

5-2021

The Story of a Journey: Awakenings Before, During and After the Zoom Production of the Play Thrift Store Junkie

Brendan Beseth
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd>



Part of the [Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons](#), [Performance Studies Commons](#), and the [Playwriting Commons](#)

Citation

Beseth, B. (2021). The Story of a Journey: Awakenings Before, During and After the Zoom Production of the Play Thrift Store Junkie. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/4120>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact scholar@uark.edu.

The Story of a Journey: Awakenings Before, During and
After the Zoom Production of the Play *Thrift Store Junkie*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Theatre

by

Brendan Beseth
The New School
Bachelor of Arts, Liberal Arts, 2005

May 2021
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

John Walch, M.F.A.
Thesis Director

Steven Marzolf, M.F.A.
Committee Member

Les Wade, Ph.D.
Committee Member

ABSTRACT

This thesis tells the story of several awakenings I had while pursuing my M.F.A. in playwriting at the University of Arkansas. It details some of the traps a writer can fall into. It tells of how to get out of the quicksand. Also contained within is an account of the thesis production of my play *Thrift Store Junkie* and the play's script.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: First Moments and the Remembrance of Art, Also Some Beginnings and Endings.....	2
Chapter Two: Lies.....	6
Chapter Three: How Can I Make it so I Start to Sweat Again While Writing?.....	7
Chapter Four: <i>Thrift Store Junkie</i>	8
Chapter Five: Script Analysis.....	13
Chapter Six: A Moment of Truth.....	16
Chapter Seven: The End and the Beginning.....	17
Appendices.....	19
A – The Script for <i>Thrift Store Junkie</i>	20
B – Production Poster.....	76
C – Production Pictures.....	77

INTRODUCTION

In August 2018 I came to the University of Arkansas' three-year playwriting program as a shadow of a person beaten up again and again by a beast called Los Angeles. Not that I hadn't had my successes there; I had risen in the ranks at the Actors Studio and over the years I had come close to selling a few different screenplays. What I mean by shadow is that I had become a ghost in that I had stopped listening to my heart as far as my writing was concerned. I wasn't willing to fight for anything I had written because I didn't really believe in it. Somewhere along the line I had sunk to a level below an actual creative being. I knew that there was something off, I had an inkling I was a ghost. I wanted to get back to being the writer I was before, where whatever I wrote people seemed to find it fascinating. I mean, I was the guy who had sold a script without even taking a writing class. I was the guy who had a movie made after two years of undergrad film school. When I found out I had gotten into the University of Arkansas, my goal was to figure out where I had gone wrong and to somehow get myself back on track. My thesis is intended not just as a chronicle of certain moments and teachings at the University of Arkansas that got me back on my path, but as a roadmap or a light for myself in the future – if I should ever become lost again.

FIRST MOMENTS AND THE REMEMBRANCE OF ART, ALSO SOME BEGINNINGS
AND ENDINGS

I thought that the mystery as to what was wrong with my writing would be easily solved. I was convinced that it was my scene directions that were the problem. I was sure that if I just wrote them in a different, more colorful way, I was bound to sell something again. I started studying how the greats wrote them. I looked at Beckett and Pinter and Mamet and Stoppard. I wrote out their scene directions to try to ingrain what they were doing into my mind. I rewrote a few of my scripts with this newfound idea, and of course found this wasn't the problem at all.

The start of the regeneration of my spirit began with my first two classes at the University of Arkansas. Professor Les Wade's class in Devised Theatre opened my eyes to the fact that writing is an art first, not a business. The act of writing should be a communion with one's deepest feelings and thoughts, not the satisfaction of an employer. And in the Graduate Playwriting Workshop, Professor John Walch pointed out one day that it seemed to him I was writing things with the thought that they would never be made. Those two insights stuck with me and started the unraveling of what my true problem was.

In Los Angeles, writers are hired to write things by people who have ideas that are exactly like a successful movie that they've just seen. Anything new that pushes the boundaries is viewed as wrong. As a writer in Hollywood you're always telling your inner self "no." In meetings you're encouraged to curb ideas that are too novel and to look at a movie that just came out for inspiration so that you can see how someone else just did what you're trying to do so you can copy it.

During my first semester at the University of Arkansas I began looking back at my years in Los Angeles to try to see what had happened to me. I found that my early success was me

believing in myself and writing what I really wanted. The screenplay that I sold, *Luckytown*, was a creation completely of my own. It was a distillation of all I had seen and experienced, and it was a story created out of a true communion with my inner being. There was no outline or plan, it was just me listening to characters and writing down what I heard. The script had exciting ideas in it. It affected not just my mind, but my body. It wasn't an act of my mind trying to fool or control an audience; it was a piece of life itself, a living being. And it made me sweat as I wrote it.

It was a script that everybody loved when they read it and they'd pass it along to friends and it eventually got into the hands of someone that wanted to make it. I was to be director, Martin Sheen signed on to play one of the main roles, but then the money dried up, and I ended up selling it to a different company a few months later.

What happened after that is a long story and only the ending and middle are really relevant. The middle is that I rewrote the script over a hundred times for the new company, changing every word but some of the first scene. The middle is that the poetry of the script was gutted; I took every note and changed everything that they wanted even though their ideas were mostly terrible. The middle is that after a year of rewrites and a hundred drafts, the script was different, but still pretty good; Kirsten Dunst and James Caan signed on to do it. The ending is Kirsten coming to me crying the first day of shooting saying that the director was the worst she'd ever worked with and that I had to fire him. The ending is me telling her that he wasn't just the director but the producer as well and therefore my boss and that I was powerless. And the ending is a phone call a few months later from another producer telling me about a screening of the film at Paramount the next day and that I had to be there. "The movie is great," he said. "You're going to win the Academy Award for Screenwriting." The ending is that after the first thirty

seconds of the screening I knew that I was about to see the worst movie I'd ever seen in my entire life, and I was right. Sitting through that movie was probably the most upsetting hour and thirty minutes of my life. To see something with your name on it that doesn't resemble anything at all of what you intended or what you worked so hard to write is akin to being accused of a crime that you haven't committed.

Something terrible happened to me during those hundred rewrites, something that over the next few years I didn't really want to think about. At the University of Arkansas and through the prodding of Professor Walch about the art of writing, I started to look back at those hundred rewrites and I found there was an arrogance in them. The arrogance was that I thought I could turn any idea, any idea at all, into something good. I achieved it with the screenplay of *Luckytown* because it attracted top-shelf talent, but I began to realize that that was the beginning of the end. The truth is, the magic begins to wear off if you say "no" to your true ideas and your true self too much. You lose sight of why you wanted to write in the first place. And you start writing awful things like everybody else.

I've seen it happen to other writers in Hollywood. One of the best writers I know can't write a good script anymore because he's spent too many years writing on TV shows that he cares nothing about. He's faked it for so long that now whatever magic made his scripts great at one time is gone.

My years in Hollywood after *Luckytown* came out were full of me seeking to write the perfect script. I had written the first draft of *Luckytown* as a junior in film school at UCLA, but I had never taken a writing class, only a class on formatting. Later in film school I took a writing class and that class led me to believe that through outlining, perfection in scriptwriting was possible.

I started outlining all my screenplays and bought every “how to write a great script” book I could find. My writing process was this: watch every movie that was like my movie idea, outline what I wanted to write, write it, then rewrite it until it was perfect. I said “no” more and more to my instincts. I said “no” so much to my inner self that it started to go away. I wrote a lot of things I felt nothing for, that had nothing to do with me.

After years of this, I started to write plays and got involved with the Actors Studio in Los Angeles and that began the healing process, but I was still using a lot of the tricks I had used as a screenwriter. I still wasn’t at the source; I still wasn’t sweating as I wrote like I used to. The first two classes at Arkansas awakened me to part of my problem, but I still had a long way to go.

LIES

But I have already lied. Due to my years as a writer and my obsession with telling a story I have already set about giving this a kind of shape. The truth is I had solved a lot of the problems in Los Angeles while writing plays. I was close, very close, but there still was something missing, something small. The sweating thing is something I just remembered writing the first chapter of this thesis and it came about completely unexpectedly to me. I bring up the lie instead of going back and changing the first chapter, because I think the lie is part of the problem. It's a part of faking it and being good enough to tell an adequate story while faking it. I mean, you could see the story in that first chapter a mile away. "Oh, OK, he's gonna tell us about how he learned how to sweat again while writing." The truth is I haven't remembered how to sweat again yet. The truth is I just remembered the sweating and I have seven days to figure out how to sweat again when the rough draft of this is due. That is the goal, to sweat while writing at some point in the next seven days. Will I be able to do it?

HOW CAN I MAKE IT SO I START TO SWEAT AGAIN WHILE WRITING?

I see the symptom, but not the cause. This isn't going to be an easy fix. I don't even know what it means to sweat while writing. I have an inkling that sweating means I'm really involved, really caring about my characters, really alive with them. But I already do get super involved with my characters. I already do feel everything they're going through, hear them, see them. There's nothing on the internet about sweating while writing. And no book on writing that I know of talks about it. I've never heard the idea of sweating while you write mentioned in a writing class. It came to me naturally and I killed it by outlining and rewriting too much and trying to be perfect. Or was that even it? Was it a one-time thing? Is it gone for good? Will I ever get it back? I have an idea now of what has happened. When I first started to write, I would write my feelings down, my true feelings about the world. Then when I started writing screenplays I just transferred those true feelings onto my characters. This is something I haven't done in years. I don't know why, but I think it has to do with *Luckytown*. Those were my true feelings in that screenplay, my soul, if you will. And I rewrote it a hundred times and started to learn how to lie while I wrote. Now, in an effort to protect myself, I've stopped writing my true self into my scripts; rather, they're just a surface. A shiny surface. I think I will now try to go all the way back to the basics. As Hemingway said, I will try to write one true sentence and then another. Not here, but I will report back to you.

THRIFT STORE JUNKIE

The first year with Professor Walch was a glorious one full of epiphanies. When you write too much, like I do, you can get stuck in ruts. You can start writing the same thing over and over again. The same themes, the same types of characters. Your writing can get lifeless. What I love about Professor Walch's teaching is: one, he doesn't make you outline; and two, he has a lot of exercises to help you get out of whatever ruts you might be in. One of my favorite tricks that he taught me was to turn off my screen while writing. This is great, because you're not constantly going back fixing things. You just go and it can really help the writing process. I didn't sweat while writing it, but I wrote *Thrift Store Junkie* in a white heat and with the screen off. There were a lot of misspellings at the end of that, but it had a lot going for it.

The play is about a man who has essentially lost his soul; he's a scavenger looking for used books at thrift stores that he then sells on eBay. He's a sad guy who's given up on his goal of being a painter and now is just a hunter. But then through the course of the story a whole new spiritual world is opened up to him and he starts to believe in himself and his art again.

