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Destination Zero: A Play in One Act

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Eastern Illinois University

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DESTINATION ZERO

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

(TITLE)

BY

DEBORAH L. MULLER

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1991

YEAR

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ABSTRACT

While there have been a few creative theses written in the English department, those written up till now have consisted of collections of short stories and poetry. This is the first play to have been conceived and written for a Master's Thesis at Eastern Illinois University. The Thesis is comprised of two major parts: an introduction and the play, itself.

The introduction deals with what the goals of writing the Thesis were, what research went into reaching these goals, what the characters in the play were attempting to communicate to the reader/audience, and whether the resulting play deviated from the original proposal, and if so, how it differed and to what degree the end results could be justified in terms of the original quest.

The original goal was to write a play based upon an in-depth study of suicides among college students. The subsequent play, "Destination Zero," left facts and statistics far behind as it delved instead into the emotions inherent in such situations. "Destination Zero" touches on truth, loyalty, and disillusionment. A synopsis of the play follows:

Characters

Rick Helmsley

Neil Ashton, Rick's friend.

Mitch, Jerry, and Pete, students.

Lori Scott, Neil's fiancée.

The play takes place in Neil's apartment. Mitch, Jerry, and Pete enter and a barrage of good-natured banter takes place. As it is the eve of Neil's marriage to Lori, he is the butt of many sexually oriented jokes. The purpose of their visit is to let Neil know that he should be on stand-by for a bachelor party to take place later in the course of the evening. At this point, Rick, Neil's friend since childhood, arrives unexpectedly. Rick is in the midst of a private dilemma. He is trying to decide between pleasing his father and his girlfriend by going back to college or continuing a budding career as a mechanic. Little does he know that his girlfriend and Neil's fiancée are one and the same. When Rick decides to sacrifice his goals to please his father and girlfriend, he is crushed to find that neither his father nor Lori is worthy of the sacrifice.

Through the course of the evening, Rick will be made aware of this and other unpleasant facts about himself and the people to whom he is closest. Later on, when Neil leans on Rick for reassurance and support, initially, Rick will shield Neil from the hard edge of truth, only to totally expose him to the cruel realities of the situation. Faced with the dilemma of telling Neil about Lori and risking the loss of his friendship, or letting Neil be all the more hurt by allowing him to marry someone who does not love him at all, he tells Neil all about Lori. He does this knowing it will cost him his friendship to Neil--knowing that Neil is his last connection--his last friend.

To John and Lois

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I would like to thank Dr. David Radavich, Director of my thesis, for his unfailing and selfless encouragement of my work. An exemplar, his dedication to technical accuracy and creative excellence spurred me on to a precision that I otherwise would never have achieved.

I would additionally like to thank Dr. Frank McCormick and Dr. Richard Rogers for acting as readers of my thesis. I'm afraid they had a rather long wait.

And finally, to my husband, whose continuous love and support helped me over many a hump, and whose cooking our children now like better than mine, as well as to our children, whose friends accused them of having no mother, and to my parents and sisters, who often watched our "motherless" children---all my love and appreciation.

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INTRODUCTION

In this introduction to my one-act play, "Destination Zero," I hope to illustrate why I wrote the play; what preparations I made prior to writing it; and what the characters in my play were attempting to get across to the reader/audience.

Over the years, I have been fascinated by the interplay of control between students, their peers, and their professors, and how the pressures concomitant with these could give rise to potential suicides. The younger brother of a friend of mine committed suicide by jumping from the third floor of his father's office building: just after conversing with his father. My husband knew a young man who in his last semester as an honors student in law school committed suicide. While I knew nothing of the particulars of these cases, the idea of building my own beginning to a certain conclusion—in the manner of Peter Schaefer's Equus and David Henry Hwang's M. Butterfly—intrigued me. I felt no paucity of material here: a play just begged to be written.

My intention seemed quite straight-forward, matter-of-fact, and even simplistic in nature: writing a play about a suicide. And so I began. I had already begun collecting ideas, thoughts, phrases, conversations, and observations. I became something of an eavesdropper, quietly listening and observing myriad conversations. Often the "D.D." or designated driver, I would find myself the "O.L." or only listener. Sobriety can make one rather circumspect.

So, too, can crossing the line from adult citizen to student peon

again. I was able to speak, but more often listened at great length to today's students with the unique position of being a student myself and therefore privy to thoughts not shared with other "parent types" like myself. Students tend to be guarded in their conversations with "adults". A student would confide something to me and moments later reverse himself when speaking to an "adult." While he had shared the truth with me, he had told the "adult" what he felt the "adult" expected to hear. Yet, as I am an adult and have been for a while, I have the added insight of my own years of experience to add to what I see and hear. After all, I have one daughter who is entering a combined MFA/MBA program, one daughter who should be completing college but sees no earthly use for it, and a son just entering college this fall. I am truly seeing student life from all angles.

I also read and read. I read those works on my bibliography. I read any play that might pertain to my writing. In order to gain some perspective on the writing of my play, I read many plays with a twofold purpose in mind: 1) to assess how each play works to build the tension required for a suicidal climax; and 2) to see how the different suicides are staged so as to be most effective. For example, the suicide in Marsha Norman's 'Night, Mother is carefully presented to the audience as a cogent solution to an irremediable problem. The offstage sound of a gunshot indicates that the suicide has taken place: a very moving scene. M. Butterfly presents an approach that differs greatly from this. While neither inevitable nor expected, the suicide is nonetheless an understandable conclusion. In

contrast to the offstage suicide in 'Night, Mother, the suicide in M. Butterfly takes place centerstage, and it, too, is quite effective. The suicide in Christopher Hampton's Les Liasons Dangereuses also takes place centerstage. In this suicide, the disheartened Le Viconte de Valmont allows himself to be killed by Le Chevalier Danceny in a duel. It, too, is a most effective suicide.

All three of these stand in contrast to Frank D. Gilroy's Who'll Save the Plowboy?, in which the suicide takes place before the play begins, as well as before the victim has died. While in battle, Larry Doyle saves the plowboy, Albert Cobb, only to find himself dying of the lingering effects of wounds incurred in this feat some seven years later. His only consolation is that he has saved Cobb, who has since married and named his only son for him. He visits them and discovers that Cobb and his wife hate each other, their son is neither male nor female, but a medical monster, institutionalized since birth, and Cobb doesn't even like his job: one of the tragic ironies of life.

Each play presents its own method of dealing with this topic. What is most interesting about these four plays is that they all deal to some degree or another with a type of suicide which has only recently begun to be acknowledged by the professionals. Formerly, suicide has been categorically considered the desperate and irrational act of a severely depressed individual crying out for help. People who were chronically or terminally ill must, by definition, be severely depressed. Those glory-seekers or jump-on-the-bandwagon imitators--i.e. a sudden rash of high school suicides because a friend they hold in common has killed himself--must be temporarily

insane. Anyone who would take his own life must be at least temporarily insane. This has been the accepted explanation for suicides in the past. Of the four plays, 'Night, Mother most clearly exemplifies the type of suicide which is not covered by this explanation. Deliberately planned and carried out--neither rashly nor emotionally--it becomes the only logical solution to an otherwise unchangeable problem.

With this thought in mind, I browsed through Andre Haim's Adolescent Suicide, David Lester's Why People Kill Themselves, and two studies, The Prediction of Suicide and Suicide in the Young, in order to give myself a feel for the type of situation potentially explosive to the suicide. It was not my intention, however, to reproduce a statistical re-enactment of a suicide on stage. I figured I could leave such graphic details to special effects movies. I did feel, though, that the subject warranted a degree of authenticity in order to be believable, if for no other reason.

To achieve that feeling of believability, I interviewed several people who had experienced the suicide of a close friend or relative. I also spoke at great length with Dr. William Kirk, a clinical psychologist, in order to find any similarity among suicides. Our conversations enabled me to have a deeper understanding of what is going on in the mind of the suicide, although it by no means is possible to answer all questions pertaining to suicides. If it were, there would be no suicides; with prior knowledge, there could be interception and prevention. Dr. Kirk has dealt both personally and professionally with all aspects of suicide. He is currently working

on a book on suicide. I have been both honored and gratified by the inclusion of an excerpt of Rick's dialogue on page 44 of my play as a chapter heading in his book. Dr. Kirk felt that Rick had grasped the essence of the suicide's inner conflict.

Having done the necessary ground work with regard to building a play, I set about doing the actual writing. The play was to consist of three scenes in which Rick, the protagonist, would be forced to perceive first his father, then his fiancée, and finally his entire purpose in life with such utter hopelessness that suicide would become a viable option within the play's context. Consequently, I needed to depict some of the underlying stress and self-deprecating illusions which, when added together, could ultimately produce a situation conducive to a suicidal tendency. While the factors that I proposed using would seldom produce a suicide when introduced individually, when produced in duplicate or triplicate these factors increase exponentially rather than arithmetically, thereby creating a suicide-prone situation. So, I needed the protagonist to have a preponderance of stress coupled with a feeling of utter hopelessness in order to lay the groundwork for a suicide. Having decided this, it would seem simple enough to have put together a nice formulaic suicide and in one nice tidy act present and perform the deed. However, killing off the protagonist in one act is not as easy as it might seem. One essential element is missing: time.

