

THE LAST BLOCK LETTER

A Drama in Four Acts

BY

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

SHELLY GREER, the son, 38 years old, is somewhat disheveled and unkempt and looks haggard and worn out about the face which belies his age. He is fighting an internal battle, one he is losing. Just one look at him leaves even a perfect stranger convinced of that fact. His mood, his nature are both agitated. He is tall, thin, losing his hair and wears glasses.

MARILYN GREER, the mother, 65 years old, tall for a woman of her era, still retains the nice shapely figure, though full with time, of one who was once very thin. To a large degree, her face has won the battle between time and beauty, or rather has survived it as one survives battles; not untouched by them, but more, by incorporating their alterations effectively into the collage of life that always shows on such an expressive face. Her nature is to ignore what she doesn't like with busy work. When something upsetting occurs, she cooks, she cleans, she organizes, she arranges again and again. Throughout the play, this is her constant action.

JACK GREER, the father, 55 years old, has a distinguished, regal look with a full head of gray hair and a black and gray speckled beard, both neatly combed and cut. He is a large man, full bodied and dressed in a double-breasted blue blazer that accents what was once an excellent young man's physique. He is a ghost, a figment of one imagination.

DICK McDONOUGH, the handyman, 75 years old, has a ruddy, tanned complexion. He is wearing a plaid, short sleeve shirt with suspenders that keep up his Floridian polyester short pants, out of which his skinny legs ending in black socks and sneakers protrude. He seems in surprisingly good shape, though he has a slight limp and more waddles than walks as he moves. He is a man who has made good money in a thankless, distinctly blue collar profession such as a plumber or an electrician does. As a result, he is awkward in Boca Raton society circles and has developed the practice of starting most sentences with an apologetic chuckle at himself and the confusing habit of nodding his head "yes" when he means "no" and vice versa.

TIME

Prologue

Act 1: Saturday Afternoon around 3:00 PM

Act 2: Approximately one hour after Scene 1

Act 3: Sunday Morning around 4:00 AM

Act 4: Sunday Morning around 7:00 AM

All action takes place in the late 1990's for no other reason than to keep temporal relations possible; everyone knowing the people they speak of and being alive when they need to be.

PLACE

All the action of the play takes place in and around Marilyn's Boca Raton, Florida home. The stage consists of two adjoining rooms, a kitchen and a living room, both of which are always exposed. The rooms are separated by a screen door which leads to the backyard. Of the living room we only see what is necessary for each scene: A writing desk up front next to the audience or a single leather chair and table with lamp against the back wall. The kitchen consists of a small, circular dinner table with four chairs around it, a refrigerator and kitchen cabinets that form the back and left walls of the stage. Everything is done in Florida white: The kitchen table and chairs, the walls, the tile floors, the cabinets and the major kitchen appliances. Everything else, lamps, hanging paintings have a soft feel, in light airy pastel colors, mostly in the peach and aqua families.

PROLOGUE

(As the lights come up, SHELLY stands alone, center stage, reading some pages thoughtfully a long moment. Then he looks up and speaks directly to the audience)

SHELLY

My father believed that you should never let *the truth* get in the way of a good story.—No, he did. To him, it was some sort of writer’s creed. A defining freedom. The sole province and possession of the Creative class. A tool that helps us live the life we need to. “Exercising the genius!” he called it. A venial misdeed perpetrated on the unsuspecting souls in our lives. For technique. For the craft!

(pause, growing solemn)

I guess that’s way I never really believed it when they told me how he died. It seemed so surreal. Like something he’d make up. In a way *too* perfect, too fitting.—True. A great many have been taken before in such accidents, even people of his notoriety. But they always seemed mythical, eponymous. Modern-day Homeric titans of folklore. Patton, T.E. Lawrence. Or James Dean!—This was my father. It didn’t seem right. Not with him, the person he was.—Not with the way he was just before....He had spoken often of leave-taking. The right way. The *proper* way! When I saw pictures of the car and the windshield—I had played back at the Powerlines as a kid with my dirt bike. I knew what they were like. And it sounded right. It did. With the press and the newscasts and the cameras....

(he pauses, leaving the “but” unsaid)

The funeral was a whirlwind. It was too much all at once. His death suddenly thrust everything into the limelight. Him, me, the town. I remember it all like a Monet painting. Blurred, with form but vague. A series of stimulation, sensual inputs. Colors, words, faces.—There was a large turnout as befitting writer of his stature. Saul Bellow came. And Roth and Styron, the usual cast of characters. James Dickey even came up from South Carolina. Competitors, compatriots one and all. Everyone stunned, everyone mollifying. Saying flattering things they didn’t mean, giving praise they didn’t believe and would retract to fifteen minutes later in the car leaving the cemetery.—Father would’ve been pleased.

(he smiles demurely)

Time passed as is its wont. There were things to get back to, things to complete. So much was happening just then. I was in the middle of a signing tour for my third novel. I was booked on NPR for two weeks from the following Thursday. Still, there was something, and it stayed with me like a deposited seed. Dormant, fertile. What had really happened? What

the world believed, what my father had done. They weren't the same. I knew. I was sure of that. But I was still active then.—Later, when it settled, when all the distractions cleared away, it gnawed at me. And as the years went by, as I began to stumble myself, it grew, watered by my struggling. Gaining steam each time, riding along on the fear that *I too* would be stricken, that *I too* would lose it, as if it was some sacred talisman that could be misplaced. They advanced together, self-fulfilling. My mind churning, fusing facts, the truth, or my perception of them. Turning their essential soundness to chaos. Piecing fragments together like a silly dime-store detective. I drew connections, built conjecture, made inferences. Overanalyzing, scrutinizing relentlessly. Maddeningly! Tormenting myself with questions and uncertainty and misgivings. Did he do it?! Did he really? Was it real?! Was it inevitable?!

(he pauses, calming, shameful)

As I drove down to Florida that weekend, self-respect and decency gave way. Instinct took over. Desperation, egoistic need. Well hidden perhaps. Nicely packaged to be sure—but repulsive, abhorrent all the same....We are writers. It's what we are. What do we do when we can't anymore?

(he looks down at the pages a long moment, flipping back and forth between them, nodding his head hesitantly)

Yeah.—Yeah well, that might do it....Then again who the hell knows.

(He continues studying the pages. Now shaking his head as he roams the stage)

Fade to Black

ACT 1

MARILYN sits alone at the kitchen table drifting through the newspaper. She doesn't actually read it, but merely looks at it, nonchalantly turning the pages, occasionally stopping on one longer than the rest. She is sipping the first of many afternoon cups of coffee. The phone rings. It is extremely loud, the ringer turned on high to ensure MARILYN's fading hearing perceives it immediately.

MARILYN

Hello....hello Ned, thank you for returning my call so soon. Ned—NED! LOWER YOUR HEAR—I can't!—I CAN'T! THERE'S A BUZZING IN MY—YES!....yes, that's better, yes....Ned, Ned did you see the article in the New Yorker.—In the New Yorker!....I know you're retired. I know—I know your—I...You're still Jack's agent! I don't care how long he's been gone, you still have your responsibilities! Ned, Ned Hubert is at it again.—Yes Hubert—In the New Yorker! But this time Ned, it's what he's saying. He's saying that Jack—his death, that he didn't....yes. Ned please, *please*, you have to take care of this. You have to put a stop to it....I don't know, something! Ned....Yes, yes okay. Call me back. Call me back Ned. *Please!* I'm waiting by the phone....Yes. Yes okay.

(she hangs up the phone and waits by it thoughtfully for a long period, then moves to clean)

SHELLY

(offstage)

Hello?!

(MARILYN doesn't hear at first)

Mother?

MARILYN

Uh, yes? Yes, who is it?

SHELLY

It's me, Mother.

MARILYN

Shelly, is that you?

SHELLY

Who else calls you Mother, Mother?

(SHELLY comes on stage carrying a large, heavy overnight bag over his shoulder. He seems restless, hyperactive, as if no position or state can calm what is driving him. He goes over and plants a kiss on MARILYN's cheek. She is surprised and perhaps because of it, unresponsive to his touch)

MARILYN

What? Well no, I didn't really hear. What, what're you doing here!—

SHELLY

Any other siblings I don't know about? A little sister woman perhaps?

MARILYN

No I said I didn't hear—

SHELLY

A red-headed stepchild. The misbegotten bastard child Smerdyakov come to kill the miserly father Karamazov. Exacting a revenge so long overdue.

MARILYN

Shelly. What're you doing here?!

SHELLY

Some road work to keep in shape. Fighting trim, ready for action.

MARILYN

What do you mean?—

SHELLY

A wayward traveler searching the highways and byways for the answers to life's many mysteries. The riddles, the conundrums! "What dire offense from am'rous causes springs, What mighty contest rise from trivial things."

MARILYN

I see but why didn't you—

SHELLY

Yes, heh-heh. I'm sure you do. Hmm mmm, I'm sure you do.

*(SHELLY dumps his bag and stretches exaggeratedly.
MARILYN watches guardedly as he meanders around the house, subtly looking for something that is not yet there)*

MARILYN

I was just going to call you.

SHELLY

Were you? Then I have saved you the expense of a long distance phone call.

MARILYN

I thank you but—

SHELLY

A considerable sum. Not to be dismissed too lightly, I might add. Might it not earn me the title, favorite child.

MARILYN

You're my only child.

SHELLY

Imagine my embarrassment at having only now first achieved that distinction.

MARILYN

Temporarily though my dear.

SHELLY

Ha ha! Atta girl. Keep the kinder off balance.

MARILYN

Yes....Shelly—

SHELLY

What were you calling about?

MARILYN

Oh nothing really. There are some Old Spice coupons in the paper. I was going to cut them out and send them to you but I wasn't sure if you're still using that brand.

SHELLY

How I long to smell of the sea. All salty dog and jack-tar returning from the voyage, imbued with the marine and exotic ports of call.

MARILYN

I'm sure....Shelly why didn't you call?

SHELLY

(he turns to her, calmer)

I wanted to take a drive for a bit, get out of the city. So I went to Jersey and found myself in Samuels driving around the old town. Ellis Avenue, Grover Park, the Oval. All the old haunts.—I even went by the cemetery and laid some flowers for Father.

MARILYN

Oh for heaven's sake.

SHELLY

When I got back on the turnpike, I don't know, I just kept going. In some sort of peripatetic haze of exits and toll booths and highway signs. Next thing I knew, Florida Turnpike three miles.

MARILYN

You drove all night? That's not safe.

SHELLY

(very fast)

Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida. Like a bat out of hell!

MARILYN

I don't think that's—

SHELLY

Don't let them fool you, there's still plenty of unused land in this overgrown rest stop we call a country. You cannot imagine the fleecing you take in Delaware, the *First State*. You're in this pint-sized, ne'er-do-well territory for barely thirty minutes and it costs you *five dollars* in bridge tolls and tunnel tolls and highway restoration fees and fat cops with a 64 IQ fees. The *Freeload State* is more like it.

MARILYN

Shelly why didn't you—

SHELLY

Any state whose grand stab at individuality is limited to its pronunciation of it as *New-Ark* as opposed to *New-Erk*, makes me question the value of the Union. Do you know you can drive five hours in Virginia, past the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Shenandoah River, doing a whole John Denver, "*Country Roads*" kind of thing for the same five bucks. Not that you wouldn't rather a good proctologic exam, but it sure beats Delaware.

MARILYN

(more forcefully)

Shelly why didn't you tell me you were coming?

(JACK enters the room from the same direction SHELLY entered. He moves to the living room carrying book and pipe and takes a seat at the writing table. SHELLY has noticed his entrance and is visibly calmed by his presence, though he makes

no mention of it. His eyes follow JACK to his seat while MARILYN doesn't notice him at all. JACK, after searching some moments for something on the desk, sits and begins to read. Throughout the entire first act, he alternates between reading and writing notes on what he is reading)

MARILYN

Shelly?

SHELLY

Hm?

MARILYN

Why didn't you tell me you were coming?!

SHELLY

(pause)

I wanted to surprise you. *Surprise!* Ha-ha! Aren't you happy?!

MARILYN

Oh, yes, ha ha, surprise. I understand. But why?

SHELLY

Do I have to have a reason? Can't a devoted son just pop in and ruin his mother's weekend every once in a while.

MARILYN

Yes, of course you can. It's just unexpected, that's all. We talked on the phone last week. You gave me no idea something was wrong.

SHELLY

Something isn't wrong Mother. Something doesn't have to be wrong for me to want to see you?

MARILYN

No?

SHELLY

No. But I'm sure I can whip something up if it pleases you.

MARILYN

No, that's quite all right.

(MARILYN goes back to cleaning as SHELLY moves to his bag, unzips it and looks recklessly for something. Eventually, he will pull out mostly everything to find it)

MARILYN

Besides I'll be seeing you in June at the memorial ceremony.

SHELLY

The ceremony.

MARILYN

The whole town's getting ready. Everyone's coming. Mayor Romer's going to make a speech with the dedication. *If* he can keep his mind on writing one. Italian men get so focused on other things at middle age. What with the graying hair, the pot bellies and their failing manhood. Apparently, he's busy fooling around with his *new* busty secretary Teresa. As I understand it, his *last* busty secretary was let go because—

SHELLY

Promise me we're not about to have a discourse on sagging breasts....Excellent. Romer's still mayor? I didn't know he was Italian.

MARILYN

Twenty years and still counting. No one's come to challenge him yet. *Yes*, of course he's Italian! He just dropped the "O" from his last name when he was a young man to advance his *political* career.

SHELLY

Oh, did he?

MARILYN

What a career. Twenty years as the stalwart head of Samuels. Who would want that job? It isn't even a full-time salaried position. All he gets is a small income and the right to park anywhere he wants.

SHELLY

Parking *is* the ultimate aphrodisiac.

MARILYN

Mr. Lynch was going to try to unseat him once, but with his habit—*Irish*—that was the end of that, tragically. Did I tell you there's going to be a parade and an official plaque?

SHELLY

An official plaque! Well well.

MARILYN

At the library where your father wrote, "*The Chimney Sweep*" and the last two criticisms. I can't tell you how glad I am we left most of his papers there. I don't have enough room in the house for what I brought down. And there's going to be a sign on the avenue leading to the Powerlines. If that *Teresa* didn't forget to order it like I've reminded her three times.