We had actors Chris Tennison and Caroline Dean come in to read it. I had never met Chris before and he hadn't read the script before coming in that day. I was very nervous because it's a tough part with a lot of long monologues. I was pretty sure that the reading was going to be a complete disaster. We had the reading in a conference room at TheatreSquared and Chris was spectacular. Caroline was great too, but I already knew she would be good because I had cast her a few months before in a reading of my script *Bookshop*. But Chris was new to me and he was hilarious in the role, and maybe most surprisingly he didn't miss a note. When I write I hear a script and see it, so readings are usually not very revealing to me. I've already seen the play a million times in my head by that point. And usually with readings there are a lot of things that

are off, or not how I envisioned. What was different here was that Chris got the part completely. He knew just what I meant. He read it exactly the way I saw it when I wrote it. I was thrilled. We were to have another reading of *Thrift Store Junkie* for the public about a month later, and I was excited.

The next reading took place at the University Theatre at the University of Arkansas. This time the script fell flat. The audience just wasn't into it; they seemed bored. I'm pretty ultra-sensitive during readings and I know I can't read people's minds, but at readings of my scripts I start to believe that I'm a superhero and that I can read people's minds. It's not a good habit.

A bored audience is the worst thing in the world for me. It means I'm not doing my job. No one sets out to write boring things. I had to figure out what was wrong with the play and how to fix it. There was a lot of stuff in there that I liked because it was essentially my own personal story of my own personal regeneration. But looking back now, I didn't sweat while writing it. I was definitely there with the characters all the way through, but something small was missing.

The next year I was to put up *Thrift Store Junkie* as my thesis production for the ArkType New Play Festival and I still hadn't figured out what was wrong with the script, but then the COVID-19 pandemic began and the live production of the play slated for Spring 2020 was cancelled. This gave me some time to figure things out. Professor Steven Marzolf came on to direct it. I'm wary of all directors because of the bad ones I've worked with. *Luckytown* is one of the worst movies ever made, and it's partly the director's fault because he was falling asleep on the set and was just horrible at his job. But Professor Marzolf from the beginning was an absolute delight. He's one of the best directors I've ever worked with and it was super fun the whole way through. I've figured out why he's so good. One, he's great with actors and knows how to talk to them; secondly, and maybe most importantly, he's interested in telling a story.

Most of the directors I've worked with before haven't been able to see the whole story in their heads at one time; they don't even seem very interested in the story, but more interested in the set or moving people around the stage. Professor Marzolf isn't like this; from our first conversation I knew he could see the story and that was exciting. I told him I wanted to keep working on the script and he was fine with that as well. That summer we met on Zoom several times a week with the actors trying things out. We cast Chris Tennison and Professor Elizabeth Jilka in the two roles and they both were incredible to work with. Professor Jilka was hilarious playing all the female parts and she made a great counterpart to all the things Chris was doing. The actors and Professor Marzolf really helped me out with reshaping the script. I decided to add another character into the mix to liven things up. I added a whole subplot as well, so I could cut back and forth. The rewriting kept up until a week before we opened. The actors and Professor Marzolf were full of invaluable insights throughout. I think ultimately they were the ones that made the script as good as it was. I'm not a good rewriter. I tend to make things safer and safer and get further and further away from the truth. But the actors and Professor Marzolf kept the script on track.

The best thing for me about *Thrift Store* was that I was willing to fight for it. I hadn't been willing to fight for any of my scripts in a long time. Most of them were just jobs I was paid under the table to do, as a kind of ghost writer. I was surprised I was willing to fight for what I wanted in it. It told me that I was getting closer to my goal of writing things I really cared about and liked again.

With *Thrift Store* I told myself: "If I'm going to fail, I'm going to go down as myself, not as someone else." I had to stand up for what I wanted the script to be and not what other people wanted it to be. This was a big step for me to take personally. Part of this idea that I've had of

not fighting for my scripts is because I've seen writers get defensive, and I've seen that they're often not right. They don't know what's best for their stories. They're too close to them. At the same time, I've lived the other side, taking every note, trying to make everybody happy. That's really gotten me nowhere. With *Thrift Store* I decided I was going to fight for what I believed in even if I was wrong about it in the end.

The production went up on Zoom in September 2020 and that night, sitting on my couch, I was excited. I was confident in what Professor Jilka and Chris were doing and I knew there was a lot of good stuff in the play, things I could be proud of. Professor Marzolf and I did a Q and A beforehand that one of the other graduate students in my writing cohort, Lauren Ferebee, was nice enough to moderate for us. I was excited for people to see the play, but I knew it was going to be different because it was going up on Zoom.

A production over Zoom is as weird as it gets for a playwright. Part of the reason you go through all of the torture of producing a play is to be there with the audience and to hear them laugh, see them involved with your story, and to eavesdrop on them when it's all over. With Zoom you don't get any of that. My partner, Lauren, liked it and she was my only audience member. That was pretty great, looking back, and simplified the whole thing for me. Ruminating about it now, what are playwrights doing watching audiences like that, eavesdropping on them at the end of their shows to see if they really, truly like it? I'm of two minds about it. In one respect I write just for myself, but in another way, I'm also writing for an audience. I really care what they think. I wouldn't write like I do if it weren't for the audience. But is the audience part of my problem? If Lauren hadn't liked the play, I would have been devastated. But thinking about an audience, trying to please an audience is a definite mistake. I'm realizing that the writing has to ring true for me from the get-go, has to deeply come from me; it can't be about what an audience

wants or how they'll react in those first stages of the writing. I think from now on I have to think more about my stories and what their affect is on me if I'm the audience. I have to pretend I'm the audience. What is interesting to me about the story and about the characters? Do I care about them? Why do I care about them? What is going to keep me as the first audience member involved in this story?

Thinking back on *Thrift Store*, I believe I was thinking about that other audience that's not myself too much in the first stage of the writing of it and too little about myself and what I really feel, what I really worry about, what I really hate, and what I really love. This phantom audience was interfering with the immediacy of my writing. And that's why I didn't sweat while writing it.

SCRIPT ANALYSIS

In Professor Wade's Script Analysis class more epiphanies occurred. One of the biggest ones was regarding dialogue. My philosophy of writing has always been to write the truth and part of that is writing truthful dialogue, maybe even boring dialogue, dialogue that sounds as real as possible. During Script Analysis, I learned that this was a trap. Aristotle said that dialogue must be elevated and he was exactly right. My adherence to naturalistic-sounding dialogue was holding back my characters and my scripts. I mean, imagine a Pinter play with only realistic dialogue. This set me off thinking about dialogue in a deeper way. I had already begun this while teaching playwriting the semester before with Lauren Ferebee. One of our first assignments was for the students to record a conversation out in the world, type it up, and bring it back. I did the assignment myself and was astounded at the complexity in an average conversation. In Professor Wade's class I saw immediately where I had gone wrong. There is no truly boring conversation out in the world. While writing boring to try to tell the truth, I had been completely missing the mark. In my opinion all dialogue has to be elevated, even a boring conversation between two plumbers, because the reality of it is that a real conversation between two plumbers is going to be incredibly complex.

And during Script Analysis another thing that Professor Walch once said kept coming back to me. He mentioned how he was surprised that someone coming from Hollywood wasn't more interested in story structure. I was taken aback when I heard this because I always thought I was, but after reflecting on it, I realized he was right. Somewhere along the line I had gotten away from where I started, from my interest in telling good stories. In Script Analysis the essays we wrote on the plays we read forced me to take a closer look at the construction of the plays but also made me look harder at my own. I realized that my writing philosophy of following my

characters, listening to them and being true to them, was a double-edged sword. I discovered that I had to get more in-control of my characters, push them around more, put them in harder spots, at times; really be mean to them so that they could grow. Professor Walch calls this technique using “force multipliers.” Just like people, characters need to have a lot against them if they’re going to be interesting. If we got everything we wanted and everything went our way in life, we’d probably all be still living at home with our mothers.

I also had the insight that I had gotten into the habit of not seeing my scripts while writing as I used to and that this was a huge part of the writing process. During the pandemic I started thinking of other forms of writing I could do along with theatrical writing and began to write a few graphic novels – this form forces you to write everything that’s happening in every panel, something I was taught in film school not to do with screenplays – and it opened my eyes to all that I was missing. By omitting camera angles and music from my screenplays I had cut an essential part of my mind out of the creation. By not seeing exactly what was there, I had been writing shadows that talked, not feelings and emotions; I was writing concepts, not real, believable people. You have to see the physical world of a scene in your head as it’s happening or else you aren’t truly there experiencing it.

In Professor Wade’s class we read Beckett’s *Endgame*, and I read an article where Edward Albee talked about that play and called Beckett a visual artist, and also mentioned how when he writes he sees everything on the stage, every detail. My first idea that my stage directions and action lines needed help was exactly right, but the cause of the problem was something I didn’t realize. I was writing too little stage direction, relying on dialogue too much for my scripts to be really alive.

I remembered another thing that Professor Walch had said in class. He encouraged us to see the writing of action lines not as a chore but as an opportunity to show off as a writer. This is great advice. I also realized that by not writing down all of what I was seeing, I was putting a huge amount of faith in my reader to be able to fill in the blanks. In Professor Wade's Script Analysis class I saw that this was a huge tactical mistake. Most readers out there need to be shown exactly and specifically what should be in a scene. They won't be able to fill in the blanks just from the dialogue. I started to realize that my scripts were completely opaque to most people reading them. I wasn't giving enough details for the world to be clear to them as they read. My scripts weren't being read as I intended them. I had to change.

Another thing I learned in Script Analysis was that even the best plays ever written are going to be misunderstood and not liked by the majority of people. Part of writing something great has to be your belief in it and your willingness to fight for it. I like to imagine a script meeting between a producer in Hollywood and Samuel Beckett about his play *Endgame*. This is how I see that scene playing out: I don't see the Hollywood producer as an idiot that completely misunderstands the script of *Endgame*, I see him as a guy who's smart and truly trying to help Beckett out in turning the script into a successful movie. I see the scene with both characters being correct. This is something I've never really considered. With art, I can be right and the person I'm talking about it with can also be right; it's really my choice to make – am I going to change everything I write so it can be successful, or am I going to stick to my guns and have something like *Endgame*? If I plan to write things like the scripts I love, *Endgame* being one of them, I'm going to have to be ready to fight for the rest of my life.

A MOMENT OF TRUTH

The act of writing to make other people happy is something that is counter to the initial instinct of writing. I began writing because I found that it was a place that I could go to as a kid to figure out what was bothering me about the world. It was a safe place and writing was something that was just for me. Several times over the years I have had the thought: “My characters are killing me.” I really didn’t pay it much mind and actually found it pretty amusing. “My characters are killing me!” I would say to a friend and laugh. But there was of course a deeper, more sinister hand at work. I spent so much time writing and thinking about my characters that I lost touch with myself. I stopped talking to myself, asking if I was OK. Everything in my life was filtered into my characters. They weren’t just doing all the living; they were the ones that were being cared for while I was leaving myself behind. When I first started writing this was fine because there was a balance. I came first, my characters second. Writing this thesis has forced me to stop writing for my characters and just for myself. I rarely write the letter “I” in my writing and if I do it’s as a fictional character. By writing this I’ve been compelled to see what I’ve been leaving behind. It’s me. I’ve lost touch with myself, my inner fears, my inner ideas. I’ve been devoured by my characters truly, so that I’m not able to write true characters anymore.