It simply takes time to allow the audience to see that there is reason enough to justify a suicide. Rushing the necessary information at the audience leaves it as baffled and unsympathetic to the suicide

as it would be baffled and bored by a three-act Waiting for Godot. The audience needs time to assimilate facts. Too much or too little time and the play becomes foolish rather than meaningful. I found that the premise I had chosen to write about was impossible to encompass within a single act without becoming totally unwieldy. Therefore, rather than write a very foolish-sounding one-act play, I put the information and thoughts pertaining to a play in which a student actually commits suicide on hold. Instead, I allowed the thoughts of suicide to persist peripherally in the play, changing the protagonist to Neil, Rick's best friend, in order to create a less dire set of circumstances. This is more in keeping with the length of the play.

One of the immediate consequences of placing a limitation on the plot was the need to consolidate and simplify the set design. Originally, the three scenes were to consist of a bar-room setting, a street scene or passing scene to be played down front of the curtains to facilitate a scene change, Neil's apartment, and a final scene to take place in the Professor's office and the adjacent corridor. While the change from the bar to Neil's apartment required no major changes, the scene in the Professor's office required a totally different, albeit simple, set--all in all, far too much movement and cost for a simple one-act play. Here again playability was the by-word.

A play is performed by a diverse lot of people whose common bond is probably a lack of funds. In writing a play, you must look to the audience--who will be viewing the play? Then you must ask yourself, "Who will perform this play?" In truth, most plays are performed by

high schools, colleges, and community theatres; relatively few are performed professionally, and those that are still end up being played by those selfsame high schools, colleges, and community theatres. It is those performances that keep the royalties flowing. They are the meat and potatoes of the industry while the professional productions are the gravy. So, a play must be flexible and not dictate to the producer how much he must spend, or how many sets he will need--or he will turn to another play with fewer restrictions. With this in mind, I restructured the play so that all the action takes place in Neil's apartment. I actually transplanted the entire barroom scene to that locale by omitting the waitress and adding some stage business.

Having tightened up the physical make-up of the play, I needed to tighten the message of the play as well. I had planned to end the play with a suicide, but now my aim was for a more subtle ending. Deciding how to end it presented no particular problem. Only two options availed themselves: 1) Boy ends up with girl, or 2) Boy ends up with boy. It could hardly seem simpler. However, keeping that ending within the realm of plausibility eluded me. Every time I almost pictured an ending, that thwarted suicide loomed before me making it impossible for me to--in the vernacular--"get real." I needed a gimmick to put a time limit on the action--something to give it enough "oomph" to end it with salience. In essence, the climax did exist at this point, but it dribbled to an ineffectual letdown; nothing forced an ending. When, Dr. Radavich suggested the addition of a telephone call as a means of egress, the proverbial light-bulb lit up in my mind, and I had a clear vision of how to use this bit of

stage business to create the tension necessary to decisively end the play.

The conclusion of the play in which, ultimately, a phone call—just a tiny piece of stage business—had become a driving force in the play was not the only place that the use of stage business was important. Naturally, the use of stage business is integral to the general continuity of any play. When in "Destination Zero," Neil leaves the stage for ice, he jolly-well had better not return empty-handed without some sort of an excuse. Inconsistency is death to a play. Before I wrote this play, I could not appreciate how these inconsistencies could arise. During the writing of this play, though, it became ever clearer to me. When revisions are made, it becomes increasingly difficult to remember what is and what is no longer a part of the play. However, if the playwright is unwilling to read through the play often enough to be absolutely sure of the continuity of it from opening to closing, it should not be expected that any audience should be forced to sit through the duration of it either. If I had learned nothing else in writing this play, this alone would have been ample justification for writing it.

At any rate, by condensing and altering the impetus of the play, instead of a rather complicated and unmanageable plot, I have opted for a tidier, more playable one. In this revised plot, some of today's social mores have been called into question. I have continued to deal with the triangular relationship of Rick, Neil, and Lori. It is virtually impossible to sustain a triangular relationship for an extended period of time. Eventually, someone will use someone, or

feel that he is being used by someone. The shared party may resent the shared knowlege of the other two. Or a certain competitiveness or just plain curiosity will force one member to ask whether or not his relationship compares favorably to the other member's relationship. When this sort of question arises, it poisons the relationship, ultimately causing it to explode.

In this triangle, Lori does not see herself as "evil." She sees herself as being practical. After all, today's woman is often taught that she must prepare herself not for the possibility of being left alone, but rather for the inevitability of being left alone. Having been forced to contend with the reality of my husband's mortality when he experienced a heart attack this past fall, I am well aware of the possibility of being left alone, but nonetheless, I believe that preparing to be left alone as an inevitability is a needlessly negative approach to marriage. This negative attitude affects the way marriage is regarded generally, as is evidenced by Mitch's comment on page twelve when he says he would "rather catch the action on Neil's next wedding night. Statistics being what they are, the second time around is bound to be the clincher." Clearly none of yesteryear's "do or die" attitude prevails; instead, an aquiescent "I can always get a divorce" attitude inundates us. Lori fits into the new mold of woman--the currently popular "bitch"-type female. Though I try to create a basic understanding for her motives and show her in a somewhat sympathetic light, I am unable to condone her character--which I view as basically flawed. She is neither genteel nor idealistic. The young at least should be idealistic. Lori is

designing and grasping. Notwithstanding, she does have two redeeming features. She initially agrees to date Rick for reasons somewhat altruistic in nature--she even seems to care for him at times. And she sincerely believes that her own capabilities, coupled with Neil's, will create a financial compatibility that will serve them both more than satisfactorily. In other words, "the end justifies the means."

Rick sees Lori as totally self-serving. He represents an earlier era, and is perhaps more than a little idealistic in his views. However, his idealism is begotten from his experience rather than his lack thereof, as is the case with Neil. Rick is the craggy head of experience who has learned much but nonetheless re-enacts the very mistakes he has witnessed or experienced himself. He is unable to refrain from meddling--a typical human frailty. It is very difficult to sit back and watch a friend or loved-one make a mistake when it seems in our power to help him avoid it. But sometimes, sit back we must. All of our own experience must go for naught. While logically, Rick realizes that he cannot hope to advise Neil, emotionally he is unable to watch his friend get hurt without at least attempting to prevent it.

Rick also introduces a problem which plagues our educational system. Whereas higher education was once regarded as the just due of a privileged few, it is now considered the right of the masses. This naturally poses several problems. If higher education is to be maintained in an across-the-board manner without regard for the capabilities of the students, obviously a certain level of mediocrity must be imposed in order to ensure the success of all students. This

is frustrating on many levels. It is frustrating to the teacher who must pare down his level of teaching, to the student who is capable of achieving greatness but is no longer required to, and to the less-capable student who believes that because of his "success" in college he has the mental adroitness of a genius. Bernard Iddings Bell, in an essay entitled "We are Indicted for Immaturity" said, "Society has. . .played the Common Man a low trick, for which those who control education are chiefly responsible. . . . (We) turned the place over to him without introducing him to the amenities of the drawing room and encouraged the poor devil to muck around in it without having learned to enjoy it." We have insisted upon government by the masses, but have given the masses only a smattering of knowlege by which to govern.

The saddest aspect of this with regard to Rick is that the "Common Man" is demeaned by a lack of education, and a capably-done craft or task consequently loses its value. In "The Big Street," Henry Fonda plays a busboy who declares with defiant pride, "I may be just a busboy, but I'm the best darn busboy there ever was." It is that pride which has fallen prey to our push for the same education for all. Rick is caught in this trap. He is a disgrace if he does not go to college, yet college does not offer the tools necessary to further him in the career of his own choosing. On the other hand, this across-the-board approach to education has probably made possible the higher education of some deserving souls whose thoughts and capabilities otherwise might have been lost. And yet, were mental acumen the only requisite norm, perhaps these few would be salvaged.

Neil, by virtue of his inexperience--his extreme naivete with regard to all things human--has the least depth of any of the three main characters. He represents that portion of each of us that begins as innocent; therefore, we can empathize with him. We know that Neil is capable of intense loyalty--an admirable quality. Unfortunately, Neil has too little experience to draw upon and consequently is doomed to a mistaken diagnosis when presented with well-maneuvered lies. Neil's image of Lori appears through that haze of naivete. Lori's turning to him directly from the more physically masculine Rick consummately flatters his fragile ego. Essentially blind to any flaws in her character, Neil views Lori as penultimately feminine and desirable and good. His common sense questions Lori's true intentions; his ego will not allow him to accept the truth of Rick's blunt response.