SHELLY

Demarcating the accident sight where father died. How thoughtful of them.

MARILYN

It isn't *demarcating* the accident sight! It's simply pointing out the spot where it happened, so it's easier to find.

(*SHELLY turns to look at MARILYN*)

Well, you know how those literary fanatics can be. Batty for anything historical.

SHELLY

Batty being the operative term.

MARILYN

I talked to the Mayor the other day and he said they're still coming. Everyday. Some people driving hours and hours to get there. There's even talk they may buy the house from that

MARILYN – con't

trying Asian couple we sold it to and make that into a memorial. Imagine that? “The House Where Jack Greer Lived.” But who knows, it’s always tough negotiations with those people. As I can attest to.

SHELLY

You’re going to make a fine fascist someday Mother.

MARILYN

Lord knows it was no small feat selling the house to them. So exact. Every crack and crevice checked twice. With their walking and bowing.—You should be very proud of your father's legacy!

SHELLY

And I am. I'm very proud.

(JACK and SHELLY share a look. MARILYN turns to SHELLY and watches him search)

MARILYN

Don’t let me forget. I have to get to the printers to drop off the proofs of the pamphlets for the ceremony. They need to be in before 4:30. The store closes at five....Why didn't you call to tell me you were coming?

SHELLY

That tends to defeat a surprise. Besides I wanted to finish our conversation. And I thought you’d run away if you knew.

MARILYN

Which conversation is that?

(SHELLY finally pulls a book out of the bag and looks down at it a thoughtful moment)

SHELLY

You know which conversation Mother. The one about Father.

SHELLY - con't

(he moves towards her, holding out the book)

Here. Simon released a fifteenth anniversary edition of “*Vainglory at Dawn.*”

MARILYN

Did they? That's wonderful!

SHELLY

Isn't it? The vipers have to find some way of making money off me. Read the new dedication.

MARILYN

“For my parents. I am what you made me. And someday we will all have to forgive you for that.” Oh, you *shouldn't* have.

(MARILYN stares at the book, somewhat lost as SHELLY begins quickly stuffing everything back into the bag)

SHELLY

Oh, but I did....The law of lost things. It's always the first thing you're looking for, that's the last thing you find. Not like an accident sight. If I was looking for an accident sight, that would be easy to find. *That* there would be a sign for.

MARILYN

I wished you would have let me know, I could have prepared.

SHELLY

What's to prepare? Just hide the dead bodies and the dominatrix gewgaws, and bring out the narcotics accoutrement!

MARILYN

Shelly!

SHELLY

Where is the your dealing paraphernalia anyway? The place looks so damn somber without the scales, the Petry dishes and that ubiquitous plastic apparatus thing-a-mabob.

(he moves to the refrigerator and grabs a bowl)

MARILYN

Don't be saucy Shelly.

SHELLY

Mi apologia. Oh but that's right. Teddy keeps the bodies well hidden in Panama and ever since the Nicaraguan cartel blew up the East Senegalese connection—I understand.

MARILYN

Ha ha, very funny.

SHELLY

Always an ounce of prevention. Tuna fish. Recent?

(she nods and he sniffs at it then nods his approval)

MARILYN

Sheldon, stop that!

SHELLY

One can never be too safe in your kitchen.

(SHELLY moves over to the cabinets and looks for the drawer which has the silverware. He opens several drawers quickly searching. He finds the silverware drawer, pulls out a fork and begins to eat the tuna fish standing at the counter. MARILYN follows behind closing the drawers)

MARILYN

I have to make the bed and get some food in the house. And I need to air out the guest bathroom. I haven't opened it since the last time you were down. There's no reason to open the AC vents if you're only staying for a day or two. I'll put a fan in there. You are, aren't you? Only staying a day or two?

SHELLY

Hmm hmm, yes Mother, you needn't worry there. I'll be gone by Sunday. Not that the thought of persecuting you isn't quite tempting.

MARILYN

I'm not the one worrying.

(a long awkward pause as MARILYN cleans and SHELLY forks the tuna fish without eating)

SHELLY

Mother, I've been thinking about what we talk—

MARILYN

I'll turn up the heat in the pool in case you want to go swimming. But if you're going to want to sit outside, you'll have to get another lawn chair pad out from the garage.

SHELLY

Not ready yet?—All right Killer. As you wish.

(they stare at each other briefly)

MARILYN

Sit down. Let me get you something to drink....Sit. Sit!

(SHELLY moves reluctantly towards the table but doesn't sit. MARILYN goes into the refrigerator, gets a bottle, moves to the cabinets, gets a glass and pours)

MARILYN

I had Dick put the pads there. If you leave them out in the rain, they get worn out faster and I don't want the neighbors thinking I have money to burn. One of them is his-Spanish and I don't want anyone getting the wrong idea by my being flashy.

SHELLY

I'm sure that's very dangerous in Boca Raton.

MARILYN

And I'm afraid it's the pull-out couch in the den for you this time. The other bedroom is being worked on.

SHELLY

Just throw a blanket on the couch. I'll sleep on top.

MARILYN

No you will not!

(MARILYN delivers the drink, sternly)

SHELLY

What's the matter with the other bedroom?

MARILYN

Carpenter ants ate a hole through the ceiling there. When it rained last week, the water was pouring through in buckets.

SHELLY

(with his mouth full)

Did you call a roofer?

MARILYN

Don't talk with your mouth full. No, Mr. McDonough is handling it.

SHELLY

Dick?

(swallowing in a gulp, then opening his mouth and sticking out his tongue to show it's empty)

Dick doesn't know a thing about roofs.

MARILYN

He can take care of it just fine and he's less expensive. It would've been done by now, but he fell and put his leg through the hole and made it worse than it already was.

(SHELLY moves to the refrigerator and puts the tuna fish bowl back in, fork and all)

SHELLY

Why don't you get someone who knows what they're doing?

MARILYN

Don't leave the fork in there.

SHELLY

Why not?

MARILYN

Because you don't!

(SHELLY watches as she takes the fork and puts it in the sink)

SHELLY

How much would it cost to get a roofer in here?

MARILYN

It's not the money dear.

SHELLY

A few more pesetas, piestas, guilders, shekels—

MARILYN

It's not the money!

SHELLY

You just said you're using Dick because he's less expensive!

MARILYN

Yes, but it's not the money! It's that I want to use Mr. McDonough, that's all, *okay?*!

SHELLY

Okay.

MARILYN

Good!....Oh I'm so glad you're here. What a lovely surprise.

(JACK stands behind the writing desk with a book in his hands and speaks to the audience)

JACK

We are so particular about our words. We've spent the entirety of our careers, the substance of our lives in this elusive pursuit of the perfect construction, intonation, and correlation. The flawless arrangement of 26 letters, given the innumerable permutations and combinations they can form. When you think of the import, the significance ascribed to your last missive, your last utterance....I'm reminded of Camus' dying Joseph Grand, spending his last *plagued* days in a futile struggle to perfect one immaculate sentence. Or perhaps of Tennessee's venerable old poet Nonno, battling long and hard on *The Night of the Iguana* to finish that last poem and when he does, he falls languidly, deep into the sweet sleep of death.—How sentimentally existential.

I researched! What good writer worthy of that appellation wouldn't. There is a whole book devoted to these famous last lines. A macabre collection of these pronouncements culled from the history of recorded word, broken down by subject matter. Did they speak at the last of god, of country, of paramours and love's labour's lost? The last chapter was dedicated to the suicide notes. Where were we, you may wonder, we good men and women of *belles lettres*? Almost no where to be found through the first nine chapters. But there, in the last, there we all were. Dickinson and Woolfe, O'Neill and Crane, Middleton and Lindsey. Lytton Stratchey said, "*If this is dying, I don't think very much of it.*" And Auguste Comte, bless his humble soul, said of his own death, "*What an incomparable loss for the world!*"

I once wrote an allegory about a novelist who thinks he's dying and is so terrified at the prospect that his last dispatch will not be up to snuff with the *oeuvre* he's so carefully

JACK – con't

fashioned, that he starts to converse less and less, selecting his words so judiciously that ultimately, he doesn't speak at all. He lives the last three years of his life speechless, stricken by this irrational fear, until finally he passes, never telling the ones he's loved most, how much they meant to him....A little gloomy, huh? Yes, well, not one of my more cheerful compositions. But I don't know. Maybe the Mehar Baba had it right. He expressed an immortal adage, in every respect transcendent, and then upon observing its perfection, its absolute unsurpassability, he smiled at the Brahmins at his side, nodded contentedly, and didn't speak again for last forty-four years of his life. His instruction: "*Don't worry. Be happy.*"Yes. *We are* all so particular. For *it is* that important.

SHELLY

How is Dick anyway?

MARILYN

He's fine.

SHELLY

Is he still courting you?

MARILYN

Mr. McDonough isn't *courting* me.

SHELLY

C'mon, the man's been *wooing* you ever since you moved down here.

MARILYN

He has not!

SHELLY

Like Florentino pining fifty years through conflict and cholera for his one true love, only to realize his dream, forever adrift on the wellsprings of love under the yellow flag of pestilence.

MARILYN

A tad too melodramatic Shelly.

SHELLY

Perhaps. But I think there's a little truth in there somewhere.

MARILYN

The truth is exactly what I make it.

SHELLY

I have no doubt. But I would beware "*The Seagull*" all the same.

MARILYN

And what's that?

SHELLY

Well, in a Chekhov play by that name, a young aesthete, not that Dick will be mistaken any time soon for either of those *but*, a young aesthete loses the girl he's loved his whole life when she runs off after another man, a famous writer no less, to herself become an actress in the rough and tumble theater world of 19th century Moscow.

MARILYN

A love story.

SHELLY

Indeed. While there, the rogue impregnates her. Then he leaves her, alone, with child, to make do on her own talents.

MARILYN

One of my Harlequin romances.

SHELLY

But alas, our leading lady founders. She loses the child, and returns home to the old village, shamed and destitute, to endure the greatest sin of all.—That of being a minor talent in a world rife with prodigious ones.

(they share a telling look)

Ah, but be not forlorn my dear *Mamochka*, our young protagonist professes his eternal love for her, all over again.

MARILYN

(pause)

Well do finish Shelly. What becomes of our young hero? Something uplifting, I'm sure.

SHELLY

(pause, grave)

She thinks him even more ridiculous now, and proclaims to love the blackguard all the more.—And then our young aesthete kills himself, while his mother waits anxiously in the other room....Don't say I didn't warn you.

MARILYN

I won't.

SHELLY

(pause)

Spreading happiness and good cheer throughout the land.

(after drying her hands, she heads towards the phone on the wall near the screen door)

MARILYN

Yes. Which reminds me, I have to call your Aunt Ethel. You know she's living in Delray Beach now. In a community off A1A. Not really my taste. All these cookie cutter complexes that have these tiny little apartments with these tiny little balconies and you don't know who you're living next to. Mostly goyim, I think.

SHELLY

I don't want to see anyone.

MARILYN

Yes I know. You never do. But your Aunt Ethel isn't just anyone. And besides she hasn't seen you in nearly two—

SHELLY

I CAN'T SEE ANYONE!....Not right now.

(slowly, she hangs up the phone, then moves back to cleaning)

SHELLY

I'm sorry. I'm just not in the mood right now, to deal with people.

MARILYN

Ethel's a pain in ass anyway. Always talking about your cousin Paul and the two grandchildren. Brat one and brat two as I've taken to calling them. Not that it wouldn't be nice to have something to *add* to that conversation except divorce, but you reward me in other ways. And you can't always—

SHELLY

Hyperion let me go.

MARILYN

What? No! They can't *do* that. Can they do that?

SHELLY

Apparently.

MARILYN

But you had a contract. I thought you had a contract.

SHELLY

I did.

MARILYN

So how can they do that?

(SHELLY walks to the refrigerator and takes out the same bowl of tuna fish)

SHELLY

Because they negotiated an *out* clause.

MARILYN

What's that?....Shelly what is that?

SHELLY

It says if I don't meet certain expectations stipulated in the contract, they can cancel it and pay me nothing.

MARILYN

What kind of expectations? I don't understand. Shelly what kind of—

SHELLY

They expect me to write something publishable. Those bastards.

(he looks through the drawers for another fork)

MARILYN

What do you mean? I don't understand—

SHELLY

What don't you understand?! I'm a writer! That's what they pay me to do. When I don't, there's a problem. They're funny like that.—When I couldn't, phhht. Actually, if the truth be told, I didn't write anything at all. That'll teach 'em.

MARILYN

Can they do that?

SHELLY

Yes Mother, I just told you they could.—Just like Carlisle did.

MARILYN

(getting up to close the drawers)

Well, why did you put that in there?

SHELLY

(with a full mouth)

Why did I put what in where?

MARILYN

The out clause.

SHELLY

I don't know. My agent did it.

MARILYN

Why did he do that?—Shelly why did he do that?

SHELLY

(he chews for a while)

Because it was the only way anyone would give me a contract. After Carlisle let me go, no one would touch me.

(JACK starts looking for something on the desk, shuffling the papers around)

MARILYN

Oh who's to say what's publishable or not?

SHELLY

Publishers are Mother. Publishers are who's to say—

MARILYN

It took your father seven years to get his first book published. Every major publisher passed on it at least two times. Those little *homosexual* men with their bow ties and matching handkerchiefs. When it finally came out, and what a success it was, all those other publishers were kicking themselves, just kicking themselves, climbing over one another to get his next book.—

SHELLY

It's a different world now—

MARILYN

Literally climbing over themselves to get at your father in that little apartment we had in Brooklyn. But he never went to them. No sir! He stayed with Ned Jenson his whole career. Because he believed in that first book!

SHELLY

It's not the same as in Father's day. It's more of a business—

MARILYN

Ned became his tutor, his editor, his best friend. He believed in your father. He believed in his work. You've just got to find someone like Ned to handle you. To see you get treated right. Not with any *fancy* clauses saying—

SHELLY

DIDN'T YOU HEAR ME, I SAID I DIDN'T WRITE ANYTHING! Nada. Zilch. Zero!....Nothing. Not a single word.—They can't publish what I *don't* write!