Great characters come from their writer’s truth. And if the writer isn’t in touch with what that is, he can only write what is false or soft, no matter how much he wants to write the truth. In my effort to make myself sweat while writing, I found I really couldn’t do it. So I went all the way back to how I first fell in love with writing. I started to write down my inner thoughts, my inner fears, my inner feelings, just for me, and I found, slowly, that the sweat was coming. This is the source; this is what my stories have lacked. They’ve lacked me.

THE END AND THE BEGINNING

If I believe in theatre and film at all, I believe in them as art. I believe in them as forms that should try to say new things, go in interesting directions, and sometimes make people uncomfortable. I believe that they should reach into the depths of the human soul and that they should tell the truth. I like plays and movies that push their characters to the extreme. I like stories that show characters as living beings, show every part of life. I like characters that are full of contradictions. I like when characters are forced to change, not always in good ways, but in honest ways. What I don't like are perfect characters going along in perfectly structured stories that are just like every other play or movie ever made.

From my years at the University of Arkansas I've learned that if I'm going to write things like what I've listed above I'm going to have to trust my own instincts and be ready and willing to fight for what I've written. I've also learned to write action lines and scene directions that show exactly what I'm seeing as I write, and to elevate my dialogue so that it's interesting no matter who's talking. I've wanted to be accepted my whole life and write things that everybody loves, but I've learned that seeking that was a mistake. I have to just write what I like, what I enjoy. If I aspire to write great things, I can't take every note, make every change, seek applause from every audience. That used to be my goal, but now all I seek is to make myself happy with what I've written. That being said, I've discovered that I have to take a hard look at my scripts and their structures and make sure that I'm really interested in what's going on as that first audience member. And that brings me to the final thing I've learned, the thing that I came all this way searching for. It seems unbelievable to me that I've found it by writing my thesis and not by writing a great script, but I guess it is the most poetic way it could have happened. I've learned

that the first step of writing is by checking in on myself, making sure I'm the lead character. If I do that, I know I can't help but write the truth again. And I know I will sweat.

APPENDICIES

APPENDIX A

THRIFT STORE JUNKIE OR: BOOKHOUND

by

Brendan Beseth

CHARACTERS:

(All female characters played by one actress and all male characters played by one actor.)

HENRY – 36

ANTON – 36

HER, MARGE – 32

NILA - 22-67

OLD WOMAN - 80-130

DONUT SHOP ATTENDANT

/ - denotes where the next line of dialogue begins.

"This is what you shall do; love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body."

Walt Whitman, from the preface of *Leaves of Grass* (only in the 1855 edition).

"I was sitting alone in my wagon-lit compartment when a more than usually violent jerk of the train swung back the door of the adjoining washing-cabinet, and an elderly gentleman in a dressing-gown and a traveling cap came in. I assumed that he had been about to leave the washing-cabinet which divides the two compartments, and had taken the wrong direction and come into my compartment by mistake. Jumping up with the intention of putting him right, I at once realized to my dismay that the intruder was nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass of the open door. I can still recollect that I thoroughly disliked his appearance. Instead, therefore, of being terrified by our doubles, both Mach and I simply failed to recognize them as such. Is it not possible, though, that our dislike of them was a vestigial trace of that older reaction which feels the double to be something uncanny?"

Sigmund Freud, *The "Uncanny"* (1919)

HENRY sits in a spotlight. Direct address.

HENRY

You wanna hear a story? It's not a short story, no - it's a long, fucked-up, drawn out, crazy story. It's a ghost story, actually. Yeah, a real ghost story. But if you don't have the time, just forget it - 'cause I'll warn ya, the beginning's pretty slow - it's a true story so I can't just make the beginning any better than it is, ya know?

Ya wanna hear it? Want another beer first? Ya sure? All right.

Henry reaches out and sips his beer.

HENRY

(to audience)

This was a couple years ago.

Back then I was a bookhound - means I went to thrift stores looking for books that then I'd sell on ebay. I even had a partner, Lori was her name. We'd meet at the strip joint about three. (laughs slightly.) Yeah. It's not the hot girls. Middle of the day, it's the kind of worn-out ones, the ones that move slowly like they're underwater and have the weight of the world on their shoulders, kinda like how I move around...

Then we'd hit the Arby's and then we'd thrift until the sun went down. But then one day Lori comes up/ to me and-

LORI (just her voice)

-Beatrice left. I'm going to Montana to try to bring her back.

HENRY

What?! Don't be an idiot! Thrift stores are death in small towns, Lori, I know, I lived in Wisconsin once, it's just bible, bible, bible, bible, bible, bible! It's completely disgusting! Trust me. All right?

(to audience)

But she didn't listen and she left. So I was all alone looking for another partner. But nobody in these junk shops would even talk to me. And I hated going to thrift stores alone. It's all right if you just do one a day or so, but I was hitting, five, six, seven and it wears you down. But then one day I saw her - this woman. This is where the story starts. She's going through the books like a jackrabbit using this isbn reading machine that tells you the price of a book on the internet. I always considered it cheating and lame but I'm like who's this fucking girl. Right? So I go up to her like a shadow... She's dressed all in black like a witch. She's a skinny lady, nice skin. I try to smell her - but I can't - the stench of old clothes and warped mildewed records drowns it all out. Then I'm like, fuck it - just talk to her -

The WOMAN appears. She looks slightly foreign and strange.

HENRY

(to her)

Look at this place, huh? (She glances at him, then looks away) Just look. All the waste. All the junk. You ever seen so much junk? You ever seen so many bad books? Books that nobody would ever want to read? Books that would rot your brain? I need a cup of coffee just to look at this place. Just a bunch of stuff nobody wants. Things people wanted so bad and now they don't even remember wanting 'em. Ya know?

HER

(still looking at her books, slightly weird, vague foreign accent)

It's not so bad, eh? I do at times think, yes, how most of this stuff is from dead people... But so what? If not for someone who knew what it was, what then? Objects, yes, but what else is there? We are not animals. Eh?

HENRY

(impressed with what she said and that she even spoke to him)

You wanna get out of here?

HER

(confused)

Get out of...?

HENRY

-We could get some burgers. You hungry? I'm buying.

HER

(not looking at him, looking at the books)

I'm vegan...

HENRY

Let's get some vegan burgers then.

HER

(still not looking)

I have all these books... I...

HENRY

-They'll still be here. Believe me. Come on.

HER

(glances at him)

No. No. I'm in middle of something. You come up/ here, you -

HENRY

-If I can find you a hundred dollar book right now, will you go? Huh?

HER

(looking at him)

I'm not prostitute.

HENRY

(To the audience.)

Yeah, she was a prostitute. But she'd gotten away from her pimp and was out of the sex business.

She lived down at a little motel off of Sunset.

Seedy, gross looking place. Sound of construction all around. Cars. People screaming. Doors slamming. Just constant noise and commotion.

She'd been there a year and had made an arrangement with the owner. Her rent was cheap.

HER

Where's my hundred, eh?

HENRY

I just carried three boxes of books/ up -

HER

-Deal was you find a hundred dollar book. You don't. So.

HENRY

All right. OK. OK, yeah.

(to audience)

I take her to get burgers, then to the ATM. I feel like a jerk, but I give her a hundred and she smiles - this beautiful, perfect woman - and when she does I see that her front tooth is completely rotten and turning black. And it's the sexiest thing I've ever seen in my entire life. This combination of beauty and attrition - like the definition of sexy.

I'm smitten. But then she's gone before I get up the nerve to ask her for her number. And I'm like - you're probably never see this girl again, damnit (to audience) because that's how it is in Los Angeles. And then to myself I'm like: You fucked up again.

Next day as I'm doing my thrift store rounds - I'm looking for her. I hit all the thrift stores from Fairfax to fucking Glendale, that's like nine places, but she's not at any one of 'em. Finally I go back to the vegan place and there she is,

looking through a stack of first editions. My heart leaps up and I'm like OK now, do it, get her number, ask her out. I sit down.

HER

Goodbye. I go. I'll be at thrift store at ten-fifteen tomorrow morning, tho, for when cart come out. That's where good books are. Bye.

HENRY

Hey wait...

(to audience)

She's gone. Ten-fifteen, the good books...

And as she's walking away, I feel like my heart's being pulled out of my chest.

And I'm like: I want to be attached to her. I want to watch her do stuff. Boring stuff. I want to fix stuff for her. Her car. Her faucet. Her... Whatever...

Attached, we'd make dinner together. She'd stir the pot with one hand, get the salt with her other. I'd start the burner with my one hand and pour in the sauce with the other. We'd be a marvel of modern times. We'd get neat suits to wear, that we could fit in together. We'd walk around attached. Everybody would know our names. We'd be on TV. They'd ask us questions about important matters.

(to audience)

Yeah, it was like being in grade school again, how hard I had fallen for her. And then I was like - Hey, man, snap out of it, please, you're embarrassing me. She probably has a hundred guys after her in the same way... Or at least one or two.

A little later I learned there was another guy hanging around... He... Well, this is what this guy sounded like:

HENRY (as ANTON)

Ty smotrish' na menya, ty vidish' Armani...

(to audience)

He's this Russian dude, OK? He's like:

HENRY (as ANTON)

Vy vidite zamshu. Vy vidite kozhu.

Henry becomes Anton completely. He pulls on Anton's black leather jacket.

ANTON

Ty smotrish' na menya, ty vidish' Armani. Vy vidite alligatora. A ty menya vidish'? A? Nastoyashchiy ya? YA, kotoroye vnutri-

Anton's phone vibrates. He answers it.

ANTON

(in English)

Hey, ma... I call you later, mama. Okeydokey? Yes. Yes, yes, I'll be there for dinner. Mommy! Mommy! I'm at my girlfriend's house. OK, I pick up condensed milk, OK? Bye.

He pulls out a gun, we see it for an instant. He shoves it at the front of his pants, struggles doing it. He makes like he's knocking at a door. We hear the KNOCK.

The Woman answers all business, nods at him.

ANTON

Ty smotrish' na menya, ty vidish' Armani... Vy vid-

HER

-In English. Fuck, I told you!

ANTON

Sorry. OK, in English, in English, yeh. (breath) You look at me, you see Armani. You see suede. You see leather. You see alligator. But do you see me? Eh? The real me? The me that's inside of here? Eh? What is that? I will show you.

He unzips his pants, reaches down.

HER

(covering her eyes)

Oh, God no...

ANTON

No, it-

HER

-Stop!

ANTON

It gun. It joke. Why don't you laugh? It joke. OK?

HER

We don't need gun. Sit down. I find somebody. An idiot. He's perfect.

ANTON

For plan, uh...

HER

Plan c. We make him slight partner. Very slight. Tell him very, very little. So little, he know just enough for if cop come. Yeah? Then I finally get my-

ANTON

-I know, honey.

HER

I'm not your honey.

ANTON

OK, hon- I mean- I know. (trying to start over) Hello.