"Destination Zero" deals primarily with disillusionment and how it is handled. There is disillusionment both on the tack-hammer level and the sledge-hammer level. Neil, Rick, and Lori all suffer from disillusionment as children and again as young adults, as do we all. Each character copes with it in a different manner. In writing about their travails, one difficulty I had was keeping their individual problems in perspective with their characters. At times, the banality of their plights made me wish that I had opted for a standard thesis. But the problems of mankind are never new; they just assume the latest guise. I believe it is important to treat the problems of each successive generation as if they were not "old hat," for the problems are never old to those who have not encountered them before. So, it

became a good exercise for me.

I encountered another problem with some of the language used in my play. I feel torn between depicting life as it is and life as I would like it to be. With each subsequent read-through of my play, I automatically deleted instances of non-standard English—that is the grammatical inconsistencies and expletives that are often common in spoken English. But the characters speak for themselves, not for me. If their speaking patterns appear to change, that change merely reflects different variables—whom is being addressed, the sincerity of the speaker, the degree of intoxication of the speaker, as well as the sex of the speaker can affect the nature of the language. Consequently, whenever the urge to tidy up some of the dialogue occurred, I was forced to return these selfsame lines to their original state in order to allow the characters the "strength of their convictions," so to speak.

While I am not shocked or appalled by non-standard English, I am bored by it. Therefore it must be an inseparable part of each character's nature in order to pass muster and remain an essential element of the play. A play is in the unique position of both reflecting and affecting society. If the language were too much out of synchronization with the current mode of discourse, it would become comical and inconsequential. So, the characters speak for themselves.

The fact that they do speak for themselves allows them to be multi-dimensional rather than flat characters. The "good" characters are not all good; the "bad" are not all bad. Neil, Rick, and Lori deal with some degree of adversity in different ways. Each of

them, like most people, discovers at some point that no one is perfect. Even that one particularly-revered person in everyone's life--cheats, or behaves cowardly, or beats his dog, or displays some weakness or another. The question becomes one of how much to accept as a human foible and where to draw the line? Values change. What was once considered dishonest is now applauded as virtuous. Neil, Rick, and Lori attempt to find solutions to their private dilemmas. Neil and Lori apparently succeed in finding their answers--Neil will be able to present the image of a solid citizen--a married man--maybe even a family man--which will in turn please his parents and his prospective employers. Whether or not he will be happy with his choice is the quandary he is left with at the play's end. Lori has found her "Sugar Daddy." Rick instilled just a hint of a doubt in her that, ultimately, she may not be satisfied with this; she may even regret throwing away her chance for happiness, but she is not mature enough to grasp the consequences of her actions. Rick, who in the original version of the play commits suicide, now uses his insight as a turning point from which he will grow. He has learned much in a short period of time. Somewhat cynical, he will never again accept anything at face value.

The issues are not all solved with the conclusion of the play. Life is not as pat as that. There is no "and they lived happily ever after," but rather--they continued to muddle through their existence making some mistakes and correcting a few of them. The characters were thrust into some very human circumstances and dealt with these circumstances in a realistic manner. This is what I had hoped to

accomplish; this is what I believe I have done.

DESTINATION ZERO

A Play in One Act.

by

DEBORAH L. MULLER

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Rick Helmsley

Neil Ashton, Rick's friend.

Mitch, Jerry, and Pete, students.

Lori Scott, Neil's fiancée.

SCENE

Neil's apartment, one evening close to graduation.

SETTING

The interior of an apartment in league with a posh condominium. The heavy carved mahogany door opens inward from the corner, upstage left. To the right of the door on a pedestal of amethyst-hued glass sits a spotlighted "objet d'art" of unrecognizable form. It should be so commanding as to be noticed immediately by all who enter. The downstage portion of the stage, is defined by a generously lowered floor of which the preponderance is living room. Downstage right gives evidence of a kitchen, though only a doorway and passthrough are visible. The decor is whatever is most outlandish and avant-garde at the time. There must be much metal and much black against a background of stark, stark tones. All this should be boldly punctuated with colored down-lights further accentuating contemporary works of art on the walls, "objets d'art" on pedestals of varying heights, as well as on the sofa and chairs grouping, which will bear little or no resemblance to a standard sofa and chairs grouping. Neil, in his college preppie, soon-to-be-successful-businessman attire, looks conspicuously out of place in his own apartment. In truth, the apartment is conspicuously out of keeping with student life in general.

SCENE 1

(Curtain rises on NEIL, who is anxiously setting out coasters on any surfaces which might seem conducive to parking a drink. Having situated a goodly number of them, he then will go to his sound system, deliberate on a CD, finally choosing one that was very "in" some years prior to now. This will play throughout the scene. NEIL has a lot invested in being absolutely "current." However, he never quite seems to get it right. By the time he discovers a trend, it is long since passé. He doesn't realize that to be "in" one must lead, not follow. Accordingly, NEIL is dressed in expensively fashionable clothing, which matches too well and is a marked contrast to the casually thrown-together look of his friends.)

(The doorbell chimes "To Dream the Impossible Dream." NEIL bounds to the door, opening it post-haste. Enter MITCH, JERRY, and PETE. Fellow students, they are in the midst of a conversation which rolls in bowling past NEIL, pausing only to do a doubletake before the statue and impart some part of their respective apparel upon it, i.e. hat, sunglasses, etc. They are well-laden with party fixings of the B.Y.O.B. variety of which they have evidently partaken already.)

PETE

(Continuing conversation.)

Can you believe that guy? One point and they could've had it.

JERRY

Come on now. You know no one's gonna win after just four games.

PETE

(Gesturing.)

But, man, they were this close.

JERRY

You know better. They've got advertising and T.V. and radio rights; they aren't going to blow that kind of dough by letting them win after only four games.

PETE

You mean it's rigged?

JERRY

Naw . . . they wouldn't do that. Right, Mitch?

MITCH

(Beginning in falsetto--obviously drunk.)

Mercy me, no! You still believe in the Tooth Fairy, too?

JERRY

(Almost doubled over with laughter.)

Now, don't you start casting aspersions on Santa, Mitch, 'cause I believe in him.

PETE

Okay, knock it off, already. If that's true, that's just great.

JERRY

Well, you came to college to get an education.

NEIL

Who won what?

PETE

(Oblivious to NEIL.)

God, am I depressed. Do you know how much I had riding on the fourth?

NEIL

What fourth?

JERRY

Are you kidding? Best of seven. You know--the NBA Championship. Haven't you been following it?

NEIL

Well, no, I guess I forgot they were on.

MITCH

Forgot they were on. I don't believe it. Take his pulse, Jerry. He must be dead.

NEIL

(Hedging an explanation.)

You know, what with graduation and the wedding coming up, I guess I've got a lot on my mind.

MITCH

(Cheerfully.)

A likely excuse.

NEIL

(Somewhat sheepishly.)

What can I say?

MITCH

(With slight slurring of his "s".)
Just don't let it happen again. (Indicating "objet".) God,
what's this thing?

NEIL

Isn't it something? My dad's got me started on some art
speculation. The artist that did this is supposed to be the next
Picasso.

MITCH

Looks like a recurring nightmare I used to have.

PETE

Now, how can it be recurring if it doesn't occur anymore?

MITCH

Oh, up yours. You know what I mean.

JERRY

(To NEIL.)

C'mon, Pablo, how 'bout giving us something to drink, so we can
make a toast to the prospective doom.

PETE

That's groom, you asshole.

JERRY

Groom . . . doom. Six of one

(THEY all laugh as they sprawl upon the
furniture.)

MITCH

Hey, Pete, how much did you lose?

PETE

Well, it was only a buck, but I was really attached to this
particular buck. (Grinning.) You know the dollar I borrowed from
you, last week? Well, that was it. They got your dollar, so now
I guess we're both out a buck.

MITCH

God, are you bad.

PETE

Me bad? You've got the wrong guy entirely! Now, Neil here--he's
bad. You got a setup like this, and a girl who practically throws
herself at you, and you want to ruin it by marrying her? What a
waste.

MITCH

(Speaking in the manner of Andy Griffith,
he emphasizes loudly with a magazine

rolled in the semblance of a megaphone.)
He's got a point there. How come you want to slip on the noose,
anyway? Oh, now don't tell me, let me guess Oh, I'll bet
she's preppers. I'll bet that's it. Neil's going to be a daddy.

NEIL
(Grabbing for magazine-megaphone.)
Will you shut up? It's nothing like that at all.
(They struggle briefly; JERRY grabs
magazine.)

JERRY
(Utilizing magazine-megaphone.)
Sounds real titilating, if you get my drift.

PETE
(Dreamily.)
Picture those jugs full of milk.

MITCH
(Supplicating.)
Oh, God, make me a baby, again, knowing what I know now.

NEIL
(Embarrassed.)
I'm really sorry to disappoint you, but it's not like that at
all.