(he puts the tuna fish bowl back into the refrigerator, with fork inside. MARILYN watches him apprehensively)

MARILYN

I'm sure it's nothing. You've had bouts like this before.

SHELLY

This is different. I can't focus. I can't—I can't concentrate on anything.

(MARILYN goes to the refrigerator, takes out the fork from the bowl and puts it into the sink)

MARILYN

That doesn't mean anything. Of course not. It's just a little case of—last time, before you wrote "*Semblance*," I remember how you were. Stormy like a colic baby.

SHELLY

It's different this time.

MARILYN

That's what you said the last time and as it turned out—

SHELLY

This is different!—I know it. I can feel it.

MARILYN

(pause)

It's just nerves. You'll see. Last time you were sure. I'm sure it's nothing.

SHELLY

Have you thought anymore about my writing about father?

*(MARILYN stops cleaning. There is a sharp, long pause.
JACK, still searches, as he speaks to the audience)*

JACK

Have you ever lost something, misplaced it, when you were sure you knew where it was? Maybe you had put it some place special, to keep it out of harm's way, and had forgotten where that was. Or maybe it's something you always put in the same place, allowing the repetition to form a routine in your life, like putting your car keys in a jar in the foyer or the dog's leash on the door knob to the hall closet. You know it's there. It's got to be there. Right where you always put it. Right where it's always been.

(he's now moving things feverishly)

But for some reason—you can't get at it. It's gone. It's gone when it's, it's got to be there....For crying out loud, I put it right here! It was just here—a minute—Goddamn it....*goddamn it!* I put it right—I put it right, AAACH!

(He sweeps a whole pile of papers and objects of the desk in a mad fury. He stares first at the pile on the floor, then finally at the audience)

JACK

That's what it feels like, when it first begins.

(JACK slowly, feebly, picks up the papers he's thrown)

SHELLY

Have you? Because you know I really think—

MARILYN

I told you there was nothing more to think about.

(MARILYN begins to clean, but when SHELLY speaks, she stops)

SHELLY

I don't need your permission Mother. Or your authorization....But I want it. I want you to give it to me. It would make it so much easier for me. If you only understood my deficiency, if I only had your support.—Or if not that, if that's too much to ask, then at least just your acceptance.

(she begins to clean again. Long pause)

When I was in town yesterday. I went driving back by the Powerlines.

MARILYN

What on earth did you do that for?

SHELLY

Searching for something historical.

MARILYN

(pause)

Have they paved it in yet?

SHELLY

No they haven't. There were just some kids back there on motorbikes. Actually, if I didn't have my Jeep, I don't think I'd ever've gotten out of there.

MARILYN

I would've thought they'd have paved it over by now. To this day, I don't know what your father was thinking. But he was always like that.

SHELLY

I know.

MARILYN

He was always going and doing just what he pleased. If he wanted to go fishing, he'd go fishing. If he wanted to go driving over mounds and ditches, well then that's just what he was going to do and you couldn't stop him. He'd been talking about it for years. I remember him talking about it all the time with Curtis Phillips, but I never really thought he'd do it.

SHELLY

Curtis said the same thing. I stopped by the diner while I was there.

MARILYN

Did you? How is he?

SHELLY

Fine. He sends his love.

MARILYN

Oh that's sweet. He's a dear man. A real credit. That's what your father always said. Every time he went to visit him—

SHELLY

I've been back there!—I have. I've driven through the ditches and over the mounds. Once you get past the tree line, where the car was found, there's scarcely a tree big enough to run into.

MARILYN

(pause)

Did I tell you I spoke to Ned?

SHELLY

Mother—

MARILYN

On the telephone to Phoenix. It was the first time in years. Five or six at least. Took me all day just to find his telephone number.

SHELLY

(pause)

No, you didn't.

MARILYN

I'm expecting his call back any minute. He promised me he would get some answers. I don't know what's taking him so long.

SHELLY

The man *is* ninety-three.

MARILYN

That's no excuse!....Besides, he only eighty-seven. This world would work so much better if I ran it.

SHELLY

I'm sure you think that.

MARILYN

I do! But God doesn't delegate much to me. Did you see the article in the New Yorker? It's criminal! Simply criminal! Lies and slander! Hubert is full of nothing but lies and slander! I won't stand for it.

SHELLY

I know.

MARILYN

How dare he imply there was something else! Not in this family. His life was good! He was happy! He can't do this. Not after all these years. It was a car accident! That's what the police said. Dr. Kassern signed the death certificate. The Mayor was on the news coast to coast! It's as simple as that!

SHELLY

Is it?

MARILYN

Of course it is!...Now! Just before the ceremony. With everyone coming. He timed this, this *attack!* It's criminal!

(SHELLY gets up, picks up a fallen piece of paper and hands it to JACK)

SHELLY

Hubert quoted some anonymous source of his. Some letter someone has, that suggests Father was thinking about—that he wasn't thinking clearly about his problem before he died.

MARILYN

What does that mean?! Who can that be?

SHELLY

I don't know. Father wrote a lot of people. He saw it as part of the job. To ensure that he would be published *posthumously*.

(he walks to the refrigerator and refills his drink)

MARILYN

But he never talked about it! He never brought it up. He was superstitious!—We have to put a stop this. I already spoke to Ned.

SHELLY

You said that.

MARILYN

We'll sue him. We'll sue Hubert for his lies and slander.

SHELLY

You can't sue him.

MARILYN

Oh yes I can! I'll sue him all righ—

SHELLY

You *can't* sue him!—You can't draw attention to it. Not like that.

MARILYN

(pause)

They are lies. Nothing but vicious lies and slander—

SHELLY

WHY DO YOU KEEP SAYING THAT!

(he spills some of his drink. After a pause, MARILYN grabs a sponge and starts to wipe it up)

SHELLY

Here, let me.

MARILYN

I've got it.

SHELLY

No let me—

MARILYN

I'VE GOT IT!

(she cleans furiously a moment before speaking)

He is *not* going to do this. Not now. Not after all this time. Hubert Johnson has been jealous of your father ever since the publication of "*Lenora Lore*." He never forgave your father for his success. Just because *his* books failed and he had to make his living in what your father believed the most vile, the most repugnant manner possible.

SHELLY

Literary critic.

MARILYN

Yes!—He didn't have the talent! He never had the talent your father had and he was jealous! Always jealous! But his attacks before have never been criminal. These are simply evil!

SHELLY

Yes they are.

MARILYN

And what he said about your father last July in *The Atlantic* was just not true! Only more of his campaign to smear his reputation.

SHELLY

He said Father was pedantically unfair to the Beat writers.

MARILYN

Yes!

SHELLY

Father *was* pedantically unfair to the Beat writers. He couldn't stand that style.

MARILYN

No one could!

SHELLY

Mother.

MARILYN

It's true!—Well, it is!

SHELLY

(pause)

I remember how Father put it. “They blur the lines between literature and mash with their circumscribed composition skills, their surfeit of proletariat provocations and their trifling, prurient imagery.”

MARILYN

Yes exactly!

SHELLY

(he smiles momentarily)

What a shame he disdained criticism so. He had such a gift for it.

MARILYN

He did have that.

SHELLY

No one could make you feel as *obtuse* as Father when he was busy making someone *else* feel obtuse. But you have to admit he was somewhat hypocritical. Especially near the end. Just read “*By the Light of the Flare*” and you'll see the way he—

MARILYN

That's not true!

SHELLY

C'mon Mom, he stole liberally from them with that staccato—

MARILYN

That's simply not true! Your father was a great artist!

SHELLY

He *was!* But you have to admit—

MARILYN

I will not have you blackening his name in this house!

SHELLY

I'm not *blackening* his name.

MARILYN

He was getting ready. I know it!

SHELLY

He hadn't produced anything new in almost *six years!* All he kept writing were new introductions to his anniversary reprints and the occasional laudatory review for all his old demimonde compatriots. A little *too* laudatory if you ask my opinion—

MARILYN

I WON'T HAVE IT! I WON'T HAVE IT IN THIS HOUSE! Your father was a great talent! A great talent!...I could always tell the way he was before he started something. Something wonderful. He'd start rising earlier and earlier. Staying up later and later. It seemed he never slept! Just lying there on the couch....And then he would begin. He'd write for days on end. In a torrent! I had to bring him his meals at his desk. He wouldn't leave it. I'd have to *beg* him to eat! For months it would continue. It would damn near kill him, like a breech birth....Then finally, *finally*, at the end of his strength, he would finish. Exhausted. Barely able to care for himself like a helpless child.—Then I would nurse him. I would nurse him back from wherever he was.

(she begins to clean again)

He was getting ready. I know it.

SHELLY

(pause)

Yes. I'm sorry. Of course he was.

MARILYN

Hubert is *not* going to do this! Not now! Not this time!

(MARILYN goes to the refrigerator and takes out some carrots and moves to the sink)

SHELLY

No. Don't worry. We'll think of something.

(MARILYN begins peeling the carrots into the sink, tearing into them with broad, firm strokes)

Fade to Black

ACT 2

It is roughly an hour after the previous act. MARILYN and DICK sit quietly at the table, cups of coffee on matching saucers lie before them. A glass vase holds a small, but exquisite bouquet of purple anemones. Though speechless, they seem completely together as a series of smiles and glances, proffered and returned, express an ease and comfort more than words every could. There are long pauses before and in-between their bouts of talking.

DICK

The wisteria.

MARILYN

Yes.

DICK

I'll get to it.

(MARILYN nods in understanding as they fall back into reverie)

MARILYN

And the fern.

DICK

I see it.

MARILYN

With the rain we've been having.

DICK

I know. Yes. Hunh.

(a silence again, barely interrupted by sips and wan smiles)

DICK

Where is he again?

MARILYN

At the store.

DICK

Oh right, right. That's right.

MARILYN

Left in such a hurry, he forgot his toiletries.

DICK

That happens.

(a long pause)

Does he know?

MARILYN

No.

DICK

About us—

MARILYN

I know what you mean.

(They share a look that leaves DICK just nodding)

MARILYN

He'll be back soon.

DICK

I don't mind.

MARILYN

Dick please! With all that's going on. Shelly, here now. Hubert writing these terrible, terrible things. It isn't the right time.

DICK

It never is.

MARILYN

That's not true! There is. There will be.

DICK

Yes Marilyn. Of course, of course.

MARILYN

Richard....

(In lieu of words, DICK reaches out and covers her hand, squeezing it with great emotion. MARILYN responds by eventually covering his with hers lovingly, then pats it)

DICK

“Que sera, sera. What will be, will be, they say.”

(They smile a contented moment together. Then as if realizing the potential risk in this situation, she removes her hand, MARILYN rises, moves to the sink with her cup and saucer, washes them briefly and sets them out on the drying rack)

MARILYN

I'm worried Dick.

DICK

I know.

MARILYN

I've built a foundation. I've built a life here.

DICK

You have.

MARILYN

He can't just tear things down like that.

DICK

He wouldn't do that.

MARILYN

No!....

DICK

We'll work it out together.

(MARILYN smiles at DICK deeply, almost believing him. Then she hears a sound and looks out the window over the sink)

MARILYN

That's him. That's the car in to driveway.

DICK

I'm moving.

(DICK rises from his chair with as much alacrity he can muster and moves towards the sink with his cup and saucer. MARILYN meets him halfway and takes them from him. He moves towards the screen door)

DICK

I'll be on the trimming.

MARILYN

And don't forget the tomato vines.

DICK

No, I haven't.

MARILYN

Dick....

(he stops before the door and turns)

Thank you for these.

(DICK smiles happily, nods, and moves out the door)

DICK

“Que sera, sera. What will be, will be, they say.”

(MARILYN finishes washing the incriminating dishes and quickly peels some potatoes into the sink)

SHELLY

(offstage)

Mother.

MARILYN

Here! In here!

(SHELLY comes on stage carrying a small plastic bag as MARILYN looks over her shoulder to see)

MARILYN

Did you get what you need?

SHELLY

Only some off it. Razors and a toothbrush. And they don't carry Old Spice.

MARILYN

No? Since when?

SHELLY

Publix doesn't inform of their stocking decisions.

MARILYN

Oh it's probably there. You just didn't look for it in the right place.

SHELLY

You don't think I'm capable of finding the deodorant aisle.

(MARILYN turns to him, checks him up and down, then turns away. SHELLY stands before the table, puts down the coupon, and focuses briefly on his book without touching it)

MARILYN

How 'bout I make you some bananas and sour cream. Huh? With lots of salt, just like you like.

SHELLY

I'm not hungry.

MARILYN

Shelly you look awful! You're not eating enough! Looking at your picture on the back of "Vainglory" and looking at you now, I can see the weight you've lost.

SHELLY

I'm an artist Mother, we're supposed to look like crap. Makes people think we're exceptional.

MARILYN

Nonsense.

SHELLY

Nope it's true. Dying for our art and all that bullshit. Not that the world wouldn't benefit from a few of us pretentious bastards actually *dying*!

MARILYN

Sheldon, be serious. You've got to take better care of yourself. That's not going to help. Why don't you try a little exercise? Jogging or tennis. Or basketball! You used to like that. Join one of those gym clubs they have. I hear lots of pretty girls go to these places nowadays.

(SHELLY, who has been ignoring this last, looks in the direction of the backyard through the screen door)

SHELLY

Dick's outside, trimming the branches of the fern.

MARILYN

I hope he's not too close to my azaleas.

SHELLY

He's nowhere near them.

(as she dries her hands and goes over to open the screen door)

MARILYN

Last month he was mowing the lawn and he ran over the zucchini I planted by the side of the garage. He thought it was some wild weed growing.

SHELLY

He isn't anywhere near—

MARILYN

Dick, do be careful of those azaleas!

DICK

Don't worry Marilyn, I'm bein'.

(a crashing sound is heard)

MARILYN

Are you all right?

DICK

Sure sure. Just got my foot caught.

(As MARILYN goes back to peeling)

MARILYN

The man's a darling, but if you don't direct him all the time, nothing ever gets done right. He winds up making the problem worse than when he started.

SHELLY

Then why do you let him do it?

MARILYN

With the cost of professional gardeners.—But it's not the money!

(SHELLY gestures "I didn't say anything")

He's just a widower, that's all. He enjoys the work.

SHELLY

What nice flowers. A delivery from an admirer?