HER

-Shhh! Sit. He'll be at thrift store tomorrow. You be there at -

ANTON

-No.

HER

What? You be at -

ANTON

-Look. No. Look what I wear, eh? No. Thrift store, no. That stick with me, all day long. That stench. I sit in car. I look through window.

HER

No, not good enough. Be there. I'll point at him with my elbow, like this.

Shift.

HENRY

(to audience)

I'm up early the next day. I have to find something. Rent's due in five days and I don't want to be at zero for the start of the month. It's too much pressure.

And when you're desperate, the books know.

Yeah, I don't know how they do it. But they only come out when you're relaxed and having a good time. They're like women.

Also I want to be there to see her when the cart comes out, but not only that - I had read this article the night before - it was all about how nudity causes brain damage. Yeah. You see too much nudity - I mean, imaginary nudity, not like your significant other - but studies show it fucks up your amygdala or your hippocampus or something and you can't feel real joy anymore. It causes brain damage, man. So I'm like fuck. Right? I'm never going to the strip joint

ever again. My brain - it's one of the only friend's I've got.

So I get to the thrift store early; Marge comes up.

MARGE

What you read, eh?

Marge points at him with her elbow.

HENRY

Van Gogh's Letters to his Brother Theo. Ever read it?

Still points, pretty subtly.

MARGE

I don't mess with paperback.

HENRY

No, it's not for selling.

MARGE

That not worth shit.

HENRY

I know. It's uh- This used to be my favorite book back when I wanted to be an artist. It's good. You ever read it?

MARGE

Really? You wanna be artist? Everybody wanna be artist, huh? Sad.

HENRY

No, I really... I really am artist, an artist - I went to art school. I studied pain-
(to audience)

-She goes to the cart. She's amazing. I've never seen anything like it. She knows books like most people know their favorite TV show. She's pulling books out, bam, bam, bam. Not only that - she's a speed reader. I'm getting mad, I'm like what the fuck! Most eBay book sellers don't know a Faulkner from a Danielle Steel, a first edition from a book club, a blind stamp from a remainder mark, but she knows it all. And she smells good too. She smells like rain.

And cigarettes. And flowers. And chocolate.

MARGE

Listen, I have something to talk about. Business opportunity. How you on money, eh?

HENRY

(suspicious)

Fine. Why? Eh?

MARGE

I have something I think of getting into. What you do this Saturday night, eh?

HENRY

(slightly excited, might be a date, but still wary)

Saturday? Nothing. Why? Eh?

MARGE

Want to make hundred dollar?

HENRY

(getting slightly annoyed)

Doing?

MARGE

Can you act? Hm? You have nice, long, black coat? You have hat with like brim?

HENRY

Like cowboy hat? Like a cowboy hat?

MARGE

No, more like Sinatra. You have tie, like business man? You know anything about ghost?

HENRY

What? Ghost? What do you mean - you mean ghosts?

MARGE

I need protection. So you want to make hundred dollar? It's just some little old lady. We make it seem she haunted. We get money. That it. Easy.

HENRY

Is that legal?

MARGE

Everything legal in America. It make her feel better anyway, she just lose loved one.

HENRY

Nah, I can't lie to some old lady, Marge. I don't do stuff like that. I do what I do because I don't wanna lie. You know? You get a real job, you just lie all the time. That's all you do. They pay you to lie. That's what a real job is. I know, I've had 'em. And if you can't lie, they think there's something wrong with you. It's sick. And then your mom - your fucking mom - after you get

fired, she's like 'What's wrong with you?' And you tell her about the lying and she just gives you a look like you're crazy. Ya know? That's why people get drunk and watch sports every hour of the day once they get home from work because of all the lying they have to do at their fucking jobs. And that's why I do what I do. Ya know?

MARGE

I know you want more. You mention New York, great thrift store there. Maybe we even go together. Hm? That the real book business -

HENRY

-Really? You would go to New York/ with me -

MARGE

Yeah, and when you have next egg, you just sit home and wait for stupid people to list book for quite cheap on eBay that you snatch up and sell for way more. That how real-

MARGE

-This could get you there. To real thing. Me, I have dental work. See? Will you help me? Please.

HENRY

-Well, I like your teeth. But, uh, no, Marge, I-

MARGE

-OK, I tell you. I find old receipt for book with customer address. Expensive book. I find it in other old first edition at thrift store. So - I stake out house, witness ambulance, then gurney with dead man, saw old lady, and on whim put up sign advertising my service as medium on tree outside house. I think of no other way of getting in legally. And I'm not criminal. Also I once knew gypsies. You know, seances. I think no way she call, right, because it so stupid and crazy - so I spend all time trying to figure out other way in house. But then old lady surprise me. She call!

HENRY

(slightly outraged)

What?

MARGE

Yeah. Don't worry. We split money with old lady if we find book.

HENRY

What book?

MARGE

I no tell you what book-

HENRY

-OK. No. See ya.

(to audience)

I tell her goodbye and get in line with this wedding dress I found earlier. I mostly was after books, but when there weren't any I would also sell wedding dresses and women's shoes. (He shrugs.) And some other shit... So I'm in line and my eBay pings, which always gets me excited, because it means a sale. But this time it's a return. Five hundred bucks which is more than I'm even worth. This dude wants to return this April Twilights I just sold him. Willa Cather's first book. Which is fucked because he says I didn't describe it right, but I did. I took twelve pictures. And the guy's like famous and been on Antiques Roadshow, he's this big shot book store guy - so I know he's just trying to screw me because he says he'll keep it if I send him back two hundred bucks and I'm like fuck that, because April Twilights is worth like 800 in that condition. So I go back to Marge.

(to Marge)

All right, I'll do it. But if we find something, we tell the old lady. That's not our book, Marge.

MARGE

Awww. My hero.

Shift.

ANTON

One problem, he like you.

MARGE

What? No.

ANTON

I see from across room. He got eye on you - left eye. Worst eye. Right eye OK. But he see with left. This problem.

MARGE

Why?

ANTON

Left eye man unpredictable. There book. I lend you. But I want back. In other news, he have (points at crotch) no polovoy chlen. That's goot. I don't like his look, though. He low-level creature. No?

MARGE

He's perfect. We're doing it.

ANTON

(casual)

So, you like him?

MARGE

God no.

ANTON

My mother wanna meet. I tell her about us - I mean, you.

MARGE

I don't want to meet your fucking mother. I told you. I'd like to meet your father.

ANTON

He dead. I told you-

MARGE

-I know. I want to meet. Dig him up. Take him out. I shake hand. Kiss cheek.

ANTON

He cremated.

MARGE

And maybe I fuck him. Hahaha.

Awkward pause. Anton's hurt a little, decides to let it go, tell her what to do.

ANTON

You're not very nice to him - uh whatever his name is uh -

MARGE

-Henry.

ANTON

Henry. Well, be nicer. Not too nice. But nice. Gotta keep him close, but not too close. This place smell. Let's go to my place.

MARGE

No. (ruminating) Can be anything you want here if you willing to play game. Talk, talk, talk! Say nothing! Smile, smile, smile! Mean nothing! America. What a lie. I will be king.

ANTON

I know.

MARGE

But first TV commercial.

ANTON

I know.

MARGE

You read book I gave you? Ayn Rand.

ANTON

Yeah, part of.

MARGE

Phewwwf! I read three time in first sitting. Hokay, now we plan. Tomorrow most important day of life. Until next day. Then that most important. I just wanna act. Wanna live in Beverly Hill. Want Dalmatian. Caviar. Blackberry. Bikini. Pool. Green grass. Blue sky. Yellow sun. Maybe mountain. Nice bed. Biggest bed in world that fit in whole room. Room of bed. Burger for breakfast - vegan. Own cook. Little robot that talk and walk and know everything and sit by my bed at night and talk to me so I can sleep. That so much to ask? Important to remember our dream. Say them out loud. Then they appear. I read that. Now what do you want?

ANTON

Uh... (Unsaid: "you.") Hmmm. Lamborghini. Black. (Thinks, can't think of anything else, shrugs.)

Shift.

HENRY

(to audience)

It's the day. I'm in my car out in front of her motel. It looks even sadder when I have a moment to look at it. Used condoms and cigarettes in the gutters. Soiled undergarments, scum, blood, plastic wrappers on the sidewalk. I'm looking out the window trying to find one beautiful thing out there when knock-knock-knock. It's her.

She's got a blonde wig on and a little fake beauty mark on her cheek. Yeah, she looks just like Marilyn Monroe.

We get to this old creepy-looking house up in the Los Feliz hills. Two stories. Vines all over.

MARGE

You look good. Like quarterback. Now can you throw pass? Hmm? You strong like ox. Are you smart like fox?

HENRY

Uh yeah I-

MARGE

-Shhh.

HENRY

(to audience)

She grabs the lion's head knocker and slams it to the wood.

An old woman answers a second later like she was just standing right next to the door. She looks like she's a hundred and thirty-seven years old. She says:

OLD WOMAN

I'm so glad you've come.

HENRY

(to audience)

We walk through her kitchen, mounds of old newspapers all around, then we go up the stairs and while going down the hall, I smell the smell - the smell - you know? The smell of femininity. It's like a web. But this time it's slightly different. I feel a weird sensation of peace... and the feeling - the feeling of an answer. I don't know what it means. I stop, shoot out my hand for the wall and stand there just staring ahead. The old woman turns and looks.

OLD WOMAN

Yes, he's here. But even more so down there.

HENRY

(to audience)

Marge urges me on with her eyes.

We walk down the hall.

Then we're in the room.

A dead man's room. Brown raincoat on a chair. Hat above it. A sadness hits me.

Marge takes over.

She sets up three chairs in a circle.

We all sit and take each other's hands.

The old woman's hand feels like paper. Marge's feels like a hot, sexy lizard.

Then Marge hits the ground and starts shaking.

I'm so shocked I miss my cue! The old woman and I just stare at her writhing all around, drool coming out of her mouth. Then I'm like get it together, man. Do something. You have to do something!

(to Marge and the Old Woman)

It's in her! It's in her!

(to audience)

The old woman stands, backs up in fright. She's white as a sheet.

OLD WOMAN

(whispered)

Howard?

HENRY

(to the ghost)

Leave! There's nothing more for you here! You have other places to be, other places to see! Leave! You're not wanted here anymore! Go! Go!!

(to audience)

Now Marge is really acting weird, I just stop and stare.

Marge starts shaking her head back and forth, making GURGLING noises. Then she stops, looks left and right breathing hard. There's a moment of absolute still quiet.

MARGE

(loud as though a demon is coming out of her mouth)

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Pause.

HENRY

(To the audience.)

Then we're at the donut shop. When I'm upset, I go to donut shops. Marge doesn't want to be there, but I don't care. I get a Bavarian Kreme, a bear claw, a glazed, a rainbow sprinkled and - and a cup of hot cocoa. Lionel Richie's playing on the juke.

MARGE

(soothingly)

It all in your mind. No such thing as ghost, Dwight.

HENRY

What'd you just call me?

MARGE

Dwight.

HENRY

You do know my name is Henry, right?