JERRY
(Aghast.)
You don't like tits?

NEIL
(Red-faced.)
No. I mean yes, but she's not pregnant. We just wanted to get
married.

PETE
You've got to be kidding. No one just wants to be married.

MITCH
That's right. We all know she's pretty "hot to trot," if you'll
excuse the parlance. You know what they say, "If you can get the
milk free"

(PETE and JERRY chime in.)
"Why buy the cow?"

NEIL
(Getting huffy.)
Lori's not exactly a cow, you know.

PETE
Well, sure, we know that. We were just wondering, "Why the rush?"

NEIL

(With growing sarcasm.)

Because we feel like it, okay? I mean if our getting married doesn't meet with your approval, I'm sure I can get Lori to agree to call it off. She'd be more than happy to write the 400-some guests and let them know the wedding's off. I'll bet there's nothing she'd rather do. I value your opinion that much.

MITCH

My, aren't we touchy?

PETE

(Whistling.)

I'll say. We aren't trying to prove anything by marrying a bottle rocket, are we? Little concerned about the old image, maybe?

NEIL

(Uncomfortable.)

I don't know what you're talking about.

JERRY

(Laughing.)

He means if we were measuring "macho" on a scale of one to ten, Woody Allen would get a one, and you'd come in right behind him.

MITCH

(Putting an arm about NEIL's shoulders.)

Don't you worry, 'cause the good news is, even if you're not attractive to women, you're even less attractive to males. You are really ugly.

NEIL

(Embarrassed, but relieved, he pushes MITCH's arm aside.)

Knock it off.

PETE

Seriously, why the hurry? Afraid she'll get away?

NEIL

(Shrugging uncomfortably.)

Timing's just right; that's all. I'm being groomed for a nice position with my father's company. You know the scenario--young business exec. with attractive wife who not only entertains graciously, but knows the business as well. It's just a matter of timing.

PETE

And in this day and age it doesn't hurt to look like Joe Straight, right?

MITCH

(Elbowing NEIL.)

At least Neil doesn't have any problems with regard to that. You sly dog, you.

(Doorbell chimes again "To Dream"
MITCH, JERRY and PETE look at one another
and burst into laughter.)

JERRY

What was that?

NEIL

(Embarrassed, he explains while in route
to door.)

My doorbell. It came pre-programmed that way. I just never got
around to changing it.

MITCH

(Over shoulder.)

Better lose it, Neil. Between that doorbell and that old disk
you're playing, I feel like a refugee from one of those
back-in-time movies.

(NEIL opens door. He is surprised and
taken aback at seeing RICK. RICK strides
past NEIL, all the while talking as if he
were continuing a conversation rather than
initiating one. He is the same age as the
other young men, but very intense. He is
at a crossroads tonight.)

RICK

Neil, I've been driving and driving; I don't know what to do. I
just feel on the verge. (Halts, embarrassed.) God, I'm sorry; I
didn't know anyone was here.

NEIL

(Ushering RICK in.)

No problem; c'mon in. (To OTHERS.) Guys, this is Rick Helmsley.
Rick and I go way back. We went to Julia Ward Howe Elementary
School and then to high school together.

(By way of introduction.)

Rick, these are some of the guys from my fraternity: Mitch,
Jerry, and Pete.

(Each in turn makes some appropriate re-
sponse, e.g. "Hi ya, Rick", "Nice to meet
ya", etc.)

PETE

So, what's your major, Rick?

(RICK, embarrassed, hesitates. NEIL
hastily answers for him.)

NEIL

Rick's laying out this semester . . . haven't quite decided your
major, right?

RICK

Not exactly. That is--I haven't exactly decided to go to school. Each semester I sign up, but then I end up dropping everything.

JERRY

Well, not everybody's cut out for college.

RICK

(Overly sensitive.)

I'm not some kind of lunkhead, you know. I just don't know if school's the answer for me.

JERRY

No offense, man. All I meant was it's not for everybody. I'll tell you, though, my dad would have my hide if I ever dropped out.

PETE

Mine, too. How'd you square it with your dad?

RICK

Well, he's not what I'd call ecstatic about it; actually, he's pretty pissed with me. He's really putting the iron arm on me.

JERRY

What?

RICK

I'm really getting a lot of pressure to go back to school.

JERRY

Who from?

PETE

It's "from whom," soon-to-be college graduate. And who do you think it'd be from?

JERRY

You know where you can put your preposition, Petey-boy.

(To RICK.)

So, who's the pressure monger?

RICK

Well, my dad . . . and my girlfriend. I don't know why I'm telling you this.

JERRY

Why not? I'm feeling mildly drunk and wildly sagacious. Out of the mouths of babes and inebriates . . . Say, what are you doing if you're not going to school?

PETE

Give the man a break. There is life outside those hallowed halls, you know.

JERRY

I was only asking.

RICK

It's okay. I've been working as a mechanic. Pay's not bad. I'm getting pretty good at it, and I like it.

JERRY

Well, guys, I vote for dumping Daddy and the dame. With your prospects, who needs them?

NEIL

It's not that easy, Jerry. Rick's dad is a bigwig on campus, so it's really important to him that his son be a success. To him that means a Ph.D. You can imagine the conflict over no degree.

MITCH

(As if trying to jog his well-lubricated memory.)

Rick . . . Rick . . . I know where I've heard your name. You're the dude used to shack up with Neil's squeeze-to-be.

NEIL

Mitch, you can really be vulgar.

RICK

(Bemused.)

Neil's squeeze? I didn't even know you were seeing anyone. Is that what he means?

MITCH

(Cowed.)

I didn't mean anything . . . only you two got a lot in common, right? I guess after doing grade school and high school together, sharing things is just a habit.

NEIL

Knock it off, Mitch.

MITCH

It's no big deal, you know. I think it's kind of neat. Like "share and share alike", right?

NEIL

Put a clamp on it, Mitch. You've said enough.

JERRY

You're not exactly improving with age, Mitch.

RICK

I really seem to be out in left field somewhere. I'm not following this at all.

NEIL

It's no great loss; Mitch is just being cute. His attempt at fraternity humor.

RICK

You were doing some fraternity business. Look, why didn't you tell me. I can catch you later; it wasn't all that important anyway.

JERRY

Don't leave, man. We're just here for a celebration of sorts. If you're a friend of Neil's, you oughta be here, too. Right, guys?

PETE

Yeah, don't mind Mitch, here. He was born obnoxious.

JERRY

With any luck at all he'll pass out after awhile, anyway.

MITCH

Real nice.

NEIL

Yeah, well, take it easy. Rick's not used to you and your fraternity shit; don't forget he's been out in that real world you and I only hear about in hushed whispers.

PETE

(Interrupting.)

No shit! Well then sit down, man. You're just what we need; you can give us your worldly point of view.

RICK

(Taking a seat and a beer.)

For whatever it's worth. So, what are we celebrating?

NEIL

We're not celebrating anything. Actually, I don't really know why you guys are here.

MITCH

Oh, yeah, we almost forgot. It's about tonight.

JERRY

We're here in honor of Neil's impending connubials. He's tying the proverbial knot.

MITCH

Noose is more like it.

PETE

What they are trying to say is we invited ourselves to your apartment for a few drinks preparatory to your joining us at an undisclosed site for your bachelor bash.

JERRY

You will be totally amazed: struck dumb.

PETE

Even dumber than Mitch looks.

MITCH

(Drunk, but assuming an air.)

What my cohorts are attempting to utter in a somewhat dubious manner is that we are bestowing upon you the pièce de résistance, the crème de la crème, the . . .

PETE

(Interrupting.)

What he means is we are going to have one hell of a party. We're not going to tell you where or even when exactly. Just that . . .

JERRY

(Interrupting.)

It's tonight—they're setting up for it right now, and there is going to be everything you ever imagined plus a lot more.

MITCH

Even a cake and Lolita. And what Lolita does

(MITCH whistles.)

PETE

But we needed to make sure you were here and didn't go anywhere before we called. So, when we call, we'll tell you where, and you are to appear at your appointed destination forthwith. Got that?

NEIL

Got it. That's really nice of you guys.

JERRY

Think nothing of it.

MITCH

Are you crazy? Think a lot of it; it's costing us a fortune!

PETE

Will you knock it off? Anyway, that's what all the excitement is about. You're a friend of Neil's; why don't you plan on coming with Neil?

JERRY

Sounds good to me.

RICK

(Surprised and hurt.)

I don't know.

(To NEIL.)

I can't believe you didn't tell me you were getting married.

NEIL
(Uncomfortable.)

Well, it happened kind of suddenly.

MITCH
It sure did. And if you're planning to get lucky before D-day,
you'd better get lucky tonight.

NEIL
(Clearly perplexed.)
Pardon me?

JERRY
Get him. Playing the innocent.

PETE
We know. Under the exterior of our mild-mannered friend beats the
heart of an animal. What I wouldn't give to watch. Wouldn't care
to take me along, would you?