MARILYN

You know full well how they got there.—He does little fixing things for Mrs. Rosenberg, too.

SHELLY

But he brings you her flowers.

MARILYN

Lord knows what of mine he brings to that woman. Probably taking her some of my vegetables and parsley. I *know* I've been missing some recently!—He's just a lonely old man looking to fill up his time.

SHELLY

Maybe he wants to fill it up with you.

MARILYN

I have no room for that. Not with handling your father's papers. The licensing and the copyright approvals. And with preparing for the ceremony and all.

SHELLY

Maybe you should make room—

MARILYN

Now Sheldon *please*, that's enough!

(she peels a few more fierce strokes then opens the screen door)

Dick! Don't forget to clean the drain this time.

DICK

I won't Marilyn.

MARILYN

But the last time you forgot and when that storm came last week, the pool overflowed and drenched the whole porch.

DICK

I understand.

(she shuts the door and goes back to peeling)

SHELLY

You're a hell of a flirt Mother. Quite the coquette. Though I'd never have pegged Dick for the submissive type. But I bet he stays up all night just fantasizing about you *bossing* him around.

MARILYN

Shelly!

SHELLY

Scantly dressed, wearing some frilly French Maid's get-up, all leather and lace, deep plunging décolleté—

MARILYN

Sheldon, stop that!

SHELLY

Have you seen the man's workroom!? I was over there the last time I was down. Remember? When I borrowed his sledge hammer to fix my computer.

MARILYN

Oh yes I do! I *do* remember that. Honest to God, I don't know what you were thinking.

SHELLY

Teaching it the "The Language of Consequences." You know what I want you to do, now do it! Or pay the consequences.

MARILYN

I'm not familiar with that.

SHELLY

No? Odd. I would've thought you would be.

(they exchange a testing look)

They have a language all to themselves. Not necessarily spoken, but it's communicated all the same. And it reminds us that there's a tremendous cost to the actions we take. And we need to be learn that, to remember it—to remember the cost that comes along.—Or at least it used to remind us.

MARILYN

I *do* remember the mess. I was picking up letters and transistors and things for the next three months.

SHELLY

You should see that workroom. He has these pictures of nude models and centerfolds taped to the walls. It made *me* blush with some of the more graphic material—

MARILYN

Do you know I found the Parentheses key stuck between the grating of the barbecue grill months later—

SHELLY

I mean I was blown away by the sheer magnitude of the flesh and carnality. My *god!* Girls and guys. Girls and girls. Girls and *dogs!* Girls and *cats* and dogs—

MARILYN

Will you stop it! There is nothing between Mr. McDonough and myself. And that's final!

(she moves to the screen door with growing fury)

Dick! The crab grass is breaking through the cracks in the sidewalks and the driveway!

DICK

I saw—

(MARILYN slams the door shut. SHELLY smiles smugly, hardly containing himself)

SHELLY

You minx you.

MARILYN

What?!

SHELLY

Nothing Mother.

(she goes to the refrigerator, brings out celery and begins chopping fiercely)

MARILYN

How is the weather up in New York?

SHELLY

It's been pretty quiet. Not too much snow. Though we're expecting a heavy winter. Not that those guys—

DICK

(through the screen door)

Excuse me Marilyn.—

MARILYN

Oh! You scared me.

DICK

Pardon me Marilyn. I'm sorry. *Hey Shelly!*

SHELLY

Hey Dick. How are you?

DICK

Fine fine. And yourself?

MARILYN

Yes Dick?!

DICK

Sorry Marilyn. Can I get a spot of Lemonade? It's awful humid out here today.

MARILYN

(suspiciously)

Yes. Come in. Wipe your feet first. I just washed the floors.

DICK

Sure, sure. I didn't know you were coming to town Shelly.

SHELLY

Oh, I figured I'd grant my mother the favor of my companionship.

DICK

Yes, heh-heh. That's nice. Real nice.

MARILYN

Take a seat Richard.

(as DICK sits next to SHELLY)

SHELLY

Say Dick, how's the ol' workroom coming along? Still mighty cozy in there?

DICK

(chuckling throughout)

Aw well now, you know.

SHELLY

I sure do. Worked your way up to non-domesticated animals yet?

DICK

All my friends keep me company on them cold winter nights.

SHELLY

Not sure it gets that cold in Siberia Dick?

MARILYN

Here's your drink Richard.

DICK

Uh, thank you Marilyn. Heh-heh, yes well, I say cold is cold. You don't need cold to feel cold. And I figger if I can't do it anymore, well, at least I can think about it some.

SHELLY

Yes sir!—

DICK

Matter a fact, I did more of that even when I could!

MARILYN

Richard!

DICK

Sorry Marilyn. Okay, sorry.

SHELLY

(they smile together)

You and me both brother. You and me both.

MARILYN

I have to move the laundry to the dryer and do some ironing.

DICK

Oh okay, Marilyn. Thank you, you go ahead.

SHELLY

Yes Mother, do go ahead. Dick and I are gonna sit here and chat awhile.

MARILYN

(pause as she turns to them)

Dick don't forget the front lamppost needs a new light bulb.

DICK

Already changed it.

MARILYN

Oh.—And the back porch?

DICK

Got that one too.

(she pauses a moment, glaring at them as they innocently stare back. Then she leaves. Soon as she does, they chuckle like old school chums who just got away with one. JACK gets up from his desk, after a quick search grabs a particular book and moves offstage. SHELLY watches JACK as he leaves)

DICK

Yes, yes.

SHELLY

Some things never change.

DICK

No sir, not her. She still thinks we're up to something. And we might just be. Not so sure I'd know if we were!

SHELLY

You've been good otherwise Dick?

DICK

Aw, can't complain, can't complain. Same old trouble with my back.

SHELLY

The back, huh?

DICK

Sure sure. And this little trouble with my bowels lately. And you know, come to think of it, I also got this constant pain in my—

SHELLY

But nothing to complain about, right?

DICK

(with an easy smile)

No. No, nothing really.

SHELLY

That's good to hear. What do you expect, a man your age doing all this schlepping? She's works you too hard.

DICK

Aw, it's all right. Keeps me busy. And you know there ain't nothing I wouldn't do for your Mother.

SHELLY

And how's that going? You getting anywhere?

DICK

Slow. Slow but we're getting there. More friendly with each passing day. I'm over here five days a week now. She usually invites me in for coffee.

SHELLY

Ah, the modern day love potion. Geriatric alcohol.

DICK

And we'll be talking so, I'll have to come back the next day to finish all the work I was supposed to do that day.

SHELLY

You give new meaning to *labor* of love.

DICK

I guess so, I guess so. A couple of weeks ago, she baked me some cookies to take home after.

SHELLY

Be careful Dick, her baking's been compared to Little Big Horn. Few survivors. How were they?

DICK

(whispered)

Awful. Just awful. These rum raisin walnut oatmeal—turds.

(they both laugh loudly. Then we hear MARILYN from offstage)

MARILYN

Richard?!

DICK

(quietly to SHELLY)

But I ate 'em. Everyone. Yes Marilyn?!

MARILYN

Don't forget about the palm fronds.

DICK

No Marilyn, I won't.

(they listen for a second, awaiting her next request)

Yes well, I guess I'm wearing her down.

SHELLY

You're Don Quixote Dick. You know I'm rooting for you.

DICK

Yes sure, I know it, I know you are. Yes....You know Shelly, your Mom's pretty upset about this Hubert business.

SHELLY

(pause, grave)

Yes. We all are.

DICK

Do you think there's anything to it?

SHELLY

Every rumor's true Dick. Some small part or parcel of it. Otherwise, it would be just some foolish gossip that no one would ever take seriously.—Once a rumor's out there, if the public believes it's possible, they'll believe it's true.

DICK

(genuinely)

Yes sir. Truth's a mighty changeable thing. I always found it kinda depends on which side of the street you're standing. And it's about as liable to change as you are to cross the street.

SHELLY

Well put.

DICK

Mmm hmm. Come by that lesson the hard way. And most like those, aren't the kind you want to have to learn twice.

SHELLY

Sounds like you've got some stories to tell there partner.

DICK

I do. I most certainly do. But they ain't any I'm gonna be sharing with no writer.

SHELLY

Ha! A prudent philosophy. We're a pretty unscrupulous bunch.

DICK

Heh-heh, yes. But I will tell you what my daddy told me just before he walked out on my mom and me and my five sisters. God knows how long ago this was. Couldn't've been more than five or six myself. He said "Kid," since I was the only boy, he always called me "kid." All my sisters he called "girl."

SHELLY

Very fitting.

DICK

But all five of 'em! "Girl, don't do that. Girl, get me that beer can." Nobody knew who the heck he was a'talking to. With my mother in the room, sometimes there'd be six women trying to figger it out!—He was a crazy bugger. So he said "Kid, here's the first lesson to learn. Learn things the first time cause you might not make it to the second time."—That's all he says! After that he slips me a saw-buck, smiles at me real self-satisfied like, and then keeps on going. A year later, he was gone for good!

SHELLY

Wisdom beyond its words.

DICK

I agree, but I was five!

(they laugh together)

Yes, yes it sure is. But it's an awful hard rule to follow. Cause it ain't the knowing something that's the hard part. It's the keeping known. Anybody can know something. Everybody knows lots of things. But keeping it, sheltering it close by, well now, that I have a knack for. What I know, I keep.

SHELLY

I bet you do. Your father'd be proud.

DICK

Aw, no, he was a crooked ol' bird. Heard he got shot in some card game years later. At the time, alls I remember thinking was, what was the thing that day he hadn't learned. Because whatever it was, he sure wasn't gonna get to learn *that* one again!

(they laugh as SHELLY gets up to refill his glass, after which he settles leaning against the counter)

SHELLY

That's great. My father would've loved talking to you. *He'd've* stolen plenty. You're just like one of his characters, but better. You're authentic.

DICK

Yes, yes. But not as much as I used to be.

SHELLY

My mother ever talk to you much about my father. No, I guess she wouldn't. She has far too much class for that. Much more than me apparently.

DICK

That's all right. You go right ahead. I know what he was. I know what I am.

SHELLY

I'll always envy you that Dick. That makes you about the wisest man I know....My father was a deity in that little burg of ours. The attention, the privilege. In the one horse town of Samuels New Jersey, Jack Greer was *Secretariat*. He loved that town, and they him. He commended it to all his friends. Memorialized it in story and poem.

*"Lush at landing, the smile remains
Upon the eyes revealing perennials.
What time will tame, but today—
For a moment, begins anew.
On coming life—
On coming home to Samuels."*

DICK

You remembered that. That's nice.

SHELLY

He published that in *Harpers*, September two years before he died. Poetry wasn't his strong suit. Decent sense of metre, less so of structure. But he did have a way of making it seem romantic. And I guess it was to him. Ball fields and playgrounds and the county store. The just rewards of a victorious Brooklyn boy.

DICK

I guess it wasn't your style of place?

SHELLY

Me? I couldn't get out of there fast enough. Go someplace where there was something to do, something to live!—But not him. He wanted to be the country squire, the landed gentry, and they granted him that fantasy. Hell, they bathed him in it! And in return he put that town on the map. One of his short stories, "*Samuels' Game*" was about an afternoon he spent watching one of my little league games. It made it into the Best American Short Stories Collection of 1972.

(SHELLY pours an almost full glass into the sink, but still holds the glass as he tells the story)

DICK

Where'd the town get its name?

SHELLY

It was named after a revolutionary war preacher. The very Reverend Brick Samuels, who in the thick of battle one night, when supplies were out and munitions were low and the British were advancing, tore up bibles, *King James's bibles*, and set them on fire to use as flints to light the cannons. That always struck me so. How that man was willing to desecrate the symbol of all he held dear, for the sake of something he had to have.—Richie Carvlin did his sixth grade biography report on him. That's how I know. We had a lottery for our subjects and I drew George Washington Carver and now, twenty-five years later, all I can remember of my report is something about the peanut and some University, I don't even remember which, but I remember Richie's report. He was this sniveling little kid. His nose was always running and he was always wiping it with his hand up into his hair. Like this.—It grossed the hell out of you.

DICK

Heh-heh, I bet, I bet.

SHELLY

His mother probably did the whole damn project for him because the boy, the boy was none too bright. He broke the world record for three-second violations on my 7th grade basketball team. Dumb kid could never quite grasp the fact that you couldn't stand in the key forever.—Imbecile. It was just a local recreation league for kids. Every kid had to play at least one quarter. But I'm mean I'm telling you I *still* remember it and it *still* bothers me! Must've cost me eight points a game that season. He would just, just *stand* there until the referee called him for it. I swear he did it on purpose. Once he got whistled four times down in a row! In a row! He would just run down the court and, and stand there! How goddamn difficult is it to understand that you *can't!*, you are *not allowed!* to just stand in this, this painted area, this outlined space with your *stupid pimpled* face like some *stupid pimpled* totem pole waiting for the ref to call you for it! And every *goddamn* time down he would just, just, just run there like some *fucking* yo-yo on a string, like some *dumb fucking*—

(he stops, noticing Dick staring at him with worry)

SHELLY

I uh—I'm sorry Dick. I talk too much about myself. Writer's habit.

DICK

No no, it's all right. I always like listening to you go on.

SHELLY

Thanks. I *think*.

(SHELLY washes out the glass)

DICK

You still having troubles?

SHELLY

Troubles is what I do ol' buddy. They are the trade I deal in.

DICK

Yeah, I figgered. You coming down here like this, unexpected. You need the sledge hammer?

SHELLY

Nope. Just busting pencils now. Lot less shrapnel....He was my father Dick. Never Pop or Dad or Old Man. Always Father.—He was their carnival attraction, but he was my father.

(he places the glass on the drying rack)

It has way it's with you, that town. You ask anyone from Samuels today where they're from, and they'll say the town where Jack Greer made his home.

DICK

Sounds like a match made in heaven.—You going to be all right?

SHELLY

(pause)

Yeah. I think so. Not that I wouldn't benefit from a perusal of your work room.

DICK

Yes sir, that can't help but help. It'll cure whatever ails you.

SHELLY

Amen, brother.

(they laugh)

MARILYN

(offstage)

Sheldon, do you need some wash done while I'm here?

SHELLY

No. Thank you!