MARGE

No. It Dwight.

HENRY

What was with those convulsions? You didn't say you were gonna do that.

MARGE

I tell you I know gypsies. It called acting. Heard of?

HENRY

Yeah, I heard of. I felt something. A presence. Did you?

MARGE

I feel nothing. (pause) Hahaha.

Pause.

HENRY

OK. (pause) So, what'd you get?

MARGE

I find nothing. Not enough time. What happen? I tell you I need five minute.

HENRY

She had to use the restroom. Anyway, she didn't even walk in the library. And I saw your bag. You had something in there.

MARGE

Not book.

HENRY

Then what? Toilet paper? Huh!!?

MARGE

Whatever, Dwight. We go.

HENRY

Show me your bag! Now! We don't go. I have a feast here! And I might still get milk. I need to relax.

MARGE

You funny man.

HENRY

Show me.

HENRY

(to audience.)

She hands me her purse, and I'm like, look how heavy this thing is. I go through it, and I pull out a gold-plated dolphin figurine.

(to Marge)

Hmm.

MARGE

OK, OK. Deal was for book, but...

HENRY

You were gonna keep this from me?

MARGE

No, I list it. We split. That library have shit. Encyclopedia. Book club. Nancy Drew. But, like I say, I no have much time. Because of you. I say five minutes. You give me two. Book could be in there...

HENRY

What book? Tell me. Tell me right now. Or else. So help me God I will turn you in for that dolphin figurine-

MARGE

-Moby Dick. Hmm? Moby fucking Dick. Someone who live there - I think maybe Howard - buy in 1957. Pay seven-hundred and fifty dollar for first edition. First issue binding. Fine condition.

He nods. Silence for a moment.

HENRY

Moby Dick, huh? First edition? First issue binding? Fine condition. That's worth like - what? 30 grand or something?

MARGE

60. In condition it described from bill of sale.

HENRY

You have to give that gold statue back or I'm calling the cops.

MARGE

Ooooh, you're pure like milk. OK, I give back if it such problem! We'll leave at front door. She'll think it Howard. Hahaha.

Shift. Anton on the phone.

ANTON

Her eyes have entered my soul. Her voice has entered my head. Her touch has entered my touch. Her soul has entered my... loins. Ever happen to you?

(he listens)

OK. So be tough, eh?

(he listens, sad)

She don't respect me...

(he listens)

She want hard, give her hard...

(he listens)

Remember my past, what I've gone through.

(he listens)

I've only got myself...

(he listens)

OK, I'll stop repeating everything you say. So what about you? How's Delores?

(he listens)

What your cat's name then? I thought Delores was your cat's-

(he listens)

You know - I think what I do - I get flowers. I find her on street. I pretend I never see her before. See? Maybe I get fancy car for day. Hmm? I wear tux. I go by different name. I go up to her, I play whole night as new person. Maybe even next day. Maybe even forever... What you think?

(He listens. Sighs. He starts taking some notes.)

Yeah...

(he listens)

Well, I think I try it. I mean, maybe-

(he's cut off)

Yeah, I listen. Uncle Boris, I list-

(he listens)

OK. (pause) I am Petrovovich.

(he listens)

I don't want to yell it, but yes, that is my name, my last name. OK?

(he listens)

It mean that -

(he listens)

But I don't want to do evil things...

(he listens)

OK, I say it again. I am Petrovovich...

(he listens)

OK, I try. (Deep breath. Angry. Loud) I am Petrovovich!

Shift.

HENRY

(To the audience.)

Next morning I'm back at the thrift store. And I'm like forget Marge. This is done. And I start thinking of moving to Pasadena even though nobody ever has sex in Pasadena, ya know? And then out of nowhere Marge's right in front of my face, staring at me. I hop up in my chair and drop a first edition of Elmore Leonard's Swag on the ground and it bends the top board which is fucked because-

MARGE

-Old woman call. Hello!

HENRY

Yeah? So?

MARGE

Old Woman call. She think her Howard still walking around, following her. Watching her drink coffee in morning. She hearing things. She want us back this afternoon. I find this for you right over there just now.

She pulls a top hat from behind her back and tosses it to him.

He catches it, looks at it, walks with it to a mirror that only he and Marge can see.

HENRY

Yeah, it looks good, actually. Yeah. I look like a gunslinger. A fighter. I look like a... winner. Yeah, I look like a winner...

HENRY

(To the audience.)

We're at the front of the old lady's place. Marge's back in her Marilyn outfit. I knock. An attractive woman answers. Marge and I are both surprised. She calls herself Nila.

NILA

Hi. Uhm... My grandma's not feeling well... She told me to let you both in...

HENRY

(To the audience.)

This woman, Nila, smiles and opens the door wider.

Marge goes right in. I hesitate, then hurry into the kitchen and join them.

Nila walks off to find her grandmother. She's brunette with large eyes like you see on the Mother Mary. And her face kind of glows. And her mouth is strangely red like she's been sucking on a lollipop for two hours. And she looks weirdly alive. She's between 22 and 67 years old. The smell that had stopped me in the hallway the day before: it's her smell.

MARGE

What with you, huh? You look at her like wolf at rabbit.

HENRY

What? No. I'm just ready for business. That's all.

He touches the top hat.

HENRY

(to the audience)

The young or middle-aged woman comes back and says that her grandma's too tired to come down, that she told her to take us both up into the room and see what we could do.

MARGE

(to Nila, regarding Henry)

I don't know if you know my colleague here. Graham Masters of famous MIT. He expert in extrasensory phenomena. This here just simple exorcism. Plasm have needs. Usually they leave, right? But if they get locked in need and continually reminded of, they can get trapped. When that happen they start to circle. Like bird. What we have here. Now tell me, who live here in 1957?

HENRY

(To the audience)

The woman says that her grandma was a young girl then. And right after that we all feel a cool wind. The hair stands up on my neck. My palms go wet.

I look at Nila and her eyes are wide and staring right at me like I've just grabbed her hand, but I'm ten feet from her. Then it feels like our hearts are beating together. Boom. Boom. Boo!

(to the ghost)

Out spirit! Out! There's nothing here for you! You're dead. Now what do you want?

(To the audience.)

The wind blows out a candle on the windowsill. The door slams shut.

(In the scene.)

We don't fear you! You think we're afraid of death? All we know is that! I don't fear it or you. Nay! You want to take me? Take me! (Pause.) You don't want me? Well, what do you want? What? Do you have something to say, then say it!

(To the audience.)

There's a quiet. And everything's back to normal. We all breathe out, look around.

MARGE

Yeah, perfectly OK for a plasm to grow attached to place. Because if you think of all they know whe-

HENRY

(In a strange voice.)

-She's false!

MARGE

What?

HENRY

(In a strange voice.)

The lady of the house. She lied. She lied to me!

MARGE

Well, this isn't your home anymore, is it! So just leave!

HENRY

(In a strange voice.)

I did everything for her, but she didn't love me. And there's no other life but the one here! That's what they don't tell you. So I wasted it. (pause) I wasted it!!!

(To the audience.)

Then we're at the donut shop again.

When it was all over in the house, I'd gone to the restroom and written a note to the young woman or the late middle-aged woman - Nila.

It said: 'I know this is inappropriate, but please call me. I'd like to talk.' And I left my number. My cell phone was on and in my right pocket, but no calls or texts had come in.

I felt a connection to that strange woman that I couldn't explain. I had to see her again.

MARGE

You ad libbing machine in there, Dwight. Huh?

HENRY

I wasn't ad libbing.

MARGE

Oh? Don't try to scare me.

HENRY

No, I actually don't know what that was...

MARGE

Hahaha.

HENRY

You felt that wind, right? You saw that candle...

MARGE

I blow out candle when you two no look. And door was open by kitchen and window in library open and outside wind blowing about 10 to 19 mile-an-hour gusts - gusts-

HENRY

-Ghosts! You said it! You said it. Hah! Do you think? Huh? Because that wasn't my voice, Marge. That was... him. That was that fucking dude. That dead guy, man. It was Him. That was fucking Howard Shiffin the third.

MARGE

Man you meet at thrift store, my mom say: 'Jules, no trust man you meet at secondary used store. Man who buy used, eat used.'

HENRY

That doesn't even make any sense, Marge. AND WHO THE FUCK IS JULES! HUH?!

MARGE

My middle name. God. Stop yelling. Make fool of everybody.

She looks around.

HENRY

What does that mean - "man who buy used, eat used." That doesn't make any sense.

MARGE

Don't worry, my mom never make sense. Listen, you do fine tonight. I not angry. We go-

HENRY

-No we don't go. So you're saying I made all that up?

MARGE

Yes.

HENRY

Really?

MARGE

Yes. You in moment. You good actor.

Beat.

HENRY

(maybe I did just imagine it)

Fuck... maybe... And you blew out that candle?

MARGE

Yes.

Pause.

HENRY

Hmmm. Hmmm. Huh. Hmmm. Huh. (pause) I didn't know you were gonna go back to the library. So what'd you get this time? Huh?

MARGE

'Course I go back. Why not? You think I'm stupid? Who doesn't go back? Who? Some stupid person? But I get nothing. Check bag if you want. No book.

HENRY

(to audience)

I went through her bag: cigarettes, gum, keys, condoms. Magnums. Phewwww. No book, no figurines.

MARGE

We go! Take me to my place. I'm tired. It's... late.

Shift.

Maybe Marge can mime putting keys in her door and opening it, then closing it? Marge looks around suspiciously. There's quiet for a moment.

MARGE

Someone here?

ANTON

Boo!

MARGE

Jesus, fool! You'll kill me. You want to kill me? Eh! What you want? How you get in here? You break into my place?

ANTON

Maybe, yes. Maybe, no. So, how goes? How was wind? Eh? It fool old woman.

MARGE

Yes. What're you doing here? What do you want?

ANTON

So noises work? Wind work?

MARGE

What do you want? You can't just/ break in here-

ANTON

-What do you think I want? I come to scare you. Maybe. (smiles) Did we get?

MARGE

No. I told you I'd call if I found something or if something went wrong. I'm tired.

ANTON

Show me.

MARGE

What? Here look in purse, you don't believe me.

ANTON

No. Take off dress.

MARGE

What?

ANTON

I know that's where you hide book.

MARGE

You joke. Fuck you.

He pulls his gun.

ANTON

Take off. I know you have. I act like fool like you like, but that not me. No, no, no, no. No. I'm Petrovovich.

She laughs.

MARGE

Get that out of my face before I snap your arm in two.

ANTON

I stop playing. Game over. Show me book.

MARGE

I don't have any book, Anton. What are you gonna do with that? Shoot me? And then what? Be on run whole life? As immigrant? You fool!

He points the gun at her. She's suddenly afraid of him, but trying not to show it. She smiles.

MARGE

OK, I joke. I joke, I joke. Yes, I have book. I find Moby Dick.

ANTON
Give.

MARGE
You take?

ANTON
I keep deal. But show me.

MARGE
It under my dress. I don't want you to see me.

ANTON
I won't be looking at you. Just book. You disappoint me, Juliet.