NEIL
(Embarrassed.)
Come on, guys.

JERRY
How about letting us in on the honeymoon. A little verification
of a sizzling time for all posterity? Then again, you might make
me want to cry.

MITCH
Speak for yourself, Jerry. Frankly, I'd rather catch the action
on Neil's next wedding night. Statistics being what they are, the
second time around is bound to be the clincher. Experience is
such a fine teacher.

PETE
Seriously, if you haven't decided, you might try the Club Hedonism
in Montego Bay. They've got a nude beach; they've got everything.

NEIL
I don't think . . .

PETE
God, you're right. As if you'd need any excuse.

JERRY
I don't see him spending that much time out of his room; do you
guys? Nudge, nudge, wink, wink.

MITCH
(Snickering.)
Better take it easy, so she doesn't wear you out.

NEIL
(Increasingly uncomfortable.)

Aw, can it, you guys.

PETE
(With mock sincerity.)

We're just worried about your well-being, Neil. We'd hate to see you too sore to walk.

JERRY

And we know she's got to be damned good for him to pop the question so fast. Pretty hot.

MITCH

Ah, he's probably safe. You know what they say about promiscuous women?

NEIL

No, I . . . uh . . .

MITCH

All you've got to do to cure them is marry them.
(MITCH, JERRY and PETE burst into raucous laughter.)

RICK

(Has been quietly sulking.)

Well, who is the gal, anyway? Am I going to get to meet her?

MITCH

(Guffaws.)

Is he going to get to meet her? What a kidder!

NEIL

Rick, this is really awkward. I just didn't expect you to drop by tonight . . . I mean I didn't want you to find out this way, but, well, it's Lori.

RICK

(Incredulous.)

Lori?

MITCH

What a kidder this guy is. Who the hell else? I mean he begins and ends almost every sentence with "Lori said this, and Lori did that." I mean it's almost regurgitation time. I hope I never live to get that wrapped up in some female.

PETE

I don't think you need to worry about living that long, Mitch. Someone's bound to want to put an end to your mouth. Somebody give him something to drink, so he'll shut up.

NEIL

There's plenty to drink in the kitchen; why don't you guys go have at it? Mi casa es su casa, right?

MITCH

(Half standing to pull wallet from pants.)
Hey, yeah, let's have another drink. This round's on me.

JERRY

Come on, asshole. This round's on Neil.

PETE

(Grabbing wallet from MITCH.)
Don't worry, Mitch. You can buy the next round. You owe us that much for putting up with you.

(Tosses wallet to NEIL.)

Here, don't leave a cent. I want him to really wonder what he did with his money tonight.

MITCH

So what's keeping that barkeep with the drinks?

NEIL

(To PETE and JERRY indicating kitchen.)
Go ahead; everything's in there. Take your time.

(They exit stage right, MITCH is only vaguely aware of anything by now. NEIL turns slowly to face RICK.)

I'm really sorry, Rick. I didn't mean for it to come out this way. I mean it all seems so underhanded, so sordid, but it's really not that way at all.

RICK

(Speaks very carefully trying to gain control of his emotions.)

Just stop. Don't say anything more just yet. I mean I need a minute to redress—regroup.

(Slowly exhales, then speaks.)

If . . . if we forget for a moment that I came here to talk to you about going back to school--a move that would crush my inner being--the very essence of my capabilities just in order to please and appease the woman I love--if we forget all that-- the fact that I might care deeply for Lori and be devastated by what I have learned--if we forget all that, we are still faced with the fact that you set me up to play the biggest fool since Bovary's husband. How could you do that to me?

NEIL

Who's Bovary's husband?

RICK

Being a mechanic doesn't preclude my reading, you know.

NEIL
I didn't say it did; I only mean I don't---

PETE
(Interrupting through pass-through.)
Hey, Neil. Got any fruit in here?

NEIL
(Looking at RICK.)
Yeah, sure. In the vegetable crisper.

MITCH
You better not have any fruits in there.

PETE and JERRY
Shut up, Mitch.

MITCH
(Nods drunkenly.)
Right.

NEIL
God, this is really tense, and the timing here is lousy. Look, I really am sorry. But since you and Lori had broken up, I didn't think you'd be all that upset.

RICK
Who told you we broke up?

NEIL
Lori did. She said it was mostly your idea.

RICK
(Surprised.)
My idea? It was mostly my idea? Maybe it was mutual and I just didn't realize it.

(Pauses, then continues artificially bright. This is costing him.)
Hey, look; I don't know why I'm reacting this way. I sound kind of like a jilted girlfriend instead of a lifelong friend. I don't know what got into me. She's a great girl. I'm sure you'll make a great couple.

(Reaches out and shakes NEIL's hand.)
Congratulations.

NEIL
(Obviously relieved.)
Thanks a lot, Rick. I really appreciate it. Now how 'bout another drink?

RICK
Good idea.

MITCH

Sure. Anytime. Where is that barkeep, anyway?

PETE and JERRY

Keep it together, Mitch. We're coming.

MITCH

I thought you were just breathing hard.

JERRY

Funny. I ought to pour it on your head.

MITCH

(Plaintively.)

What is this? It's pink.

PETE

It's a health drink--a strawberry daiquiri. Combined with everything else you've had, with any luck at all you should barf about a week.

MITCH

Damned frilly-dilly drink.

PETE

Just drink it, you twit.

(To NEIL.)

Had a few problems with your blender. Sorry 'bout the mess.

NEIL

That's okay, no problem.

MITCH

Pink drinks don't seem real manly to me.

PETE

Shut up and drink.

MITCH

Know what I heard today?

PETE

You probably don't know what you heard today.

MITCH

Give me a break. You'll get a kick out of this--It's about old Professor Helmsley.

PETE
(Quickly.)

We're not interested.

NEIL

If we're not going to have any fun, maybe we should call it a night. I know I'm kind of beat.

MITCH

Wait till you've heard the latest. You want fun, well here's the scenario. Helmsley's old lady threw him out last night. She caught him balling one of his students, and I guess they really got into it. Anyway, he goes out and ties one on, and she packs his stuff and throws it out on the front yard. So he goes home, and he's so drunk he doesn't even notice his stuff all over the lawn. He just goes upstairs and passes out on his bed.

PETE

I know funny, and this isn't funny. I think we ought to be going, anyhow.

JERRY

I think you're right. Let's go.

MITCH

Are you kidding? This is the good part. Old lady Helmsley sees him there, and you know what she does to him? I mean you got to picture this; the old prick has returned to the scene of his crime—his bed—her bed. So you know what she does to him? She super-glues him to himself. Like she actually glues that old fart's prick to his leg.

JERRY

Yeah, right. And then you step out of the closet: the only eye-witness to the whole event.

MITCH

No, like I got it all first hand, well, second hand. My girlfriend works Emergency. She was there when they brought him in. Seems he panicked when he woke up and couldn't use it. Peed right down his leg, so he called an ambulance. When they brought him in, he was crying and babbling like a baby. Spilled the whole beans. I think he was afraid they'd have to cut it off. I wonder if his life flashed before his eyes.

(Laughs with great hilarity, finally notices the silence around him.)

Didn't you wonder why all his classes were cancelled this week? You know the way he always announces to his classes that he has never missed a class in his entire career and expects no less of his students. What a crock.

NEIL

God, Rick, I'm sorry. Jerry, help me get the son-of-a-bitch out of here.

JERRY

Be glad to.

(THEY each grab an arm to bodily remove MITCH from his chair.)

MITCH

Wait a minute. What's the matter with you guys? You goofy or something? Any of you ever have Helmsley for a class?

RICK

(Very quietly.)

No.

MITCH

(Relieved.)

Well, Jeeze, that's good. For a minute there, I was starting to think that maybe one of you had him and actually liked him. I can't imagine anyone liking that asshole, though. But you were so quiet-like, I thought I might've offended someone.

PETE

(Struggling to pick up MITCH, hisses through clenched teeth.)

You dumb bastard. Don't you ever shut up?

MITCH

What's the matter with him?

JERRY

You're going to have to help us, Mitch. I think the mastodon is not really extinct after all.

MITCH

What's with you guys?

NEIL

(To RICK.)

I'm sorry. If I'd known what was coming, I'd have muzzled him.

MITCH

What did I say? Would someone mind telling me what's going on?

NEIL

Helmsley's his father, you asshole. Didn't the fact they have the same last name mean anything to you?

MITCH

How was I to know they had the same last name?

PETE

(Exasperated, HE and JERRY are dragging MITCH to the door.)

You heard it when we were introduced, you jerk.

MITCH

(As if just realizing that he is being removed from the premises.)

Hey, wait a minute. I can walk.

(By way of an apology to RICK.)

Didn't know he was your father, or I'd never've said anything. Anyhow, it could have been worse. I mean, at least the student was a girl

(PETE and JERRY succeed in half pushing, half dragging MITCH out the door. Voices are heard offstage.)