DICK

Well, best be getting back to it.

SHELLY

Don't want to upset Dulcinea. You keep plugging away at her Dick.

DICK

Don't you worry about that.

(to offstage)

Gonna take care of that drain now Marilyn!

MARILYN

Don't forget to put in new chlorine tablets this time!

DICK

I won't!

(to SHELLY)

More work. Always more work.

SHELLY

Viva La Mancha!

(DICK waves good-bye as an answer. SHELLY gets up, walks around the kitchen and leans on the counter near the phone. He

pulls some faded, yellow pages from his pocket and reads them momentarily. As he hears MARILYN's voice, he rushes the pages back into his pocket, moves to the table and pretends to be breezing through the same newspaper)

MARILYN

(offstage)

Dick don't forget about the tarp!

SHELLY

He can't hear you!

MARILYN

What?!

(she comes on-stage)

Where's Dick?

SHELLY

Out tilting at windmills.

(MARILYN moves towards to the screen door)

MARILYN

I hope he doesn't forget to put the tarp over the hole in the roof. When it starts to rain, the water pours down through the—

(The phone rings. As she rushes over to it)

I bet that's Ned. Hello Ned....yes hi....yes....no. No! No that's not true!....But—but he doesn't *have* any sources!....What?....There is no—there *is* no letter Ned! I would have known if there was. You've got to stop him. Ned you've got to stop him. You tell him we'll sue him!....You tell him anyway! You tell him if he writes one more word about Jack, he'll be writing reviews in the poor house! In the poor house Ned! You tell him that. You tell him!....Yes, okay. Okay. You call me back. Please Ned. *Please!* Call me back. I'm waiting for your call....Yes. Yes, okay.

(she hangs up the phone slowly and waits there, lost. JACK comes in reading a book as he walks to the writing desk. He is engrossed in the book and does not even notice the two of them)

SHELLY

Bad news?—Mother was it bad—

MARILYN

Huh? What? Do you want something to eat?

(MARILYN moves towards the refrigerator)

Let me fix you a steak or something. I have some nice frozen shell steaks I bought at the Winn Dixie—

SHELLY

Was it bad news?!

(she stands silent before an open refrigerator)

MARILYN

Ned says we can't do anything. Hubert hasn't actually said anything yet. He's only *intimated*. Suggesting there might be some evidence. A letter.

(MARILYN closes the refrigerator door and takes down a big pot from above the refrigerator, fills it with water and puts it on the stove. MARILYN puts the carrots and various other things she's peeled and chopped into it. Occasionally, she adds some spices. There is a long pause before SHELLY speaks)

SHELLY

He's going to continue, you know that don't you?—If Hubert has a line on a story like this, he won't let it rest. He's always been like that. Especially when it comes to Father.

(MARILYN continues to cook, unaffected by what's been said)

Chicken soup?

MARILYN

I thought it might help.

SHELLY

(smiling faintly)

Couldn't *hoit*.

MARILYN

My mother said it could cure anything in this life. From a cold to cancer and everything in between. Every *single* male should know how to make a good chicken soup.

SHELLY

(pause)

We'll have to respond in some way. Publicly. A denial of some sort.

MARILYN

My mother always made the best. There was something in her Hungarian *stock* that made doing anything with chickens second nature.

SHELLY

We have to be careful. This could be very damaging to Father. His reputation, his lega—

MARILYN

You'd like that, wouldn't you?!...I was next. Ethel could never make one. It takes patience to do it right. It has to be done slowly, with care and planning. Attention to detail. With the skimming and the stirring. Chopping the vegetables. They must be in big chunks, not fine. Otherwise they get lost in the stewing. And the chicken, it has to be boiled before hand. Not like this. But bleached of its flavor. For two hours to build the broth correctly.

SHELLY

Was Father that selfish that he would have demanded this?

MARILYN

He was a writer.—Your father? Your father would've demanded more. He probably expected me to go with him to make sure his cloud was arranged like he liked. Enough was never enough for him. But not worse than he demanded of himself!—He demanded so much of himself.

SHELLY

(pause)

What was it like at the end?

*(the next section is **not** a conversation between MARILYN and JACK, though it should be staged that way or perhaps more like a musical duet. It is two voices explaining different views of the same events. They speak with increasing alacrity, getting faster and faster as it draws towards the conclusion. Both are lost in their recollections)*

JACK

(to the audience)

The first premonition comes when you're still a young man. In your twenties. Up to that point, it's only in nightmares. A chimera. Something that happens to other people. *Older* people. Or the star-crossed few. Maybe you start squinting more at highway signs or some hair collects in the shower drain. But it isn't real. Still, you're immortal.

MARILYN

As it got worse for him, he fought it. He fought it with every fiber of his being. But it didn't help. Nothing helped. It just kept getting worse for him.

JACK

At first glimpse, there's a pause, a caution, but you don't give it counsel. And later, later but sooner than you ever thought possible, you begin to form some impression. Not quite cognition mind you, but just a perception of it. Creeping in stealthily. You're not healing the same. Cuts, bruises, they linger, become nagging. Things you didn't think were exercise, stairs, packages, become so now.

MARILYN

He'd spent his whole life controlling every little thing in his world. His work, his friends. His family. Can you imagine what he felt? What it felt like, not to be able to bring it forth? When after so long, it wouldn't respond to his call.

JACK

The tip of your tongue expands, ransoming so many things now, just out of reach. Things you knew, things you've always known. It's a reality, all right. A clearly defined destination. No longer diffuse or abstract. But discernible. Detailed. And it's pulling you. It's pulling you, dragging you down.

MARILYN

Your father suffered the more. The pressure he put on himself to be who he was. To still be *that* man, the man everyone expected him to be. The one he created for himself. The one he created for all the world to esteem.

JACK

The ideas, the inspiration, that irreplaceable currency. They get so difficult, so obscure. And you feel it. Like water draining from the bath, it's a fading. Evanescent in the gloaming.

(JACK looks frantically for his notebook)

MARILYN

He couldn't understand it, the changes, the lapses—

JACK

You scramble, scratching and clawing to hang on. To keep a hold—

MARILYN

What was happening to him, what was happening to his mind—

JACK

To hold on. I have to hurry. I have to hurry to get it all down. I've got to!—

MARILYN

What was happening to his talent, his gift. That mind—

JACK

No! I'm not done yet! I'm not done with it!—

MARILYN

That wonderful, wonderful mind. It wasn't fair—

JACK

What was I—I was—I, I can't—*I CAN'T!*

(JACK slowly, defeated, sinks back into the chair as MARILYN moves to cook, starting and stopping throughout)

MARILYN

It wasn't fair to him. It wasn't fair....Being the wife of an artist is an art form itself. There is a talent to what we do. *Your* wife never grasped that.—We keep it together, we make it work! We do the things that need to get done, so *you* can do the things you want. This is a job! This is what I did. I was the woman behind and I stood firm....When he feared, I comforted him. When he doubted, I encouraged him. I *compelled* him to believe. It was about us! *He* was us and he was a success! He was *my* success!....We don't get awards. We don't get praise and plaques and groupies. We don't get remembered and venerated on high. We get peace! Success brings peace! Peace from the worries and the problems. Peace from the questions. Peace from the questions and the answers about *fidelity* and *trust!* And that late Tuesday night he didn't call and another Saturday afternoon when I can't find him because we know! We know! Don't get me wrong, I understood! I understood the deal and it was my choice. Mine! Don't let it be said any other way. I came to it with my eyes open wide. I may not have had many other options, but I had a choice! Our choice is between being good or bad at it and I was *great!*—I was great at it because I understood.

(she begins to cook again)

I understood....We get peace for our success.—It is no small thing.

SHELLY

(pause)

Mother it's happening to me.

MARILYN

NO IT'S NOT!

SHELLY

(pause)

I can see it when you look at me. You know what it is.

MARILYN

It's just a *bad* spell.

SHELLY

Is it? I don't really know anymore. It feels so real. My mind—it's like a pinball in some two-penny arcade game. Bounding and bouncing, but I can't make it stop. Thinking about anything, thinking about everything, but what I need it to—when I need it to.

MARILYN

That's natural. That happens to all—

SHELLY

No! Not like this!—You know what it is Mother. You've seen it before. You know what I'm going through.

MARILYN

That's ridiculous.

(MARILYN begins pacing the kitchen as SHELLY rises to pursue her)

SHELLY

You're afraid too. It's the same with me. It's the same with me as it was with him.

MARILYN

It is not!

SHELLY

I'm going to write about Father.

MARILYN

Absolutely not!

SHELLY

I'm going to write about Father. I have to Mother. It's all I've got left.

MARILYN

No! You will not do that to him!

SHELLY

It's the only thing. Don't you understand? Nobody wants me anymore. Nobody cares! I've lost it. Just like him. It's just like with him!

MARILYN

I won't allow it.—

SHELLY

Tell me what it was! Tell me what happened!

MARILYN

You will not!—

SHELLY

What did he do? Why'd he do it?

MARILYN

I won't discuss this.—

SHELLY

What happened that day?!—

MARILYN

Get away!—

SHELLY

What happened at the Powerlines!—

MARILYN

Get away from me!—

SHELLY

WHY MOTHER, WHY?! WHY DID HE KILL HIMSELF—

(MARILYN slaps him and they stand a brief moment afterward)

MARILYN

(with low, fierce anger)

Never! Do you hear me? I will *never* allow it!

(MARILYN exits. SHELLY gradually drifts to a chair at the table and takes out the same faded yellow pages from his pocket)

SHELLY

I have to Mother. I have to. I don't have anything else.

(He shuffles them frantically, looking for something specific, desperately turning front and back. JACK gets up from his chair, looks at SHELLY. They stare momentarily, then SHELLY goes back to the papers, mumbling. JACK leaves slowly in the direction MARILYN has left)

Fade to Black

ACT 3

It is late at night, nearing 4:00 in the morning. There is a seeping darkness outside that blows in on the late night sounds of Gold Coast Florida: Crickets chirp, air conditioners hum, and other deafening sounds of silence and creatures predominate. JACK is seated in a leather chair which represents the living room (the writing desk is no longer in sight). A small table with a lowly-light lamp, an ashtray and a book stands besides it. The warm glow of his pipe can be seen faintly, portraying a relaxed, calm presence. SHELLY enters slowly, looking physically exhausted, dressed in a T-shirt and long pant pajamas with his hair tussled from failed attempts to sleep. He doesn't seem to notice JACK He goes to the refrigerator, pulls out the tuna fish bowl and without thought, pulls out the silverware drawer and gets a fork. He turns and leans against the counter facing the audience and begins to alternately eat and play with the food. There is a very long awkward pause as JACK smokes and SHELLY forks.

SHELLY

I don't know how much longer.—Every time I lie down, it attacks me....What was like? How did you handle it?

JACK

(he blows out a cloud of smoke)

Oh, I don't know. Same as you I guess.

SHELLY

Was it the same?

JACK

Similar.

SHELLY

Did it work?

(JACK just looks at him as his answer. SHELLY nods, moves to the kitchen table and sits down at the chair farthest from JACK)

SHELLY

Did you have visions?

JACK

Yes. Not of my father, of course. But of other writers. Dead writers. Hardy. Maugham.

SHELLY

What did they say?

JACK

That I was failing them, letting them down. The fraternity. “Vincet omnia veritas” and all that *crap*.

SHELLY

Did you have chills? I have such terrible chills.

JACK

That's just the pressure.

SHELLY

And doubts.

JACK

Sure.

SHELLY

I doubt everything. Everything I know—

JACK

That's typical.—

SHELLY

Everything I've always known....

JACK

Doubt and fear. The essential writer tools.

SHELLY

(pause)

It's like I'm some kind of impostor, but only I know it. And someday someone will peel off this mask I've been wearing and find it's only me there, suffocating all this time.

JACK

(almost fondly)

The insecurities.

(SHELLY opens the cover of his book still lying on the table)

SHELLY

And then they'll look back and they'll see. They'll realize the mistake they've made. What it really was, what *I* really am.—I hear them in my sleep. They scream it and I can't escape them, their voices in my head. Yelling and screaming. Always the same. And I try to escape it but I can't. "He's a fraud! A fraud! A FRAUD!"

(JACK, uncaringly loud, bangs out his pipe into an ashtray. This is done long enough to stop Shelly's rant. Then a long pause as SHELLY goes back to playing with the food)

SHELLY

Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you let me know?

JACK

I tried, but it wasn't—

SHELLY

We could've talked about it. You could've warned me.

JACK

I couldn't—

SHELLY

You could've told me what it was like—

JACK

No!—

SHELLY

What I could do?! What I could change to—

JACK

NO!...When it started, you were just beginning then. It was all happening for you. That first attention was so special for us, your mother and I. It was everything we ever dreamed of, the both of us. Aeneas confirming, illuminating his father's acclaim. Ascending to greater heights, the founding of Rome! "Muse, tell me of the man of many wiles!"—

SHELLY

That's "*The Odyssey*" Father!—"I sing of arms and of a man." That is the first line of "*The Aeneid*."

JACK

(pause)

Yes. So it is....I wanted it so much for you. For us, you and I. I didn't notice when it first began. It started very slow. I took longer walks, hotter showers. Wore an old sweater. Changed my drink from Scotch to Vodka. Thought that might help.—I went back, read my early material.

SHELLY

I've done that.

JACK

Sure, it's natural. You go back to the beginning. To find where you got lost. To find where *it* got lost.

SHELLY

Do you find it?

(Again, a look is his answer. SHELLY gets up and returns the tuna fish bowl to the refrigerator, making sure to remove the fork and then settles against the counter)

JACK

It's truly a wondrous thing to be able to create. That urge, the impulse. It's what separates us from the *other* blood-thirsty beasts in the Animal Kingdom. I don't know where it comes from. The muse? It was something I always did. Even as a young child. I always just marveled that it came. Thankful, grateful I had something in this world. My father was a carpenter. And his father before him. Working stiffs in the summer heat scraping hard to earn a living, building cabinet desks and bookshelves and gun racks. Neither of them died with all of their fingers! Their mangled bodies, forever bent from stooping and slouching their whole lives, till finally their worn-down hulls just gave out on them! With nothing left to them but time!—I was glad I had something distinctive. Singular.

