OLD MAN: Sit down, son. It's no use--

EXLINE: An' I don't wanna hear a goddamned peep outta you guys fer the rest of the night! Got that!

PETE-THE-COAT: Yeas, massa Esline. We be pickin de cotton in de mawnin. Gosta get de cotton-pickin sleep--
EXLINE: Shut up, boy, or I'll finish what you started, if you know what I mean, and I think you do.

PETE-THE-COAT: (RUMMAGES THROUGH HIS POCKETS) The hell with it! (TAKES OFF THE COAT) Here, dude! (THROWS THE COAT) Take it all! I'm too burned out to care about it anymore. Just leave me alone....

EXLINE: Now yer talkin sense, boy... and you got a deal.

(EXLINE GOES THROUGH THE POCKETS AND FINDS ONLY THE LIGHTER. HE LOOKS AT PETE THE COAT. HE TRIES THE LIGHTER, BUT IT DOESN'T WORK. PETE-THE-COAT SMILES)

EXLINE: (TO PETE-THE-COAT) It don't work.

PETE-THE-COAT: But it's all yours, ain't it, dude?

EXLINE: You is lucky to be alive, boy....

(PETE-THE-COAT ALMOST RESPONDS, BUT DOESN'T)

EXLINE: (LOOKING AT PETE-THE-COAT) Figgers. (SITS DOWN IN HIS ORIGINAL POSITION UNDERNEATH THE 'NO SMOKING SIGN')

(AFTER MAKING SURE THAT HE ISN'T UNDER SEIGE, PETE-THE-COAT BEGINS TO BOB HIS HEAD. THE OLD MAN IS RESTLESS AND SEVERAL TIMES SEEMS TO WANT TO SAY SOMETHING, BUT DOESN'T UNTIL...)

OLD MAN: I never had a son.

EXLINE: What?

OLD MAN: He called me father. I ain't never been one.

EXLINE: Nobody cares, old man. Nobody cares—that's fer sure. Jest go to sleep. Sleepin is about the only thing a body can do without screwin hisself up. It's bein awake what causes the trouble. He were right about that one. It ain't much, but he were right--I gots to give him that.... So go to sleep old man.
OLD MAN: Mind if I hum? I gotta hum to get to sleep....

EXLINE: Go ahead and hum! Jest don't talk. I got a lot of thinkin to do about a lot of things--jest don't make it strange, okay?

OLD MAN: Okay.

(The Old Man hums "Fly Me to the Moon" as the lights dim and a recording of "Fly Me to the Moon" is played--that is until....)

EXLINE: Hold it!

(Sound of a skating record; lights go up)

EXLINE: That music is too damned strange. Hum something else, old man.

OLD MAN: How about 'Harvest Moon'?

EXLINE: It'll do. Like everything else, I guess it has to do....

(As the Old Man hums 'Harvest Moon,' the lights dim until the curtain falls)