Ow, that hurts.

JERRY

Good.

PETE

(Pokes head through door.)

Rick, I'm really sorry about that.

RICK

I'm not my father's keeper, man. It's okay; it's no big deal.

PETE

Well, anyway, we'll phone you when everything's set, Neil. Be ready to come: you, too, Rick.

NEIL

Right. See you guys later.

(NEIL momentarily forgets RICK's discomfiture as he puts forth his own plaint.)

I sure hope the evening improves from here. Then again it only has one way to go . . . I've always pictured a scantily clad female bursting through the top layer of cake; I hope they weren't kidding about what's ahead.

(Realizing he has forgotten RICK, hastily apologizes.)

I must sound like a complete ass--thinking about myself when you've just been through hell.

RICK

(Incredibly calm, with a false cheeriness.)

Sure. Just caught me a little off guard. Here I come seeking advice on how to make Lori happy, get my dad off my back and keep my sanity, and it looks like I don't have a thing to worry about. Everything's been taken care of.

NEIL

You really didn't know you and Lori were through, did you?

RICK

(Shakes his head "no".)

NEIL

Honest to God, Rick, I don't know how it came about so fast. If I hadn't thought that you two were through, I wouldn't have considered it. I didn't mean to be going behind your back. Lori thought if we waited to tell you it might put less of a strain on our friendship. She was kind of hoping we could be a threesome just the way we were before. Lori and me, together instead of the two of you.

RICK

Listen, she moved out two months ago. She kind of gave me an ultimatum--either I go back to school and make something of myself, or we're through. That's why I came by to talk. Last night I got home, and my apartment was empty--more empty than I had remembered its being. There I was covered with grease just like every other night, and I started scrubbing it off just like every other night when it occurred to me that maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was being totally selfish. Maybe I really owed it to Lori and my dad to let them be proud of me. I felt totally on the outs; I've never felt so alone. I had just about made up my mind to go back to school. It isn't what I want, but maybe what I want isn't all that important.

NEIL

You're wrong. What you really want is everything. It's just so hard sometimes to know what it is.

RICK

I'm probably out of my gourd for even considering going back to school just to please Lori and my dad. Going back to school because of them would have been so wrong; it's just that I've never felt so lonely. At any rate, apparently Lori's ultimatum had an expiration date I wasn't aware of. So I'm probably better off where I am.

NEIL

I hope you really feel that way, Rick. And it's important to me that you understand Lori and I never discussed marriage, or getting serious, or anything like that till just recently. Sex-wise, she doesn't want to do anything, and I don't want to push her. You two were together so long. She still thinks of me as a friend, and I don't want to spoil that. Besides that, she wants to save herself now for after our marriage.

RICK

She what?

NEIL

Yeah, how 'bout that? Down deep, she's kind of old-fashioned or something.

RICK

I'd certainly vote for "or something".

NEIL

What?

RICK

Nothing. I mean, that's real--uh--sweet. Kind of wholesome-like. Let by-gones be by-gones, and put the foreplay on hold for a while?

(Unable to contain himself any longer.)

For Christ-sakes, Lori and I lived together two years. I didn't even know we were through. D'you really think we had a platonic relationship?

NEIL

Look, I know I'm not exactly the first, but I don't think that matters. She's making a tribute, or a least a nice gesture to our marriage. You've got to admit that.

RICK

I don't have to admit . . . Oh, all right, it's a grand gesture. Any grander, and I'd puke.

NEIL

Look, I know you probably feel as if you'd just taken both barrels at chest level, but attacking me won't help.

RICK

You'd be surprised.

NEIL

I know you don't really mean that. Let's just talk it through.

RICK

No thanks.

NEIL

I won't take "No" for an answer.

RICK

I don't know why. You oughta be used to hearing it by now. That's all you get from Lori, isn't it?

NEIL

Look, I only told you that because we're friends. I want it to

stay that way, but you have to meet me half way. Assuming it came as a real blow to find out about Lori and me, you're bound to be upset. Couple that with finding out your father's the laughing-stock of the campus--it might be a little hard to handle, but . . .

RICK

"a little hard to handle." God, you are so naive. Finding out about Mom's getting a little back at Dad--that's divine justice. I guess I've known about my dad for a long time; I just didn't want to see it.

NEIL

I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to make light of your feelings.

RICK

I know. It's just that when I was little, I used to think that there was something wrong with me that made Dad hate to be around us. He never said anything, but I could see in his eyes that he wasn't really with us. His thoughts, his love, his desires were somewhere else. He wasn't really interested in us. I think it was probably to rid myself of the burden of his indifference that I began to blame my mother instead of myself. I figured I was just a kid; she must have done something to make him not love us. I watched her, and sure enough, she was easy to blame. She'd walk around with wounded doe eyes, always suspicious, always hurt, always solicitous, always saying the wrong things.

NEIL

I always envied you your mother. She was so pretty, and she really doted on you. My mother was always wrapped up in her house and her bridge parties.

RICK

What did I know? I was just your basic dumb kid. It always seemed to me as if she were hovering over me, smothering the life out of me. She inadvertantly did everything she could to drive Dad away, and I hated her for it. I knew she knew I hated her. Her eyes were so unlike my father's; they were dark and filled with fear. I think she was even afraid of me: afraid I'd hate her like Dad did. Her eyes disgusted me. My eyes were like hers; I was like her. God, I'd have given anything to be more like my dad.

NEIL

I don't get it. Her only crime seems to have been that she loved you and your father.

RICK

I know it doesn't make sense. I had her love, and because it came so easily and without reservation, I deemed it worthless. I only wanted the love my father wouldn't give to me. I had nothing but contempt for my mother's love. I read somewhere once that

children instinctively recognize and respond to love. Children don't know shit from applebutter. By the time they recognize truth, the damage has long been done.

NEIL

I never could understand your devotion to your father. Why could I see him for what he was, and you couldn't?

RICK

I don't know. I was so busy looking for someone to blame, I just couldn't see. When I was about twelve, I saw Dad with one of his paramours. I remember her laughing and clinging to his arm and hanging on every word he uttered. And I remember Dad was laughing, too. I didn't even know he could laugh; he never laughed with us. I stood there watching them and hating Mom even more.

NEIL

That's crazy.

RICK

I know, but I couldn't help it. When I was fourteen, she tried to kill herself. I found her after school. I called Dad; he was so angry at the inconvenience of it all. That was probably the first time I saw a glimmer of my dad as he truly was. It was the first time I ever felt a little sorry for my mother, although, I probably felt sorrier for myself. And I think I was really scared, too. Anyway, after she recovered, Dad took me with him to sign commitment papers. He told me we'd have to stick together to endure all the pain and humiliation Mom had heaped on us. When I was sixteen, the doctors told my dad that there was really no reason for her to be there any longer. So he brought her home. She had changed; she didn't seem to care anymore. Using the glue that way was probably the healthiest thing she's done in years.

NEIL

God, I wish I'd told you what was happening. I was just so afraid you'd end up hating me. I mean, no one wants to hear something bad about someone he loves. If it had been reversed, I think I would have wanted to know. Maybe. I don't know---maybe I wouldn't have.

RICK

Don't start kicking yourself at this late date. I don't think I'd have believed you even if you had told me. And you were probably right; I probably would have ended up hating you, instead. No, it was better that you didn't tell me. Besides, no one has a perfect upbringing. The only reason I'm bringing it up now is because I don't want you to avoid me because you're embarrassed about what Mitch said. I'll admit I may have been upset at first, but so it goes. I'm not going to suck my thumb and eat pabulum because of it. I'm a big boy, now. I'm just going to head home, so you'll be ready for that phone call.

NEIL

(Perhaps overly concerned.)

Nothing doing. I don't think it would hurt to talk over a couple more things. And you could use another drink to unwind a bit. You just sit back down and name your poison. I bet I can mix anything you can name.

RICK

(Reluctantly gives in.)

All right. How 'bout scotch on the rocks?

NEIL

Now, come on--you can do better than that. How 'bout something that's a bit of a challenge? An Amaretto Stone Sour or a Screaming Orgasm?

(Any currently popular drink will do.)

RICK

(Starting to get up again.)

Look, it's going to be too much trouble; I'll just go home.

NEIL

Hey, the man wants scotch on the rocks; the man gets scotch on the rocks.

(NEIL exits stage right into kitchen.)

Oh, shit! He didn't put the lid on the blender. Christ, I'm going to kill him. I will definitely kill him.

(There is a pause.)

Uh, Rick, I don't seem to have any scotch, would vodka do?

RICK

(Mildly exasperated.)

Sure, Neil. Vodka's just peachy.

NEIL

(Another beat.)

Uh, I seem to have neglected to fill the ice-cube tray.

RICK

Look, I'm really tired, and they're going to be calling anytime, now. Let's call it a night.