SHELLY

Why have it at all if you can't keep it?

JACK

All an artist needs is something to say and the will to say it.

SHELLY

You don't control it.

JACK

The rest is all technique and evaluation.

SHELLY

It controls you. It *feeds* on you.

JACK

It feeds itself! Once you allow yourself to feel it—

SHELLY

Give me more. Open me more!—

JACK

To accept that it's in you, it all opens wide.—

SHELLY

Exposing and consuming!—

JACK

It expands! It has to!—

SHELLY

Consuming you! Consuming and devouring all that is you!

JACK

(pause, wistfully)

It is a charmed life we lead. The eternal child, a free spirit. But it does not mean we are *free* of the spirits.

(SHELLY takes the stirring spoon lying on the counter top, opens the pot on the stove which has a low flame underneath and skims the dross off the chicken soup into the sink)

JACK

We think the rules shouldn't apply to us, that we deserve better, some preferential treatment because we're trying to do something, to say or save something. As if having made that choice alone merits some special dispensation. But it doesn't! We didn't make a choice to save anyone but ourselves. And out of some innate sense of economy or efficiency, we have this thing inside, this capacity to see more clearly, to feel more deeply. We don't necessarily want it. We certainly didn't ask for it. But we have it all right, so goddamn it, we might as well use it! It's a responsibility! To say the things that need to be said. To give voice to that without!...And sometimes, sometimes it *is* so wondrous. But that's the narcotic, insidiously maneuvering. Sweet misery, it's an addiction all right. You keep up with it at first, but it's not enough. The last dose is never quite massive enough to satisfy.

SHELLY

To satiate.

JACK

To palliate.

SHELLY

To mitigate.

JACK

To conciliate.—

SHELLY

To ameliorate.—

JACK

To alleviate.—

SHELLY

To slake—

JACK

Slake?!—To slake. Well done. Very well done.

(as SHELLY walks into the living room)

SHELLY

But what's left to say Father? Hasn't it all been said before with such pathetic repetition. Blood and guts and violence and sex. Have an invasion! Have a war! Sadism and sodomy, incest and necrophelia. A sadistic, sodomitic, incestuous, necropheliac. That'll sell! That's proven! It sold for the Greeks and for de Sade. The public loves that. That'll keep you on the roster.—

JACK

You can't shock what's dead!—The charge passes right through....When you take away the eternal child's gifts, he can't play the same way anymore. Eventually, he'd rather just go on back home and not play at all.

SHELLY

(pause)

Why didn't you warn me?

JACK

Maybe it was just me. Maybe you had lamb's blood smeared over the door posts, and the Destroyer would pass over.

SHELLY

And it just got worse?

JACK

Concise thoughts seemed further and further away. Fresh ideas so distant, so removed from possibility. Something of the Gods! Something only geniuses do and even then only in rare moments of true inspiration. "Perilous nymph, mercurial goddess, why hast thou forsaken me?"

SHELLY

And then I won the Fulton Award. And six months later, the Simon deal.—You resented me.

JACK

(with love)

No.

SHELLY

You resented me. You resented the success and the attention.—

JACK

I did not!—

SHELLY

And the adulation and the money coming so fast for me. I hadn't earned it. I hadn't paid my dues!—

JACK

NO!....I just didn't understand. I had it! I *had* had it!—And it was gone.

SHELLY

“The son unborn mars beauty. Born he brings pain, divides affection, increases cares. His youth his father's envy, his friends his father's enemies, his growth—his father's decline.”

JACK

Oedipus?

SHELLY

Ulysses.

JACK

Ah. Yes.

SHELLY

(pause)

What can I do?

JACK

I wish to god I knew.

SHELLY

(moves near JACK, menacingly)

You know! You must know!

JACK

Son don't you think I would—

(SHELLY pulls JACK from his chair, shaking him violently)

SHELLY

Tell me, you brainless fool!

JACK

I don't know!

SHELLY

TELL ME! TELL ME!—

MARILYN

(offstage)

Shelly?!

(a long silence, then louder)

Shelly, is that you?

SHELLY

Uh!—It's okay! It's just me Mother. Go back to bed.

(coming in, MARILYN closes an old robe around her. In the early morning light, she looks every bit her age)

MARILYN

What, what are you doing? Who are you talking to?

JACK

Don't tell her. It will scare her.

SHELLY

No one. It's no one. I was just talking to myself.

MARILYN

To yourself?

JACK

You're frightening her!

SHELLY

I was just playacting. Between two characters.

MARILYN

What, two characters? I don't—

SHELLY

Trying out some lines. Between them.

JACK

That's good.

MARILYN

It's four in the morning.

SHELLY

I know. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you.

MARILYN

Can't you sleep?

JACK

She's worried.

SHELLY

No.

MARILYN

Please try dear. You need your sleep.

SHELLY

Don't worry, I will.

JACK

She doesn't believe you!

SHELLY

I finally have an idea. It's got me thinking.

MARILYN

(relieved as she can muster at this time of night)

Oh that's wonderful.

JACK

It's working.

SHELLY

Yes. It's a drama. I was only working out a scene.

MARILYN

You see, I told you it would come.

SHELLY

Yes.

JACK

She believes you.

MARILYN

But it's late now. Write some notes down and go back to bed.

(she comes over to give him a kiss)

SHELLY

Yes I will. In a bit. You go back to bed now.

MARILYN

You're all sweaty.

SHELLY

It's nothing. I'm fine.

MARILYN

But you're all—

SHELLY

I'm fine!....You go back to bed. I'll go in a minute.

(she moves towards the bedroom)

SHELLY – con't

Mom—I'm sorry about today.

(she stops and turns to him slowly)

MARILYN

I remember how your father was.—Good night.

SHELLY

Good night.

(she leaves. JACK follows her in the direction of her bedroom. There is a long moment of silence as JACK lovingly touches the wall that connects to the bedroom)

JACK

That woman could forgive anyone. Nobody ever forgave as easily as she. It was always in her character. Of course, no one despised as easily either.

SHELLY

Especially when it came to defending you.

(JACK turns to look at SHELLY, then back to the wall)

She has Dick now. She baked him cookies.

JACK

As I remember it, that's hardly a sign of affection.—He's not like us. He's not a writer.

SHELLY

Let's put that in the plus column, shall we?....She's given everything to you. Let her have this.

JACK

I'm not stopping her! I want her to be happy. She deserves that.—She was always my fiercest protector. Right to the very end.

SHELLY

And past it.

(JACK shoots a bothered glance at SAMUEL.; then turns from the wall and moves to his chair)

SHELLY

You never paid him much deference.

JACK

Hubert? He was always quite a knavish fellow. Beneath all that smooth New England *savoir faire* lurks the specter of a bare knuckles street fighter. The cur. The caitiff!—But this time, this time he's met his match.

SHELLY

Couldn't he harm you?

JACK

Ach, I never pay attention to klieg light operators. There are positions with *power*, and then there are *powerful* positions.

SHELLY

Wasn't he a little of both?

(JACK waves disdainfully, then demonstrates with his hand on the table lamp next to him)

JACK

Every hand casts a tremendous shadow when it's held up close to the light. The trick is divining the substance of the shadow. Distinguishing matter from illusion. Abstracts from the material.—Besides, there isn't anything to worry about, now is there?

SHELLY

What if Hubert gets his illusory paws on the letter?

JACK

He won't.

SHELLY

What if he does? He'll print it. You know he will.

(they stare a moment, till JACK breaks off with an ironic smile)

Where did you get the gun?

JACK

I always had one lying around. In case I had to go on one of those damn hunting trips I was so famous for. Remember, I had a reputation to uphold.

SHELLY

Never let the truth get in the way of a good story.—

JACK

Never!—Anyway, the truth is exactly what the masses believe it to be. Nothing more, usually less. To wit I say, caveat lector.

SHELLY

My Latin finds me lacking.—

JACK

Let the *reader* beware!...Your Mother and I were vacationing overseas on Black Diamond bay, off the Ivory Coast of Africa. I think that's where I picked it up. A little black boy was there selling the last of his family's possessions to buy some food. Couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen. He was there with his little sister and I'll tell you *everything* was for sale that day.—I couldn't make out a damn word he was saying, and our guide could only translate half of it, but the only thing that interested me was that nickel-plated 38. It stood out so cold under that blistering sun. Like cobalt metal. And it felt so solemn in my hand. Religious. Divine....Seemed the father had been attacked by panthers in river months early. The boy said his father had killed three of them with that gun, fended off the rest with his bare hands, before finally succumbing.—If they believe the man, they will believe the myth.

SHELLY

Ecce homo.

(they share a hostile glance, which JACK ultimately breaks off into a game smile)

JACK

Wilde said, "To become a work of art is the only object of living."

SHELLY

He died a penniless, brokenhearted cuckold.

JACK

A masterpiece if there ever was one!

SHELLY

He also said, "One's real life is the one they do not lead." Anything else you care to share with me Father?

JACK

Maybe—maybe not.

(again, a harsh look is shared)

SHELLY

When did you know it was through?

JACK

When I knew I couldn't be more compelling than the evening news. When reality becomes more creative than fiction, it's time for fiction to step aside.

SHELLY

So you quit!

JACK

I didn't know what else to do.

SHELLY

You keep trying. You keep fighting it! You do something else!—

JACK

I didn't want to do anything else! I didn't *know* anything else. It's all I ever was!—And *I* couldn't do it anymore!—It takes great courage to see the truth about yourself. The real truth. Not some varnished, shiny fish that God manufactures in his woodshed. No sir, not for me! Because eventually you're not a shiny fish anymore. You're not a gifted writer. You're just a door stop or a wooden hammer in the shape of a fish, and your shine has all worn off and your substance is well nigh spent and you see it's better! It's better to replenish!....You'll see. You'll see how true it is.

SHELLY

How true what is Father?

JACK

Life—it is the only gifted writer left. And I couldn't compete....Moreover, I've always told you how important it is not to overstay your welcome. There is nothing worse than some doddering, old windbag spewing pinched epistles on love and life and death at a juncture when their genius can no longer muster the vibrant piquancy worthy of such weighty affairs.

SHELLY

How polite.

JACK

Utterly!

SHELLY

Unequivocally.

JACK

Indubitably!

SHELLY

Categorically—

JACK

Unilat—

SHELLY

Goddamn it! Will you stop it!—This is crazy.

JACK

I'd say.

SHELLY

Stop being so fucking cavalier!

JACK

I'm not the one having a conversation with his dead father.

SHELLY

Well I can't very well have a conversation with a live one!—You took care of that, didn't you?

JACK

(pause)

Hamlet, I am thy father's spirit.

SHELLY

(pause)

It's better this way, isn't it?—She has to see that. It's really best for all.

JACK

To tell the truth, I don't know. Gene O'Neill didn't produce *Long Day's Journey* in his own lifetime. And no one talked to Capote again after the first part of *Answered Prayers* showed up in *Esquire*. Not that anyone *talked* to him before it. You couldn't get in a godforsaken *word*, the damn besotted queen never shut up.

SHELLY

It's just that—I never thought it would be this way. That I would need to be one of those jackals. A carrion picking off the fetid remains of the dear.—What kind of person, what kind of child asks for everything? Give me everything. Everything you are, everything you live for.—What kind of world drives someone to that?

JACK

A writer's world.

(SHELLY looks at JACK with great enmity)

SHELLY

But you're gone. And I'm still here, having to go on.

JACK

Which of us are you trying to convince?

SHELLY

What the hell does that mean? I'm not trying to convince anyone.

JACK

Then what would you like me to say?

SHELLY

What you think! What you know! History rewrites thoughts, impressions, values constantly. Justification, validation, endorsement! It's only through the looking-glass of time, do we *think* we judge impact clearly. Designate correct policies. Assign blame and praise. It's in the ends, not in the means as it should be, as it ought to be!—But in the ends that we see ourselves. In an unclouded mirror's reflection, disputably vindicated or censured, exonerated or condemned—living inescapably with that determination.—People don't think so, but we all judge immediately. It's just that some of us judge more harshly.

JACK

(pause)

Words, words, words.

SHELLY

(pause)

You want a good story Father. I'll give you a good story. And it's true! Every last word of it.

(he sits in the chair closest to JACK)

Last spring, in a small town in Suburban New Jersey, a beautiful teenage girl gave birth to a baby boy at her senior prom. The child was one month premature, but for eight months she

SHELLY – con't

was pregnant and nobody knew. Not her classmates nor her boyfriend, nor even her loving, caring family. It had been a long winter and a cold spring. She wore bigger clothing, heavier sweaters. She took to wearing hats to hide the weight gain in her face. Just another beautiful teenage girl from the suburbs.—Her boyfriend and a couple of chums rented a limousine for the occasion. They were going in style, dressed in rented tuxes and tails. Her lavender dress matching his tie and cummerbund. A high neckline bodice concealing the burst of womanly cleavage, so natural to her state. The ride to the Hotel Devonshire had the typical prom night mischief. A smuggled bottle of champagne for the girls, a fifth of SoCo for the boys. Heh heh heh, we don't want the parents to know, we could get in trouble!—Underage kids getting smashed before the big event. Children playing at maturity....But our young parturient, she had unfortunate luck. Her water broke right there in the limo. But she was swift! A clever girl. She spilled her drink to account for the stain on the carpet. She crossed her legs for an hour to cover the spot on her dress. By the time they got to the prom, the contractions were at regular minute intervals. The pain was—excruciating. She told her boyfriend she felt a little faint from the champagne. Said she'd go to the bathroom to cool off for a moment....Then fifteen minutes later, in stall three of the first floor ladies room of the Hotel Devonshire, she delivered a living breathing baby boy, right there into the toilet.