MARGE
Why do you call me that?

ANTON
It your name. I try to make friend with you. But you're not trustworthy.

MARGE
I can be.

ANTON
No.

MARGE
OK, I give you book. I trust you will do right thing. I trust you. You trust me.
Yes?

Shift.

HENRY
(to audience)
Hardly slept. Early morning. I'm up looking at the sun hitting the wall. Reds
and yellow patterns I've never seen before.

Right then, I felt for the first time in a long time, that every moment in my life
mattered.

That I had one shot.

Maybe it was the voice. What it had said. Was it my voice? If it was my voice,
where in me had it come from?

I looked up ghosts on the internet for a while, trying to figure out what might

have happened in the house. But couldn't find anything conclusive.

Nila still hadn't called or texted. I had thought of her all night. Why?

Shift. Henry has the top hat on his head.

HENRY

(to the audience)

I went to the Irish bar downstairs. Not even noon. Hadn't had a drink in three months, was on the wagon, trying to get my head sharp, but I had heard yelling, like the Sirens in 'The Odyssey' and... So I'm like - I'm just gonna get a club soda and-

ANTON

-Hey.

HENRY

Jesus Christ! You scared the shit out of me, man! Jesus H. Christ. You look exactly like me! Whoa! Whoa.

ANTON

Don't be silly. Me? You? No. Don't joke.

HENRY

You don't think we look exactly the same, man? There - look - look in the mirror. Look at both of us!

They both look.

ANTON

No. I see no similarity. None. Sorry.

HENRY

Are you serious?

ANTON

So... Hey. How you?

HENRY

Fine. How are you?

ANTON

I just make conversation, this OK?

HENRY

Sure.

ANTON

You drink, eh? You drink what?

HENRY

I'm just gonna get a club soda... I-

ANTON

-Mmm. I drink the I P. I P... Sometimes.

HENRY

Mmm. IPA. Beer. Mmm.

ANTON

Mmm. Beer, yes. Yes. Tell me, you ever look at you self in mirror and see dead person?

HENRY

Haha. No. Why?

ANTON

-You don't ever look at you self in-

HENRY

-No.

ANTON

Me either. Haha. Or maybe, yes. If you think about. Know what I mean? (pause) Because what is truly being alive? Is it doing what you want? Getting what you want? No compromise? Hmm? Or is it being safe? Is it becoming of certain age? Yes, what is life? Real life? So you artist, right?

HENRY

How do you know that I -

ANTON

-No, I see 'cause you look through left eye, not right.

HENRY

...

ANTON

Watch out for Juliet. I tell you this - man to man. Good luck.

HENRY

Juliet? You mean - you mean Marge?

ANTON

Yes. Marge.

Anton walks off.

HENRY

Hey, man, wait!!

(Pause. To audience.)

I go to the thrift store.

The cart has already come. Marge is there. She's found three signed Ray Bradburys - maybe the easiest sale of all time. Fuck!

(to Marge)

I met someone I think you know.

MARGE

Oh? Who?

HENRY

Weird Russian dude. Uhm. And he looks exactly like me.

MARGE

I don't know anybody that look like you...

HENRY

You serious?

MARGE

What is name?

HENRY

He didn't say. He's a weirdo, though. You don't know this dude that looks exactly like me? Like exactly. It's scary actually! He freaked me out!

MARGE

So what happen?

HENRY

Nothing. He wears a black leather jacket... He uh-

MARGE

-What he do to you?

HENRY

Nothing. Talked some weird shit... He told me to be careful of you.

MARGE

Ahhh. So? I don't know who this be, Henry. I don't know anybody that look like you. Not even you. Maybe you imagine. Eh?

Silence.

HENRY

No, I didn't imagine it.

(to audience)

I look at the bookshelf and see this beat-up paperback of Knut Hamson's Hunger.

MARGE

Not worth shit.

HENRY

Yeah, I know...

(to audience, reading to himself)

'How regularly and steadily things had gone downhill with me for a long time, till, in the end, I was so curiously bared of every conceivable thing.

I had not even a comb left, not even a book to read, when things grew all too sad with me. All through the summer, up in the churchyards or parks, where I used to sit and write my articles for the newspapers, I had thought out column after column on the most miscellaneous subjects.

Strange ideas, quaint fancies, conceits of my restless brain; in despair I had often chosen the most remote themes, that cost me long hours of intense effort, and never were accepted.

When one piece was finished I set to work at another. I was not often discouraged by the editors' "no." I used to tell myself constantly that some day I was bound to succeed; and really occasionally when I was in luck's way, and made a hit with something, I could get five shillings for an afternoon's work.'

(To the Audience.)

And I'm like: God. If I could paint something with truth like that... with that boldness. That's what it takes: the willingness to never make any money... really get to the truth of what that means - falling through the air with absolutely no safety net. And in a capitalistic society where money and class are everything... what would that mean to really never be known. To be nothing... Have to take that kind of risk. Be willing to. In order to make something new, something like... like Van Gogh -

MARGE

-Henry? Henry?

HENRY

What?

MARGE

Where are you?

Right here. HENRY

I have to talk to you. MARGE

OK. HENRY

I leave today. MARGE

What? HENRY

Goodbye. MARGE

Goodbye? No. HENRY

MARGE
It was nice to know you. Maybe I know you again sometime.

HENRY
(to audience)
She hugs me.

(to Marge)
Why're you - where're you going?

MARGE
LA too small for me. I need somewhere big and loud and with tree. Goodbye.

HENRY
What the fuck, Marge! Tell me why you're leaving.

MARGE
I miss sand. And sandals. I miss my ma.

HENRY
You're going back to Russia?

MARGE
No. Goodbye.

HENRY
(to audience)

I watch her go away, carrying her books with her. I start to cry a little, but then I'm happy because I'll be able to get the books she's been getting, but then I really cry because I realize how pathetic that is and that I have nothing real in my whole life. Not one real person. I sit on the faux leather couch and people stare at me crying, but I don't even care. I look at my phone, no message or call from Nila either. Wonder what happened with Howard. Wonder if they're really was a Howard. Did I make it all up?

Pause.

HENRY

(to the audience)

Eight at night. Still no call. No text. And I didn't have her number.

I go to the store and buy some pens and a sketch pad. And I drive to the old lady's house.

I look at the windows of the house.

It's dark as a tomb in there.

And for the first time in five years I begin to draw.

I'm trying to draw the young woman's face, but I can't even see it.

I might as well be drawing the ocean.

I can't even remember her eyes.

I'm a failure. I'm a failure...

Shift.

Anton on the phone.

ANTON

(whispering)

I call you later. I have business. (beat) I don't have to tell you where. (beat) Yes, I'm fine. (beat) Well, put it in fridge. Then I nuke up and it be fine. (beat) Of course, it's fine. Fish is fine. I eat cold, I eat hot. I eat medium. I eat with ice. I don't care. (beat) Ma! Goodbye. Call you later. (pause) Love you too.

He breathes, calms himself. Has a slight freakout where he shakes out his whole body. Settles. Breathes, gets into character. Maybe can he make like he's walking a little? Stops, breathes again, knocks on a

door. Silence for a moment, he starts to knock again but-

MARGE (off)

Yeah?

ANTON

(fake, bad American accent, maybe like a famous American actor or something else)

Manager. Gas leak.

She opens the door. She's wearing her blonde wig. He forces his way in, closes the door. Pulls the gun. She's flustered and stumbles away, puts up one hand, then regains her composure and smiles.

MARGE

Hey, relax. 'K?

ANTON

You give me wrong book.

MARGE

What?

ANTON

(mocking her.)

What? Yeah.

MARGE

Only because I have buyer.

ANTON

So do I.

MARGE

Please, put gun away.

ANTON

You have five seconds or I blow you away, I don't care anymore. I had enough of you. I had buyer, he laugh at me. He think I fool. Or some sort of criminal. Means you set that all up. Had plan whole time. And means you care nothing about partner or anything else.

MARGE

No, no. I just know book business. I have buyer. We make more money.

ANTON

You leave town! I follow you! We - we - we in motel in middle of what is - Fontana!

MARGE

You have just to call me, we could have talked.

ANTON

I call and call you!

MARGE

I don't get any calls.

ANTON

(points gun at her)

You liar. Show me book. Five, three, four, two, on-

MARGE

-I don't have. They look at. I get money tomorrow.

ANTON

Show me book. Or I start shooting. I don't care anymore.

MARGE

I don't have.

ANTON

SHOW ME BOOK OR ELSE!

MARGE

OK. OK.

She smiles, puts up her hands. She grabs the book. Gives it to him.

ANTON

I check it thoroughly now. I know what to look for.

MARGE

I like this new you. You become real man. I like.

ANTON

Shut up.

MARGE

I just play with you. Do you know that? Do you know why I play with you? Because I love you. (grave) I love you, Anton. And I want you. Now that you're man.

ANTON

FFffhhh. I believe you?

MARGE

Bring gun with you then if you don't, put in my mouth. It loaded, yes? Put in my mouth. Polozhi drugoy pistolet v moyu kisku. (Put other gun in my pussy.)

ANTON

Chuu. I go.

MARGE

I love you. Now that you're man. I mean it! God, now I finally tell you truth and you don't believe! YA lyublyu vas. Zaymis' so mnoy lyubov'yu.(I love you. Make love to me.)

He looks at her, thinking.

MARGE

At least kiss me. Then I kill myself tonight. Podoydi syuda. YA sizhu na tvoyem litse. (Come here, I'll sit on your face.)

He doesn't move.

MARGE

Kiss me. You will see in my kiss where my heart is. Give me one moment of truth and happiness in miserable life of pain, corruption, and nothingness. (pause) Kiss me.

ANTON

All right. I'll kiss you, but only once. I turn safety off. You make one move... You betray me again and...

He walks for her. She starts breathing hard, smiling.

They stay apart from each other. Start breathing hard in their separate places.

MARGE

Now you're right next to me. You're right here. Oh, we're in Paris! We're at the top of Eiffel Tower looking down... We're together up there. Oh, no one else... Now, become one with me!

She lets out a moan, then viciously headbutts him.

He reacts, dazed, head back.

She tries to grab the gun. They struggle. The gun goes off.

MARGE

Fuck! Fool! Careful! Boo-

The gun goes off again.

ANTON

Oh.

MARGE

I told you. You hit book! You fool!

She bites into his neck.

He gains control of the gun. Swipes her off of him with it and hits her harder than he wanted.

Blood comes from her mouth. And she lies there knocked out.

He gets off the bed; he breathes hard. He turns from her, walks for the book. Looks at it. It has a bullet hole through it. (Show the book.)

ANTON

Fuck.

She stands up behind him, grabs the lamp, swings it hard at the back of his head.

He falls. Blood starts to seep from him. Way more blood than she expected. She goes to him concerned, shakes him.

MARGE

Anton... No. Anton! Pozhaluysta, prosnis', prosnis', prosnis', prosnis', prosnis'. Usluga! Don't be dead. Wake up. (Please, wake, wake, wake, wake, wake. Wake!)

Shift.