NEIL

Nothing doing. I don't think you should be alone just yet. There's ice downstairs. Be there and back in no time.

RICK

Hey, look; some other time. Some time when you're not getting married the next day.

NEIL

(Already heading out the door, ice bucket in hand.)

I think you should stay; we'll talk, okay? Besides, someone has

to answer the phone when it rings.

(Doorbell rings.)

RICK

You really don't need my presence.

NEIL

Just shut up and put your ass in that chair. I won't be a minute.
(Answers door. Enter LORI. She is very attractive and self assured. She does not immediately notice RICK.)

LORI

Hi, honey. (Kisses NEIL perfunctorily on cheek.) I won't take a minute; I just have a couple of wedding details to go over.

NEIL

That's probably just as well; the guys are throwing a genuine bachelor party for me. They'll be calling me when they're ready.

LORI

You look embarrassed. You don't have a stripper in the next room, do you?

NEIL

No, though I'm kind of hoping for one later. (Pause.) Lori, Rick's here.

LORI

(In stage whisper which RICK appears not to hear.)

Here? What's he doing here?

NEIL

He is my friend, Lori. You know that.

LORI

I don't care; I think it's really inconsiderate of you to have him here knowing how I feel about him. You get him out of here.

NEIL

I'm not going to throw him out; he's my friend. And, frankly, I'm not sure I do know how you feel about him. You told me you two broke up because Rick wouldn't marry you. Well, for some reason, Rick wasn't aware that you two had split permanently.

LORI

Well, you don't believe him, do you?

NEIL

Look, it's not a matter of whether I believe you or him; It's a matter of what Rick believes to be the truth. So, I want you to talk to him and reach some kind of understanding. You understand that I intend to stay friends with Rick, so work it out with that in mind, okay?

LORI
(Hisses.)

No, I won't.

NEIL

You will.

(To RICK.)

Rick, Lori's here, and she has a couple of things to talk over with you. You two can break some ice while I go for some. Just remember you're my two favorite people, so work it out now.

(NEIL exits hurriedly.)

LORI
(After an awkward pause.)

Did you hear . . . ?

RICK
Un huh. I'd have had to be dead not to.

LORI
Oh. (Pause.) So, how's it going?

RICK
Just fine. It was just fine last night, too; that is, if I can remember that far back. As I recall, it was also fine for you. But then that really was a long time ago, wasn't it?

LORI
I take it you know all about Neil and me.

RICK
You always were quick.

LORI
I meant to mention it last night; it's not exactly something you can explain in just a few words.

RICK
You might have tried something like: Rick we're through; I'm marrying Neil. I think I'd have understood that.

LORI
I don't think I care for your attitude. You needn't be hostile.

RICK
(Obviously hurt and angry.)
Who, me? Hostile? Not me. "Au contraire." I understand congratulations are in order. I guess that's "best wishes" for the bride. But in this case it seems to me that maybe "congratulations" is a little more appropriate. I've got to hand it to you, though; it was real politic of you to wait till the day after you were in bed with me to snare him. I mean it might have seemed a bit crass to be getting married to someone when

you're screwing someone else. But then I don't imagine for a minute that you'd go against protocol.

LORI
That's not fair.

RICK
(Incredulous.)
I'm not being fair?

LORI
(Coldly.)
You seem to forget we are no longer living together.

RICK
We may not live together, but we were sure as hell doing something together.

LORI
Oh, for heaven's sake, just because . . .

RICK
(Sarcastic.)
You're absolutely right. What am I thinking of? You moved out 'cause I'm not good husband material. So, why should that bother me? Just because you can't stay out of my bed by night, but you wouldn't be caught dead married to me by day; now, why should that bother me? What am I to you? Some sort of brainless schmuck?

LORI
You know better than that.

RICK
I only know that I sure as hell feel used.

LORI
(Somewhat mechanically.)
I'm sorry. I'm sure I don't want you to feel that way. It's not that I don't have feelings for you. I think I even loved you at times. But last night didn't happen out of love as much as out of habit. I'm accustomed to the way we . . . I thought you'd understand.

RICK
Forgive me for being so obtuse.

LORI
Well, we always did get along pretty well together. You're used to me, and I'm used to you. (Pause.) Just because I'm marrying Neil doesn't mean we have to be enemies. Actually, I don't see why our relationship should have to change at all.

RICK

I think you're a little too sophisticated for me.

LORI

If I could just count on you to watch what you say to Neil, I don't see why that part of our lives couldn't continue just as before.

RICK

If you want to get a little, how 'bout puttin' in some practice time with Neil. After all, he's the lucky man.

LORI

Neil's the one who wants us all to be friends.

RICK

Who are you kidding, anyway?

LORI

You just don't understand.

RICK

(Assuming the role of a hawker.)

Bingo! Give the little lady a prize! Now what's it gonna be, M'am? Will it be the cement mixer or the pavement pounder?

LORI

Very funny. If you'd only let me explain...

RICK

Go right ahead; I'm all ears.

LORI

Neil means a lot to me.

RICK

(Interrupting.)

Now I feel much better.

LORI

(Continues.)

He's got determination; he's going places. You don't have any destination. You know that. It's not that I don't like you; it's just that you're such a zero.

RICK

(Wounded to the quick.)

I'm really glad you took the time to explain this to me. I really feel so much better now.

LORI

Don't take it personally; I'm not trying to be cruel.

RICK

What a lucky break!

LORI

Come on. We both know what kind of person you are. You're a really nice guy. . .

RICK

Another zinger.

LORI

I tried to convince myself that being with someone who was just a really nice guy would be enough for me--that I didn't actually need to be at the top--that the lure of big bucks isn't all it's cracked up to be . . . but it didn't work. I don't want to be trapped in some roach-infested rat-trap all my life. You know me; I want to go places. I want all those things that go with being at the top.

RICK

Like happiness?

LORI

Like security. Like knowing there's money in the bank and a nice home and car, and nobody knocking on the door to repossess what you've got.

RICK

You're still harping about that CD player. Just once I get so far behind that they repossessed it, but so what? I said I was sorry. It never happened again. It's not as if one lousy CD spells the end of the world.

LORI

Maybe not to your world, but it totally shattered mine. I didn't care about the CD--that didn't matter--it was having someone walk in and take it right out of my home. I didn't feel as if it were my home any more. I felt violated.

RICK

Violated. Violated--you sound like one of those sicko women's magazines. You didn't feel violated at the time. As I remember it, we really had a big laugh over it.

LORI

Well, maybe on the outside I was laughing, but on the inside I. . .

RICK

Ah, come off it. You're really full of it. When did you suddenly become the sadly misunderstood martyr?

LORI

I don't know what you mean.

RICK

My point is your story seems to acquire new meaning whenever it suits your whims. Okay, fine. My feelings aside; I'm out of the picture now. But what about Neil?

LORI

I don't see that my relationship with Neil is any of your business.

RICK

Hold it. A few minutes ago we were all going to be good friends. If we're all such good friends, then I think your relationship with Neil is absolutely my business. Besides, Neil is my friend. And I really do care about him, and I don't want to see you fucking him over. And I think that's just what you're planning to do. He actually believes that you're the sun and the moon, and you're just going to use him.

LORI

That's not true. I care about Neil. I've always liked him. The three of us have had some great times together. You must know I would never do anything deliberately to hurt Neil.

RICK

You might not intend to hurt him, but do you care enough not to?

LORI

I'll be everything Neil ever dreamed of wanting. That's part of what bugs you, isn't it?--That I can find what it takes to make people who aren't at all alike happy. Most people lead such miserable lives that it really doesn't take a lot to make them believe that they're happy. You were always happy with me. And, Neil will be even happier with me than you were because I'll make him.

RICK

For what? A meal ticket? Whose bed were you in last night? Don't you think Neil is entitled to a woman who is in love with him?

LORI

Aren't we getting a little melodramatic about the benefits of love? I have to look to my future. You're so wrapped up in idealism you can't think. I don't share your maudlin beliefs. I think, and I do it well. It's only sensible.

RICK

I can always credit you with being sensible.

LORI

(Increasingly annoyed.)

Whether you like it or not, you will get old. And when you can't get it on anymore, it'll be bills stamped "paid in full" that'll keep you warm and secure: not love.

RICK

I hope to God I never get that old.

LORI

Well, you will. It's inevitable.

RICK

Not necessarily.

LORI

Oh, Rick, for heaven's sake, grow up.

RICK

You know, you sound just like my father when you say that.

LORI

Well, maybe your father has a point. I don't see that it would hurt you to be a little more like him. Your father's a lot like my father was.

RICK

I didn't realize you knew him so well.

LORI

(Hastily.)

As a matter of fact I did. It was only because of my relationship with him that I got to know you. He thought I might be good for you. I'd like to think I was. But even I couldn't put you on the right track.

RICK

You and my father knew each other?

LORI

That's right. We knew each other and in the biblical sense, too.

RICK

You and my father?

LORI

That's right.