(he laughs derisively)

And, and he's swimming there. She says later, he was just, just swimming there. Because it's all so natural to him. He's just exchanged amniotic fluid for toilet water, but who's quibbling. Hell, a fluid world is all he's ever known!—And it's all he ever would....But he's still attached to her. He's still attached by the umbilical chord....How'd she do it, huh? Huh? You're wondering? Because, because I'm wondering, too, you know. I mean I'm reading this story in the newspaper and I'm wondering, I'm wondering how'd she do it? Well I'll tell you. I'll tell you because this, this is the best part. This, I love this part because what's the big deal, right? Infanticide isn't new. Mothers have been killing their babies for thousands of years! Medea and Ino killing in the wake of Gods. Christ, India has killed *generations* to save them from the caste! But this is different, right. This is, this—we've changed! We're advanced! This is a technological age. We kill with proficiency now. With precision and consideration. Dollar cost averaging murder over tens of thousands. We've progressed to this. We've moved on for God's sake! This isn't the dark ages. These aren't prehistoric times. We don't need blunt objects anymore. We don't need sharpened shivs and spears. We've advanced, goddamn it! It's a new era! It demands a new method, a new means for a Mother to kill her child. An innovative artifact to cut the bonds of maternal weal!

(SHELLY moves his chair uncomfortably close to JACK and begins to act this out with one hand, open, palm up and one hand in a fist, knuckles up, about ten inches apart, moving outward and then in towards his body repeatedly)

SHELLY

So she fishes the child out of the toilet bowl, her child, her own flesh and blood and she takes the baby in one hand and the umbilical chord in the other and begins to shear it, back and forth against the *serrated* edge, of the toilet paper dispenser. The toilet paper dispenser! My god, those things can barely cut the fucking toilet paper! But can you see it? Huh? Yeah? Because, because I can see it! I can see it! I can just see her there, doing it. Shearing it back and forth, but it won't cut. It won't cut! So she keeps at it! She keeps cutting and cutting it! Shearing it. Shearing it! Gnawing and tearing at it!—

JACK

Stop it.

(JACK rises from his chair to escape the voice. SHELLY moves with him, pursuing, eventually backing JACK into a corner)

SHELLY

Ripping and tearing it but it won't give! So she continues—

JACK

Shelly!—

SHELLY

Ripping! RIPPING!—

JACK

Shelly stop!—

SHELLY

GNAWING AND TEARING!—

JACK

Shelly!—

SHELLY

SHREDDING AND TEARING!—

JACK

STOP!

(After a long pause, SHELLY turns from JACK and moves towards the leather chair)

SHELLY

When it was finally cut through, she wrapped the child in toilet paper, head to toe, and then coming out of stall number three, in the first floor ladies room of the Hotel Devonshire, she placed a paper towel in the baby's mouth, and put it in the garbage can there, like Moses placed on a bed of wicker, and went back to the prom. Dancing and singing. Dancing and singing and being young and free as all beautiful teenage girls are.

(he sits exhausted in JACK's chair, slouching down to sleep)

A toilet paper dispenser. *Christ!...*How do I compete—how do I compete with that?—I haven't written a word in fifteen months.

JACK

Shelly....

SHELLY

It's for everybody's good. I know it is.

JACK

I know Son. I know.

SHELLY

She has to let me. She has to.

JACK

I don't know if she will.

SHELLY

I'm just so tired. So tired.

JACK

(as he plays with Shelly's hair)

Sleep boy. Sleep. Get a good night's sleep.

SHELLY

You're all I have left.

JACK

I know Son. I know.

SHELLY

You're all I have left.

JACK

I know.

Fade to Black

ACT 4

Early morning sunlight shines through the windows. It is Sunday morning around 7:00 AM. SHELLY is sleeping in the chair when MARILYN enters wearing the same robe as the night before. She walks towards the kitchen, stops by him and watches him sleep a moment. She reaches out to brush hair from off his forehead, but stops herself. She pauses a moment longer. She goes into the kitchen, picks up the newspaper from outside the screen door, puts on water to boil and gets the instant coffee down from out of the cupboard. She grabs a teaspoon from the drawer and waits, thinking absently. All her actions are done with the utmost care for silence. When the phone rings, she rushes towards it as SHELLY wakes with a start. As is frequently the case in the early morning, each little noise seems disproportionately loud.

MARILYN

Hello Ned! Hello.—What!?!...Oh. Yes Ethel, I'm sorry....What?—No I haven't....Because I haven't Ethel, that's why....Listen Eth....Ethel....*Ethel!* I can't talk now, Shelly's here....Yes.—Yesterday....He'd love to see you too....Well maybe later....Later....I don't know when, later! Ethel I have to get off now. I'm waiting for a call....Yes okay....Okay....*Okay!* Yes good-bye.

(she hangs up and acts as if possibly, SHELLY is still sleeping)

SHELLY

You can sit down now Mother. I'm awake.

(she pulls the kitchen chair out slowly, still trying to be quiet. It makes a loud, grating sound as it drags over the white tile. He speaks to cut it off, slowly getting up from the chair and moves into the kitchen to open the refrigerator)

SHELLY

How's Aunt Ethel?

MARILYN

Oh she's fine. She wants me to develop the pictures I took of Paul and the kids the last time they were down. Did you sleep much?

SHELLY

Not enough.

MARILYN

(pause)

Do you want me to make you some cheese eggs? I think I have some cheddar that may still be good.

SHELLY

(standing before an open refrigerator)

No thank you.

MARILYN

Paul's children are darling to look at, but their behavior. Always getting into everything. They wouldn't last ten minutes in this house. You can be sure of that....How about today I bake you a fruit cake?

SHELLY

(alarmed)

No! Thank you. That's quite all right.

(He closes the refrigerator door and leans wearily against it.

MARILYN moves to make the instant coffee)

MARILYN

The young one, Erica, she's adorable. All energy and what not all the time. But the older boy, Robert, you cannot imagine a dimmer bulb. Just like his father. He sits like an organ grinder while that little girl runs circles around him, gangbusters, like a yapping dog. Come to think of it, they'd make a good circus act.

SHELLY

Mom—how'd you do it?

MARILYN

What's that dear?

SHELLY

(bemused)

I've never quite been able to work it out in my mind. It must have been so....

MARILYN

Maybe you should try to write something. Now. While you're fresh in the day.

SHELLY

Did you have help? Someone must've known.

MARILYN

Your father always wrote bright and early in the morning. Each morning before noon.

SHELLY

The police, the coroner, someone had to've been able to tell—

MARILYN

That was his time. Four hours every morning. Typing away on that Selectric in his study.

(the faint sound of a car is heard. MARILYN moves to look out the window over the sink)

MARILYN

I think I hear Dick outside. That must be him pulling up in the driveway.

SHELLY

Mother—

MARILYN

Yes, that's him. I must remind him to nail up the storm shutters.

(she rushes to pull open the screen door)

SHELLY

Mother we have to discuss this.

MARILYN

Morning Dick!

DICK

(offstage)

Morning Marilyn!

SHELLY

We are going to do this—

MARILYN

You're here early for a Sunday?

DICK

You know I always come early on Sundays?

SHELLY

(firming)

Whether Dick is here—

MARILYN

I've got some water boiling. Let me bring you out some coffee.

DICK

Fine fine.

SHELLY

Whether Dick is here or—

MARILYN

NO!

(MARILYN quickly pours the coffee and leaves through the screen door. JACK enters carrying the Sunday Times, goes to his chair and sits down reading the newspaper. He is wearing his blue double breasted blazer which he takes off and puts behind his chair. SHELLY and JACK share a momentary look of understanding as SHELLY drifts to a kitchen chair. MARILYN returns through the screen door, hurried. She rushes to clean away the coffee preparations)

MARILYN

I must get some chicken soup for Dick, so he can take it home. He doesn't have anyone to cook for him. I don't know how he gets on.

SHELLY

(pause)

You take care of Dick. His needs. His life.

MARILYN

I'm going to the printers to drop off the proofs.

SHELLY

It's nice to see that side of you again. It's been so long, I think I almost forgot.

MARILYN

And the bank! I must not forget the bank.

SHELLY

I think Father would understand. He wouldn't have wanted this for you. To be alone.—I think he'd be pleased.

(MARILYN begins to move out of the kitchen. As she passes him, SHELLY catches her hand. This stops her one step beyond him. He gently plays with her hand a moment. Her expression is remote. SHELLY stands and moves around behind MARILYN and wraps her, lovingly, in an embrace. She seems

uncomfortable, almost pained by it. As he speaks, he gently rocks her)

SHELLY

There's no need to walk in the shadows Mother. You've earned the right to march out in the light.

MARILYN

I've got to get to the printer early. Otherwise they won't take you.

SHELLY

It's 7:30 in the morning. I think you'll make it.—He's a good man. I'm quite fond of him actually. And he cares for you dearly.—Remove the Albatross from around thy neck. Release the Ancient Mariner from his penance.

MARILYN

The printer Shelly.

(she pats his arm as he slowly tightens his grip)

SHELLY

I've always tried to imagine it. What it must've been like.

MARILYN

Shelly....

SHELLY

The incredible clarity of mind you must've had. Did you see it all immediately? Did it come to you as you were going along.

MARILYN

(she tries to get free of his grasp)

Shel-ly!

SHELLY

Developing as one thing led to another. Decision trees splintering, fragmenting and fracturing into endless different determinations.

MARILYN

Let go of—

JACK

Shelly!

SHELLY

The car, the town. Where to do it, how to make it look. How the body would lie.

MARILYN

(struggling)

Let me—

JACK

Not this way Son!

SHELLY

How *would* the body lie?! His back arched over the driver's seat. Draped across the front? Outside the car all together?!

MARILYN

I don't know what you're—

JACK

Leave her alone!

SHELLY

SHUT UP!

(he lets her go)

Mother *please!* Just tell me how it happened.

(MARILYN moves frantically about as SHELLY blocks her way)

MARILYN

I'm not hearing another word of this.

SHELLY

Did you smash the windshield? Was it broken in the crash?

MARILYN

I have to get to the print—

SHELLY

How did you get the car going with him in place? How did you get away from there?

JACK

Shelly!

SHELLY

There had to be signs!

MARILYN

This is insane!

SHELLY

You couldn't have a suicide!

MARILYN

THAT'S A LIE!

SHELLY

What would his suicide say about you? About your marriage!?!—

MARILYN

JACK GREER DIED IN A CAR ACCIDENT! A CAR ACCIDENT!

SHELLY

About your lives! About your success!—

MARILYN

LIES! LIES!—

SHELLY

No! He killed himself in our garage!

JACK

It doesn't matter!—

SHELLY

He shot himself with the 38 he bought on the Ivory Coast!

MARILYN

No—NO!

SHELLY

You drove him to the Powerlines! To cover it up!—

JACK

It doesn't matter!—

MARILYN

That's a lie!—

SHELLY

To make it look like an accident! After he killed himself. Didn't you Mother?! DIDN'T YOU!—

MARILYN

GET AWAY!—

SHELLY

STAY WHERE YOU ARE!

(the phone rings. It must be especially loud and jarring. They both stare a moment. Then, MARILYN rushes towards it and gets it after the second ring)

MARILYN

Yes, yes.—Ned yes....No. No, that's not true! No!....THERE IS NO LETTER! THERE IS NO LETTER!....THAT'S NOT TRUE! That's not true! That's not—it's not....

(her voice fading, she no longer speaks into the phone)

No. He'll ruin everything....Jack, Jack no....no....

(She doesn't hang up but absently puts the receiver down on the counter. We can hear a voice still talking on the other end of the phone. MARILYN is lost as she drifts slowly to a kitchen chair. SHELLY moves to hang up the phone. There is a very long pause after)

SHELLY

What did he say?....Mother what?....Mother. Mother listen, we have to prepare. It's going to come out.—Mother it's going to come out and we have to do something. But last night, listen to me, last night, I thought of a way.—Mother, *listen to me!* I've thought of a way and it will save him. We'll steal it Mother. We'll rob Hubert's story. I'll write about it before he can. I'll write about it all and it'll be okay.—Mother *please* listen to me!

MARILYN

(as if in a dream)

Your father always looked best in that blue double breasted blazer.—The one with the mother of pearl buttons.

SHELLY

Mother please, you have to listen to me! You have listen to what I'm saying!

MARILYN

It was classic. Not just any man can pull that off.

SHELLY

Mother *please*—

MARILYN

It takes a big man. Barrel-chested with big shoulders. A man who carries his weight up high. Your father had that. He had that in spades. And that jacket looked so striking on him.

SHELLY

(conceding slowly)

They found him in it.

MARILYN

He was such a handsome man when I met him. So virile. Masculine. I didn't understand why he was interested in me. I was pretty for my age, but really, I was only this skinny little thing.

JACK

Paracelsus's sylph, my love. A beautiful flowing sylph.

MARILYN

I was flattered by all the attention, and oh, so taken with him. Even then, he knew his look mattered. He always said that half of being a writer was *looking* like a writer. He knew this from the start.

SHELLY

It was important to him.

MARILYN

He believed it!—That's why I didn't understand. He knew, he knew it was his best look. His best writer's look.

SHELLY

Maybe he was tired of being a writer.

MARILYN

No! Your father was tired of *writing*! He was tired on the work! He was *not* tired of being a writer!

SHELLY

(tentative)

He wasn't wearing the blazer when you found him.

MARILYN

It was in the cleaners! How could he even think of it without!—He knew I would never let him go like that. He was testing me.

SHELLY

So after you found him—you went and got the blazer from the cleaners.

JACK

(matter of fact)

It doesn't matter now.

MARILYN

He always looked his best. I was not going to fail him. Not then.

SHELLY

And when you came back, you went into the garage and put the blazer on him.

MARILYN

There was traffic! It took me forty minutes! But those photos were going to be perfect.

(SHELLY pauses, understanding fully what he believes)

SHELLY

And then you drove him to the Powerlines.

MARILYN

He hadn't been well those last few months. He had lost a lot of weight and his face had become so drawn, so careworn.—But then he looked so beautiful again. Like a writer.

SHELLY

(pause)

Mom, if Hubert has a letter, if someone is giving it to him, there's going to be a scandal. This letter will hurt him.

MARILYN

That wait must have been so long for him. I tried to hurry. I tried! But there was so many cars, so many....

SHELLY

No Mom, there was no wait. Father was gone. He wasn't waiting for anything.

JACK

Shelly it doesn't matter.

(MARILYN turns to SHELLY as if acknowledging his presence for the first time)

MARILYN

For me.

SHELLY

For you? What? I, I don't—

JACK

Let it be!

SHELLY

I don't understand. I don't understand! Father was—he wasn't he waiting.

MARILYN

(with love)

No.

JACK

Son please, you have to understand!

SHELLY

What do you mean?....