HENRY

No lights came on in the house for three hours. Yet still I waited. Thinking. Trying to draw.

I go: Creating great art means to constantly lose, to constantly be laughed at, to constantly let people down. Creating great art means to be hated.

I have to chase myself now. Like a fish in a bowl. Find myself. Find my shadow. And make no sudden moves if I do.

That's it. It's yourself that you're after, nothing outside of you.

You've seen it. It comes out just before sleep. It comes out in dreams...

Next time you see it, you'll have to just glance at it. Tiptoe to it. Don't act excited. Don't brag.

And then: I saw her face, Nila's face in my mind.

I started to draw. And as I did, I smelled her; I knew her as though I was with her.

Silence.

HENRY

A nude. Like none I had ever drawn before.

When I was finished, part of me was saying don't do it - but I folded it up. Wrote on its outside: 'Please call. I need to talk. My life depends on it. No pressure. Thank you. You know who this is.'

And I put it under the mat at the front door.

Then my cell phone started to ring. Marge.

MARGE

(on phone)

Can you come? I have bug. Huge bug. Aww!

HENRY

(to Marge)

Where? I thought you-

MARGE

-Come now! Motel! Bye!

HENRY

(to audience)

I get to her place. She's in a bath towel; she's just come out of the shower.

MARGE

It in there. Thank you for coming.

HENRY

(to audience)

I go in and it's the littlest spider you've ever seen and it's dead. I go back to tell Marge and she's naked - completely naked, sitting on her bed, smoking a cigarette. I cover my eyes with my hands.

(to Marge)

It's... dead.

MARGE

Says? It poisonous. Burn it.

HENRY

(to audience)

She stands. I can't help it, I look at her. She's perfect. She smiles. Her rotten tooth is right there, it looks slightly different to me now... But I still love it. I want to climb it!

(to Marge)

You're bleeding... your mouth. Your arm.

MARGE

(shrugs)

It nothing. I bite my cheek. Draw blood.

HENRY

I thought you left.

MARGE

I do, but then something happen. I come back. Dump out my suitcases.

HENRY

(to audience)

She hugs me. She's so soft.

MARGE

(whispered)

Make love to me, Anton. I love you.

HENRY

Anton!? What the fuck, Marge! What is with all these names? Huh? First Dwight, now Anton. Who the fuck's Anton?

MARGE

Nobody. Make love to me. I've decided I love you.

HENRY

You've decided? You don't decide such things. I gotta go. I... I've been drawing, man. Oh, fuck.

(to audience)

I remember right then. Right then it hits me what I've done! I have to get that nude out from under the doormat. It's insane. I mean, what if a girl you didn't even know drew a nude of you where you were... hard and...

MARGE

What do you mean you have to go, where?

HENRY

Home and... Home. I'll take the spider with me. I'll bury him. OK?

MARGE

Wait. Get those luggage and that saw. Take to my car. Please.

HENRY

I thought you weren't leaving.

MARGE

(emotional, hitting her for a moment what happened)

I tell you something happen. OK? You think I talk about TV show? I live in real world. Not like you. Like all American, you don't live at all. You go buy thing and sit places and watch thing and think that life. Go! Luggage. Saw. Now.

HENRY

What happened? What do you need a saw for?

MARGE

To cut up meat. Deli sandwiches.

HENRY

That's a big fucking saw, though, that's-

(to audience)

-On my way home that night I drive quickly to Nila's grandma's house and feel a flush of relief when I see the drawing still tucked in the side of the mat.

I grab it.

Michaels, the art supply store, was about to close, but I get there just in time and buy three large pieces of paper - bigger than I'd ever dared work with before - six feet by four feet.

Then I hit the liquor store - I get a bottle of gin and some scotch.

I go home. I put the pieces of paper on the floor of my apartment and stare at their blankness.

And then I see Nila's face there.

I start to draw.

I begin with her eyes. I think: go further, go deeper than ever before, you're not just a watcher, this is real, make it real. The truth, the truth... Don't just draw her eyes, draw her real eyes...

I spend three hours just on their color and some tiny minuscule details. When I'm done, they look like two large pools. And they seem to be looking at me.

Wherever I go in the apartment, they follow.

I take a break. Open the scotch. Sip of the burning, ahhhhhh!! Look away from them, but when I look back, they're still looking right at me. I go:

(to the eyes)

What do you want from me, huh? What do you want me to do? What do you want me to be? Huh?

But they don't say anything back. I hang my head and think how I've failed yet again. (Silence)

But then I realize: Well, there isn't a mouth, of course they can't answer you!

I run over to them and start to draw the mouth, just like I did the eyes. Really believing it. Really believing that I can be her. The real her. Draw Nila's actual mouth, not a fake mouth, not a representation of a mouth. Become the mouth. I am the mouth!

No, that's impossible. It's impossible! It's impossible, it's impossible...

Shhh... Relax... Believe you can do it... Believe it's possible; that's the only way anything becomes possible.

Years go by but maybe only hours or days... I can hear the birds chirping outside. The sun's come up...

Shut it all out!

The reality is here, right here in front of you.

Now talk to her mouth and eyes and see what she says.

'Why haven't you called me? Huh?'

A pause, like nothing, then Nila appears.

NILA

I was nervous.

He recoils, takes in a quick breath, hearing her. Pause.

HENRY

Why were you nervous?

NILA

Thinking that you wouldn't like me.

HENRY

But I obviously do. I obviously like you.

NILA

But you like me too much. I don't want to let you down once you get to know me. Once you see that I'm not perfect.

HENRY

I don't want perfection.

NILA

But it's how you see me now. As perfect.

HENRY

Yes. But I don't want it.

NILA

Maybe you do. Maybe that's what you're after.

HENRY

What's your greatest fear?

NILA

I'm afraid of being... no, I can't say.

HENRY

Why? Tell me.

NILA

No. I don't know you.

HENRY

Do you want to know me?

NILA

(quietly)

Yes.

HENRY

How much?

She says nothing.

HENRY

My greatest fear is to be... to be invisible. To be...

NILA

My greatest fear is to be... to be... put on.

HENRY

Put on?

NILA

Lied to. Lied to by someone I truly care about. Like if someone was wearing a mask for years and years and one day took it off... And I saw them for the first time as they really are...

HENRY

I've already lied to you...

NILA

Since you're telling me before I know you, I forgive you.

HENRY

I love you, though I know I don't know you...

NILA

I love you.

Shift. A pause.

HENRY

(to audience)

I wake on the floor. Sit up, drool coming from my mouth. Pounding headache. Fuck. Nine fifteen AM. Fourth day of the month. I had drawn the mouth the night before, but the conversation had happened in a dream. I think.

I decide to be bold.

Whatever is going to happen is going to happen. I can't plan it all out. I can't draw a straight line; life is a squiggly line, or no line at all, an imaginary line. But not a circle. I've been living a circle my whole life...

In the car, outside the old woman's house, I breathe in and out quickly. Get out. Shut the door.

I look around myself and see colors on the car I've never noticed before. I always considered it a gray car, but now I see flecks of red and blue and white, small dark smudges and circles of dirt here and there.

I walk across the street. Look at the cracks in the pavement, leaves, sticks, stones... Everywhere I look is different. I can't look one place and see the same thing... I can't see one thing I've ever seen before...

There.

There.

There.

This tree. A million rivulets, a million abutments. Tiny red ants running up and down it. Everything different. Everywhere you look new and interesting and never before seen.

I start for the house.

Shit! Who's that weird, unhappy looking man!

Oh, it's... me... In the reflection of the house's window.

No, no, it's the guy from the bar. Marge's friend. What's he doing here?

I turn and look. He's driving a green car very slowly, looking back at me. He waves. And drives off.

What the fuck?

It snaps me out of my reverie. Everything's ordinary again.

I go up to the door and knock. The old woman opens it and smiles.

She takes me to the living room and we sit. I tell her the truth. My real name. That I'm not Graham, I'm Henry and I'm about to ask her about Nila when I notice that her eyes are Nila's.

They're young eyes in an old lady's body.

A chill hits me and I stand up and run for the door. It's stuck. I wiggle it, slam my body into it. It opens and I fly out of there as fast as I can, get into my car and speed off.

I get home. I turn over the picture of Nila.

I sit at the couch and just stare ahead, breathing really hard. What the fuck's going on - Nila is the old woman? Have you gone crazy?

Phone rings. Marge. I pick up.

MARGE

What's the matter with you? Are you drunk? Huh!

HENRY

No. Are you!!?

MARGE

That old lady just call, she say she want money back! She say she going to call police! She say you were just over there and admitted making up whole thing. Fuck you doing!? I told you I need money. Now we have to make this right. Meet me at donut shop in half hour! And bring top hat!

HENRY

(To the audience.)

I get there a little early. Bring my water bottle with me. Fill it to the top with gin before I leave. Just in case. I sip a little of it as the lady behind the counter keeps giving me hard looks for not buying anything... I had to save money now. Things were gonna be tight.

Then Marge's friend comes in and sits right next to me in the booth I guess so he could see the parking lot and the cars coming in and out. He's got a bloody bandage on the back of his head.

ANTON

You after other book in that old lady's house or what, huh?

HENRY

(surprised)

No, I'm not, I'm - wait, is your name Anton?

ANTON

You in on it with her? You clever, smart guy, eh? Yeah, you real clever, you real smart. Aren't you?

HENRY

No, I'm -

ANTON

-You after other book. Answer me! What book?!

HENRY

No book, man. Now what do you want?

ANTON

Where Juliet?

HENRY

Marge? She'll be here in a few minutes. Why?

ANTON

You not involved? But you fuck her, right? She fuck you.

HENRY

No, man. I'm in love with that lady at the house. I'm not after any book, man. How about you? What's going on? What happened to your head?

ANTON

Old lady? Thousand year old lady?

HENRY

(intercut after the /)

No. And wait are they the same woman/ they're different wom-

ANTON

(intercut first lines fast)

-You're not involved... You just see through... (He nods) OK.

HENRY

(to audience)

Then this guy tells me everything. About the motel in Fontana where she killed him and how he came back to life. And how he crawled out of there and then about Moby Dick and everything. And I'm like. Fuck. And I'm like. Shit. And I'm like. Goddamn it. And to him I'm like - But the young woman - there's a young or middle aged woman, right? She's not the old woman, too, is she? And he's like, no, there's two women. And I'm like no, and he's like, yes, and I'm like no! And he's like yes! Then I'm just so happy that Nila actually exists, and then he's like - what about you, you got nothing out of this. And I'm like thing is I can draw again and that's priceless, and then I'm like what're you gonna do and he's like-

ANTON

Thing is I died. So I am of two minds, two people, one an old, one a new. Who will win? I hope what I do, I think what worst than death? Fear is worst. Aye. Now Juliet always look over shoulder thinking Petrovovich - me, Anton

Petrovovich - is after her. Now I like ghost and she live entire life of fear. That horrible. (he smiles) But I love her. I never hurt her.

HENRY

Jesus Christ. I'm pretty sure she loves you, too, man.

ANTON

She hate me. She kill me.

HENRY

She told me she loves you.

Anton starts to cry, stifles it.

ANTON

No.

HENRY

She said it to me, man, she thought I was you or something - wait, you're really just gonna fucking haunt her forever, that's fucking/ crazy, that's fuc-

ANTON

-No, I move. Montreal. Try to see out of left eye. America too crazy for me. What you mean she think I you?

HENRY

Well because we look exactly the same. It's insane and scary. It's like looking in a mirror.

ANTON

We look nothing alike. We are opposite. I tall, you medium. I blonde you - Shit! She here. Tell her nothing. Be smart. She have gun. I go hide in bathroom. Try not to stay here too long. I afraid of bathroom.

HENRY

OK, take care of your-

(to audience)

He's gone. Marge comes in. Dressed as Marilyn.

MARGE

Hello, fuckhead. Let's go.

HENRY

Hey, Marge, how are you today?

MARGE

Fuck you! Are you drunk? Are you!

HENRY

No!

MARGE

You have top hat. Goot. Let's go.

HENRY

OK, listen, wait, Marge, I gotta ask you a serious question - it's about my art. Uhm, what do you think?

(to audience)

I pulled the drawing I did of Nila out of my pocket. The nude. Marge looked at it for a second and then made a face and then turned it over so she couldn't see it anymore.

MARGE

My God, Henry, this kind of art you do?

HENRY

I know it's, uhm, it's pretty intense.

MARGE

It's... chepukha.

HENRY

Is that... good?

MARGE

How you say - "worst."

HENRY

(nods solemnly)

Worst.

MARGE

Yeah.

HENRY

Look, but it's - how can you say that - this is of that girl, Nila.

MARGE

Nila? Who's Nila?

HENRY

That woman - the young or middle aged woman at the house.

MARGE

Oh, you mean - you mean one with limp and yellow itchy skin?

HENRY

Yeah. I mean... Yellow itchy skin? I-

MARGE

-One who smell like oat? Like ugly girl?

HENRY

OK, you know what? I am gonna come at you with some straight truth, Marge. Like a fucking bullet. I love that girl Nila.

MARGE

Hokay, okay, okay. I put in good word with syphilitic woman if you want. What ev. This is shit. We go.

HENRY

Wait I worked all night this is one of the best things I've done in my entire life.

MARGE

OK, you don't believe me, ask her. Then we go. I have plan. Hurry.

HENRY

(to audience.)

OK. So I went up to the lady behind the donut counter with it, asked what she thought, but she thought I wanted to trade it for a donut and shook her head vehemently-

DONUT ATTENDANT

-No. Cash only.

HENRY

No, no, no, do you like it? What do you think? Huh?

She covers her eyes not wanting to look at it anymore.

DONUT ATTENDANT

Please! Please sir, take that away! I don't like to look at it!

HENRY

All right, all right! Jeez Louise! God. I'm sorry.

(to audience)

We drove to the old lady's house. I was in shock. I firmly believed my drawing to be the best thing I had ever done and that it proved that I was special and one of a kind. But then I was like if everything and everybody is one of a kind - is anything one of a kind? Is anything special at all?

Then we're in front of the old lady's place.

Then we're at the door.

Then we're in the library with the old lady.

Sunlight's coming into the room and I moved my foot so some of it is hitting me. Just in case.

Marge's going on and on about our credentials, telling a convoluted story about why I was going with a different name-

MARGE

Extrasensory overlords have heard of him and are after him so he...

HENRY

(to audience)

The old woman seems to be buying it, which is astounding. I'm looking around for Nila, but she's nowhere.

And I'm relieved that the old lady's eyes look less like hers in the daylight...

I see on the bookshelf - the Melville section, mostly paperbacks, but a big gap and a line in the dust where 'Moby Dick' must have been. Marge is droning on and on. Old lady's nodding her head.

Then out of nowhere and against my will I scream out: 'Stop! I must live in the truth!'

MARGE

Henry... God. Please.

HENRY

My name's not Henry. (Deep old man voice. Completely in this other character.) My name's Howard Shiffin, the third. Don't run, Lena! I'm tired. I have something to say... I'm still in love with you. I treated you badly because I was angry. When I died, I saw the truth. Yeah, I saw it. I know the truth, Lena. And I never knew. You kept that from me. Why?

OLD WOMAN

Howard?

HENRY

(Old man voice.)

Why?

OLD WOMAN

Because I...

HENRY
(Old man voice.)

Why?

OLD WOMAN

Because I wasn't sure.

HENRY
(Old man voice.)

But you were, as soon as I was gone.

OLD WOMAN

I love you now, isn't that enough?

HENRY
(Old man voice.)

No. No and it never will be.

HENRY
(To the audience.)

Now this old guy has me completely - I'm just a watcher, a listener.

I scream out, but nobody hears me.

I jump up and down, but my body doesn't move.

I'm going to the old woman. I'm feeling love in my body. But I don't know her. I'm kissing her lips. I'm smelling her skin. I'm feeling her hands.

I don't know her face, but somehow my body does. Love! I feel it.

I try to move my hands, but they don't move. I try to look down. But my head won't turn.

I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead. He's taken me over.

And then I'm like - was I ever truly alive at all - did I ever have an original thought?

I could have been something. I could have been someone.

Myself. I could have been myself.

Oh how wonderful that would have been! And how brave!

What was I instead?

A Frankenstein. A Frankenstein of wants that weren't my own.

All I really wanted was to draw, to paint... But I didn't truly follow it.

And then I thought: Now, just when I've finally started to become me, it's over. I've been taken over by someone else.

Shift. A pause.

HENRY

(To the audience.)

I'm lying in darkness. I move my fingers. I feel them move!

I'm ecstatic, but still skeptical!

I sit up.

Am I back? Has he let me go?

If I can have one original thought, that would prove it. That I'm myself. That I'm someone. And that that old man is gone.

I see Marge looking at me with concern. I see the old woman crying in her chair.

I'm afraid to speak. That nothing will come out.

Marge smiles with relief seeing me move, and I see a change in her eyes. A softness. Maybe that she seeing for the first time that there're other people in the world.

I look away. The top hat is on the ground. I leave it.

I realize I'm breathing.

But I still don't have a true thought. What is a true thought? Something original and all my own. Something that would prove I'm one of a kind. But my brain is a blank. There's nothing inside. I have nothing.

I have nothing.

I have nothing.

I will keep saying this to myself until I have some original thought or idea, some identity that proves to me that I am me!

I have nothing.

I have nothing.

I have nothing. I have nothing. I have nothing.

MARGE

Henry. Are you OK?

HENRY

(To the audience.)

I have nothing. I have nothing. I have nothing.

I have nothing.

I have nothing.

I have nothing.

No thing.

No thing.

I have nothing.

I have nothing.

(Pause, fear and sadness at the realization)

I have nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

(Pause)

I have nothing.

I hear a door open and close. I turn to the sound. The old lady is still in the chair. Marge is still at my right.

I breathe. I see the room. The colors in the room. Really see it.

No labels anymore. Everything new and fresh.

Everything strange like before.

Footsteps coming. If it's the old man again, I don't think I'll be able to fight him. I still haven't had a new thought. I'm still nothing.

I'm nothing. I'm nothing. I'm nothing.

I say it out loud: "I'm nothing."

I hear my voice. Yes, it's my voice, not his!

Then I smell her first...

I see a part of her hair in the doorway.

Then her face.

Nii-----la.

I don't think.

I go.

I reach for her hand.

I am there!

She takes it. I feel her hand and a spark like a rocket lifts me up.

She pulls her hand away.

I fall.

I am nothing.

I am nothing.

I am nothing.

I speak without thinking: 'I drew you.'

I pull out the drawing. I show it to her.

NILA

Oh.

HENRY

(To the audience.)

And she looks at me. Like she did before - the first time. When our hearts - when our hearts beat together. I see my reflection in her eyes. I am very, very, very, very tiny.

But I am there.

Shift. Long pause.

HENRY

(to audience)

But that isn't even the crazy part. Or the ending. The crazy part happened months later, when I looked at the drawing again. This is what I saw:

He shows a picture on his phone. We see it. It's a very abstract drawing, not a nude at all. Very strange like Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase," but not that either, something weird - a drawing of a soul, if that makes sense.

HENRY

(to audience)

So what is it? An essence...? I think so. Somehow during that time, periodically, I was seeing things as... as they really, truly are. Beneath it all...

I still do it now and then while walking around as an exercise. I take the names off of everything and look around as a new born child, not knowing anything. Everything is new and abstract and never before seen, everything is different. I don't call trees, trees, I don't call anything, anything. I see things for what they are and nothing more and therefore can delve deeply into their mysteries.

You're probably wondering what happened with Marge and Anton. They got together. But first Marge went to prison for three years on an unrelated thing. Anton never went to Montreal and started visiting her. She had changed and they were in love. But she was in prison. He waited. She waited. And they got married. And they're happy now. I was best man.

As for the book, Marge and Anton gave it to me. Here's a picture of it. (He shows on his phone the book with a bullet hole through it.) I keep it on my bookshelf. It's completely worthless now, but...

Now, what I'm gonna say next is maybe gonna sound the strangest of all - Anton isn't my double. Here, look.

(Show a picture of Steven.)

HENRY

(to audience)

But at that time I saw him as that, it was like I was looking in the mirror. Sometimes I think, he was the other side of me, the side I had finally said goodbye to. That he was my opposite, and it's only in meeting our opposite that we can truly meet and know ourselves. Also that he was an emblem of a choice. To not be pecuniary, to not seek what others seek. To only seek greatness. To only seek myself which can't help but be true, if I listen to it, if I can see it - though no one else may ever recognize it or know it to be anything at all...

Other times I think it's because I was seeing his essence and that he was truly me in some way, a compatriot and a friend.

The time before this, before the story, I had become lost. I'd forgotten my own worth. I'd forgotten that if you believe in something, you have to fight for it, because that's who you are - and if you aren't fighting for who you are - I mean, if you aren't yourself, who are you?

And in my seeking of things outside of myself - I had forgotten about the seeking of myself. Which should be the primary one. It's a searching that never ends...

As for Howard Shiffin the Third and the old lady - Howard finally left. The old lady, Lena - she's happy now. She never knew she had love in her lifetime. But now she's in love. She's in love with Howard. She tends her garden.

And she enjoys hanging out with Nila and I when we come over.

And that's it.

The end.

THE END

APPENDIX B

The poster designed and created by Ash Micheel.

**THRIFT STORE
JUNKIE**

SEPT 10 - 12, 2020 | BY BRENDAN BESETH

**MOBY
DICK**
OR THE WHITE WHALE

PREMIERE
PERFORMANCE

 **DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE**
J. WILLIAM FULBRIGHT COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

VIEWING LINK: visit uarkartstickets.com

   

PERFORMANCE DATES:
Sept 10-12 at 7:30 PM

LOCATION:
ONLINE LIVE STREAM
Fine Arts Center
340 Garland Avenue
Fayetteville, AR 72701

APPENDIX C

Professor Jilka and Chris Tennison during the second performance.