JACK

I wasn't well. I wasn't able to think! You have to understand. Shelly you have to understand!
I wasn't able to act!

SHELLY

What do you mean? I *don't* understand!

MARILYN

That wasn't your father. He could never have.

JACK

Shelly *please*, listen to me!

SHELLY

Couldn't what?—

JACK

I had written the note. And loaded the gun! I was ready. I *was* ready!

SHELLY

He couldn't what?!

MARILYN

Your father could never have done that.

JACK

Son I was ready! I was!—

SHELLY

What did you do?—

JACK

I was going to! But—at the last moment—

MARILYN

I wasn't failing him.

SHELLY

What did you do?!

JACK

At the last moment, I couldn't. I couldn't!....

MARILYN

Not then—

SHELLY

WHAT DID YOU DO?!

MARILYN

Not when he needed me—

JACK

It doesn't matter now! It's all in the past! Son it's all in the past!—

MARILYN

Not when he needed me most. I always did what was needed.

JACK

Shelly it's all in the—

SHELLY

LIAR!

MARILYN

I was not going to fail him!

JACK

Please son—

SHELLY

LIAR!

MARILYN

Not then! Not when he needed to be free! I knew what I had to do.

SHELLY

Fraud.—You fraud.

JACK

Shelly. I—

SHELLY

You fraud!

(JACK moves slowly to his chair)

MARILYN

I knew. It was always left to me. Those things were always left to me.

SHELLY

(to JACK)

How could you?

MARILYN

How could I not?! He needed me. He needed to be free.

SHELLY

I believed in you.

MARILYN

I freed him.

SHELLY

I believed....

(SHELLY turns away from the scene as JACK, defeated, sits in the leather chair)

MARILYN

No one looks into your car anymore, when you grow older. When you grow old. No one seems to care.—When I was a young girl, in high school, the boys never paid much attention to me. This skinny little thing in black curls and freckles.

JACK

(to the audience)

It was the landscape of the moon back there. Or perhaps more, primordial Earth. Nothing paved or leveled. As it was millions of years ago, untouched by man. Some brush and bramble, gullies and knolls, until you traveled miles deep, through the thicket and the copse, till they opened up wide, breath-taking, majestic in their silver steeliness.—16 million megawatts of power, pulsing and coursing through them, bringing light like God to the heavens.—Keats said it best. “*La Belle Dame Sans Merci.*” The Beautiful Woman Without Mercy.

MARILYN

But after, when your father and I were married, at every street light there was always some interested gentleman looking at me. I had changed somehow. I had bloomed. I had blossomed. I was a wife. I was Jack Greer’s wife!

JACK

*I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful—a faery’s child
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.*

MARILYN

We traveled the world. People watched. People took notice!—But no one does that anymore. No one pays that kind of attention. You just sort of go by, unnoticed. As if you're useless when you're fading.

JACK

*She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew
And sure in language strange she said
“I love thee true!”*

MARILYN

We drove on the avenue and when we got to the Powerlines, I pulled off into the brush just before the plant. I stopped a moment to see if anyone had seen us pull in—but no one did. No one noticed us at all.

JACK

*And there she lulled me asleep,
And there I dreamed—ah! woe betide!
The latest dream I ever dreamed
On the cold hill's side.*

MARILYN

Peace. He wanted peace. Of all the things. Of all the....It was such a long walk home.

*(JACK grabs his writing tablet from off of the table and writes
throughout the rest of the scene)*

SHELLY

Mom....

MARILYN

I hadn't walked that far in so long. It was so long. So far alone.

SHELLY

Mom it's going to come out.

MARILYN

I barely had the strength to—No. It will not.

*(she gets up, moves frantically looking for something to clean.
SHELLY pursues)*

SHELLY

Hubert knows. If he has a letter, he knows. And it's going to come out.

MARILYN

Someone is talking to him. Someone is helping him!

SHELLY

There's a letter. There must be a letter!

MARILYN

But I paid everyone! I paid them all! The mayor, the police chief, Dr. Kassern. We agreed. We all agreed!

SHELLY

That doesn't matter now! If he has a letter, there's enough there to piece it all together!

MARILYN

No one wanted to tell. No one wanted to see this happen. It was good for the town!

SHELLY

Hubert will find out before the ceremony. It will come out before the ceremony!—

MARILYN

It was best for all! We all saw that. We all agreed!—

SHELLY

But there's a way. There's a way!—

MARILYN

Goddamn him!

SHELLY

Yes mother, yes. But I have a plan. Listen!

MARILYN

Goddamn him!

SHELLY

Listen to me! I have a plan.

MARILYN

(pause as she gradually understands SHELLY thoughts)

No.

(MARILYN moves desperately trying to escape his voice)

SHELLY

I'll write it. I'll write it all—

MARILYN

No!—

SHELLY

The car, the gun, the double breasted blazer.

MARILYN

You will not!

SHELLY

I'll tell it all. How you dressed him. How you went together to the Powerlines.

MARILYN

I won't listen! I won't!—

SHELLY

How the whole town worshipped him. How they all wanted this. I'll say what it was. What it really was.

MARILYN

This won't happen!—

SHELLY

But I'll change the names. I'll change the town. It'll will be my story Mother. Mine.

MARILYN

No—

SHELLY

Something I created. Something I made up! Yes, *listen to me!*

(SHELLY grabs her and she crumbles in his grasp back into a chair)

MARILYN

I won't! I won't—

SHELLY

And when he tells it, when Hubert tries, no one will believe him. No one will believe his story—

MARILYN

(weaker)

I won't listen. I won't.

SHELLY

It'll seem so absurd, so ridiculous. No one'll believe him. They'll think he's attacking me. Like Father. From jealousy. For revenge! Everyone knows he hated Father. He wouldn't dare. It would be so absurd he wouldn't even dare!

MARILYN

Please....

SHELLY

And he'll be safe. Father'll be safe and you'll have saved him.

MARILYN

Please no.

SHELLY

No one will believe it. No one will. It's all so—it's all so unbelievable.... Save me Mother. Save me. I have nothing left. I have nothing. It's the same. It's the same with me as it was with him. I know that now.

(SHELLY turns slowly to JACK)

He was proud.

MARILYN

He was very proud!

SHELLY

I know.—But he was afraid. He was afraid. Father was always so fearless as a writer. But towards the end—I had never seen that before.—Father was afraid.

MARILYN

There was enormous pressure on him. Everybody depended on him. Ned was calling every day. And the publisher. He couldn't get himself started. He couldn't focus!—

SHELLY

I know!—I know.—It's terrifying the first time a child sees fear, real fear in his father's eyes. It kills the myth. And eventually, it takes the man with it.

(he turns back to MARILYN)

And I know. I know it's scant and it's feeble and it's weak. I know it! And I'm sorry. I *am* so sorry for Father. But I don't have anything else.—And I'm no better. I'm no better than they are. Those who can't dream, who can't create. Those who in the absence of any true inspiration, any genuine understanding, take the easy way. The *talentless* way. We'll shock you. We'll shock and disturb and agitate you with this cheap procession of debauchery and depravity masquerading as novel thought. Disguised as some trenchant insight into the comprehension of life. But it's all so fucking counterfeit! So fraudulent. They have nothing new to say. Nothing new to add. It's all deception.—And I admit it, I'm worse. I see it. I know it. I know that now.—Premeditation *is* requisite for the capital crime.—But I don't have anything else. And you can give me this.

MARILYN

I can't.

SHELLY

Mother please. It won't mean anything. Nobody will know.

MARILYN

No—

SHELLY

Nobody will know. It will just be you and me!

MARILYN

I can't!—

SHELLY

Why?! WHY?!—

MARILYN

BECAUSE YOU TOOK IT FROM HIM!—Because you took it from him!...It's crazy. I know, I know it's crazy. I've always told myself that. I have.—But I feel that. In my heart, I feel that. My mind tells me—but my heart feels that!

SHELLY

Mother I didn't....

MARILYN

Everything was good. Everything was right. He was happy! He was strong!—And then you wrote and he couldn't.

SHELLY

And you blame—

MARILYN

YES!...When your father was—he would say “Look at Shelly. Shelly's writing. Shelly's getting it done.” He said it with pride. With love! With a father's love!—But he said it as if he was not. As if he was not a writer. And it was killing him. You were killing him! And I couldn't stop you!—What kind of wife was I? My husband wanted, he wanted to—No. No this cannot be.

(a long pause)

SHELLY

It was his choice Mother. His. I don't blame him for it. Not anymore. I did. I did for so long.—But you've got to stop. *We've* got to stop!—I didn't do anything. I didn't take or do anything. And you didn't fail him. He just failed.

MARILYN

I did! I must have!

SHELLY

No. No sweetheart, no. He just failed. He just failed all by himself.

MARILYN

He couldn't have.

(a long pause as SHELLY stands above MARILYN)

SHELLY

There are times when it seems you don't know anything anymore. You don't know your family. You don't know yourself. Not as you really are. Not really. You only recognize the roles you've all played. Those cherished, revered characters you used to be and the beloved parts others play in relation to them. Faithful wife, reverent son, family patriarch....But things are not the same. They're not! And you know this. You do. You know this but you keep playing along as if they were because no matter how painful and humiliating they are, it's still easier than change....Free us Mother. Free all of us from this cage we've been trapped in. This bondage we've chained ourselves to like a millstone. We have got to cut free from the ties that have been holding us here in place. It's the last thing. There's nothing else left to give. And no one left to give it to.—It's time to release us Mother. It's time to release all of

SHELLY – con't

us...Dick's a good man. He's kind and he's decent. And he loves you so. You're his whole world. You know that.—And you love him. You do.

MARILYN

(pause)

He's not a writer.

SHELLY

No. He's not.

MARILYN

That's a good thing.

SHELLY

(with an amused smile)

Yes. That's a very good thing.

(There is a long silence)

MARILYN

Shelly, I....

SHELLY

I know. I know that too. And it's the only thing still holding me here. Without you, tetherless, unconnected—I'd simply drift away....Now Mother, Mr. McDonough awaits.

(after a pause, she rises with great dignity, straightens her dress, and breathes deeply)

SHELLY

You've still got it kid.

(a nod of assurance to SHELLY, MARILYN moves to the screen door. She calls out stern, but her voice breaks a touch)

MARILYN

Richard?! May I speak to you?

DICK

One second Marilyn. I gotta get this—thing—undone.

(he falls into something with a loud bang)

It's all right. I'm all right. I'll be there in a minute.

(SHELLY and MARILYN share a look as they wait. MARILYN moves to the counter to clean)

MARILYN

Your father and I never went to the Ivory Coast.

(SHELLY turns to her abruptly)

He hated the water. He was afraid to get in anything over his head.

SHELLY

I didn't....

(JACK and SHELLY exchange a look)

MARILYN

And it wasn't about the money.

(DICK comes in)

DICK

I'm sorry Marilyn. I couldn't get the hose off the spigot and I, I kinda got tangled up after that.

(he surmises the scene)

You told him?

(SHELLY turns quickly to DICK)

It's not the knowing, it's the keeping known. Sometimes all to your self.

MARILYN

Richard, did you trim the big hibiscus next to the driveway?

DICK

No, I haven't quite gotten to it yet.

MARILYN

There's a heron's nest in the one next to it. Next to the one you'll need to trim next week.

DICK

Yes, well now, I'll be careful not to—

MARILYN

(softly)

Come. Let me show you.

(she puts out her arm to be escorted)

DICK

Okay Marilyn. Yes. Okay!

(SHELLY sits for a long moment watching them go. Then he gets up, moves over to telephone and dials a long distance number. He is still watching out the doorway at the couple when he pulls the yellow pages from his pocket, then stares at them momentarily. JACK tears off a similar page from his pad and looks at it thoughtfully)

SHELLY

Extension 41....Yes, can I speak to him please. Tell him—just tell him it's important.—Yes I'll hold.

JACK

(directly to the audience, with the pages in his hand)

Shelly I've been thinking a lot about endings. About beginnings and endings, and the moment when the struggle, the inception and the battle of life, transmutes to other states, other places, hopefully tranquil and serene, but as yet *terra incognita*, unknown and unknowable.

SHELLY

Hello, yes, I spoke to you....yes, the letter.—It's a fraud. It was written by someone else. Someone—someone I didn't know.

JACK

It takes from you all that has been gained and lost, the knowledge and the sentiment, the perception and the cognition, and absorbs it, assimilates it whole, back into the soil, deep into the Earth's recesses, for another day, another life, another time.

SHELLY

I wouldn't do that if I were you. You'll run the risk of being sued. And you *will* get sued. That I'm very sure of.

JACK

We are all husbands of the soil Shelly. Tillers. Caretakers. We must not take too much, nor give back too little. Please think of this. Please remember it always. Be well Son. Be what I know you can.—Be what I was not. Ever, your father.

SHELLY

No, I thought not. That's a good idea. I'm sorry for the mistake....Yes, all right. Good-bye.

(SHELLY hangs up the phone and slowly looks at the pages one more time. Then he turns on the gas stove and lights the pages. They burn slowly in his hand. He watches them. JACK gets up from his chair, puts on his blazer and moves to exit. SHELLY moves to the sink and washes the burning embers down the drain. Before JACK leaves, he turns to SHELLY who after finishing with the letters, turns to look at him. They stare a long moment)

JACK

You can cheat it. You can. The fool ignores time, tries to outrun it. The sage, the sage welcomes it. Adjusts to the changes it dictates.—You *can* cheat it, for a spell.—What will you do next time?

SHELLY

There won't be a next time.

JACK

But what if there is?

(They stare at each other, then JACK places the pipe and the writing tablet on the table and begins to leave slowly stage left)

SHELLY

Goodbye Father.

(JACK stops, turns with a remorseful smile, nods and goes off. SHELLY moves to the table, picks up the pipe and smiles looking back in the direction in which JACK left. He takes a seat at the table, opens the writing tablet and begins to write. After a moment, he looks up at the audience)

SHELLY

He bought the 38 for protection. Cobalt cold and black as lightning, it was the color of the West African sky at midnight's climb. Like so many of the possessions in my father's life, the purpose it eventually fulfilled was not the purpose for which it was originally intended.—I am one of his possessions. And as I struggle now to tell his story, I realize, I struggle with my own at the same time.

Fade to Black