RICK

But, I don't understand.

LORI

Don't understand what? Surely you can't be that dense?

RICK

But, why? When?

LORI

Honestly, you are such a baby, sometimes. Do you really want all the sordid details? A blow by blow account, so to speak?

RICK

I don't know what I ever saw in you--you're disgusting.

LORI

Funny, you didn't think so last night.

RICK

I oughta kill you.

LORI

You probably would, if you had any balls. But we don't have to worry about that, do we?

RICK

But, why?

LORI

Why what? Why did I diddle your father? Why did I diddle you? Or what?

RICK

Why did you screw my father and then screw me? What did I ever do to you?

LORI

Well, actually, your father and I just kind of clicked: your basic teacher-student relationship, I guess. I needed a little help with class work, and one thing led to another. It wasn't totally mercenary on my part. I suppose he filled the void in my life where my father had been. And then I think he saw a way to gently terminate our relationship by setting me up to meet you. I cared enough for him that helping him by steering you in the right direction seemed like a nice thing to do.

RICK

How could he have lined you up to meet me? He never even mentioned your name to me.

LORI

Didn't you ever think it was strange that I kept bumping into you in one place after another?

RICK

I thought it was more than a coincidence after the first few times.

LORI

I would think that by the fourth time we'd met in Auto Parts World that you might have been a little suspicious. I certainly don't look the part of a mechanic, do I?

RICK

I knew you were there deliberately; I just had no idea that it was all part of my father's strategy.

LORI

You're shocked, aren't you?

RICK

(Sarcastically.)

No, of course not. After all, my father is a pillar of virtue: a man to be thoroughly emulated. I suppose it naturally follows that you'd be one of his conquests.

LORI

It wasn't like that at all. I think your father was being altruistic.

RICK

Altruistic, my ass. My father just always has to be the controlling factor in every single situation.

LORI

You just can't understand—he really was attractive to me. He was so much like my father: a man who knew what he wanted and went after it. When my father died, he left my mother and me quite well off. He took care of us.

RICK

Took care of you by dying, but what about while he was alive? I mean, you and your mother took his death really well. Too well. I don't think you cared one iota about him. I mean all that concern about what you would wear to the funeral, and what kind of flowers to order . . . I don't remember the two of you ever crying.

LORI

Yes, well, that was because Dad was financially prepared for the possibility of death. We knew we were taken care of; part of him would always be with us.

RICK

Yeah. Like his bank account.

LORI

How dare you!

RICK

Save the Miss Priss routine for Neil. Jeeze, you sound like a goddamned commercial for Metropolitan Life.

LORI

(Indignant.)

Well, maybe I do, but that's why Mother married him in the first place. She was madly in love with some good-looking guy when she was young. But he was kind of an artsy-type, a flake, I guess. Well, she had the foresight to realize that if she stayed with him, she'd never know where her next meal was coming from. She knew he might be a success eventually, but she couldn't count on anything. It would have been always feast to famine. There never would have been any real security for her.

RICK

But think of their love.

LORI

Oh, come on. Don't you think the day-to-day drudgery of not being able to pay the bills would have spoiled it? It did for me.

RICK

Maybe if you'd had some faith in me.

LORI

Look, I can't go over that again. Anyway, we were talking about my mother.

RICK

Were we?

LORI

(With finality.)

Yes. We were. So, anyway, when Dad asked her, and she knew he loved her, and he had all of these prospects lined up, she dumped the artsy dude—even though she loved him—because she knew she'd have a better life with my dad.

RICK

I'm really sorry, Lori.

LORI

Whatever for? Mom's forty-five, and she's got everything she ever dreamed of having. If she sees something in a shop, she can buy it without giving it a second thought. If she wants to vacation

in Europe, she can. After Dad died, she started working, but only because she wanted to.

RICK

She went to work because she leads an empty, useless existence. How happy do you suppose she is?

LORI

Don't be ridiculous.

RICK

How about your dear old Dad? How do you think he felt when he hit forty and realized that all he was to his wife and daughter was a bank roll?

LORI

(Enraged.)

You're a fine one to talk. At least my father didn't have to look outside his own family for companionship.

RICK

That doesn't deserve a response.

LORI

I'm really sorry.

RICK

You're so nice; what, pray tell, awaits Neil? You don't love him. But you'll let him grind away so that he can lavish you with "things" until the day he wakes up when he's around forty or so and realizes that nobody cares whether he lives or dies just as long as his insurance is paid up. Then he keels over with a heart attack--and for what? An expensive house in the suburbs and a well-dressed widow. I call that nothing.

LORI

You go to hell. It wasn't for nothing. They had me; I'm something. And the house was practically a palace. That's something.

RICK

Not to your father it's not. And it won't be to Neil either.

LORI

You're impossible. I don't know why I ever condescended to talk to you here.

RICK

You're so self-serving you make me sick. You're just a self-centered brat.

LORI

How would you know anything? You live in some sort of dream world

LORI

where everything is either right or wrong. Well, it isn't like that. What's right for some may not be right for others. And if you have enough money, whatever you do is always right. You just can't accept the fact that not everyone thinks the way you do. And it's a good thing, too. You--you zero. This world couldn't function if it were filled with deadbeat dreamers like you.

RICK

This is one deadbeat dreamer who's going to keep you from destroying someone. I'm not going to let you use him that way.

LORI

It's too late. Everything's set.

RICK

Do you honestly think he'd marry you if he knew about last night?

LORI

Yes, I do. And I'll tell you something else; you say a word to him, and I'll make sure he never speaks to you again.

RICK

God, you're such a . . .

(Enter NEIL carrying ice bucket. He is blithely unaware of the intensity of the preceding conversation, but is hopeful of a positive outcome.)

NEIL

Mission accomplished: ice at last!

(Pause.)

Being civilized is great, isn't it? Instead of Rick and me dueling over you, Lori, we're just going to come to an accord. Then the three of us can live happily ever after.

(LORI and RICK eye each other warily.)

Well, how 'bout it? Can you two put the past behind us all? If you could handle it, Rick, I'd even like you to be my best man. Well?

LORI

(Hastily.)

I don't think you should put Rick on the spot like that. It's just not fair to him.

RICK

I'd consider it an honor and a privilege to stand up for you, Neil, my man. Besides, I want to keep an eye on Lori and see to it she always gives you the treatment you deserve.

NEIL

I'm not so sure I like the sound of that.

RICK

Don't worry; you deserve only the best. And I intend to make sure that's just what you get.

NEIL

Well, great! Then it's settled.

LORI

(Sweetly.)

Rick, are you sure you wouldn't feel a little uncomfortable having to be in the bridal party? I wouldn't want you to do anything that would put any additional stress on you; you've been through so much with this already.

RICK

I really appreciate your concern, but I don't think I'll feel any less comfortable being there than you'll feel having me there.

LORI

Well, this means a lot to Neil and me. I couldn't begin to tell you how much it means.

RICK

Say, why don't you let me have that ice before it melts, I think we could all use a drink.

LORI

Oh, none for me, please; I have too much to do to relax yet. Besides, you'll be leaving any time now for the big B.P. Maybe Rick and I should be leaving, too. Then you'd have time to get ready.

NEIL

I'm all ready. And I'm hoping Rick will come along with me. How 'bout it?

RICK

Sounds like fun.

(Takes ice bucket and exits into kitchen.)

NEIL

(To LORI.)

I can't tell you how relieved I am that you were able to work things out.

LORI

I'm not altogether sure that we did work things out.

NEIL

I don't think I'm following you.

LORI

You know Rick and I were very close for a long time. Well, he told me that he still loves me.

NEIL

Well, of course he does. I couldn't expect him to quit loving you overnight, could I? Besides it would be pretty hard not to love you under any circumstance.

LORI

That is so sweet of you to say that. It's one of the many reasons I love you. But that's not really what I'm concerned about. You see he told me he'd do anything he could to put a halt to our wedding. Now, I know he'd never deliberately do anything to hurt you, but he sounded so wild; I can't imagine what he might say. I'm afraid his jealousy might cause him to hurt you just to get at me. I just couldn't bear that.

NEIL

What could he possibly say that could keep me from marrying you?

LORI

I don't know. I'm probably just having last-minute, bride-to-be jitters. But he was so intense, he really kind of frightened me. You will be careful not to let anything he might say spoil our happiness, won't you?

NEIL

You're being silly.

LORI

I'm sure I am, but after all, isn't it a bride's prerogative to be a little silly?

NEIL

I suppose so.

LORI

Well, at any rate, the last thing I'd ever want is to come between you and your best friend.

NEIL

That could never happen.

LORI

I want you to know that if you think it would be better, we could postpone our wedding. It would take a lot of work--what with writing explanations to everyone and returning the gifts we've already received--but if you think it would make it easier for Rick to handle our being together, I'd be more than happy to make

a little sacrifice.

NEIL

(Pulling LORI toward himself.)

You are really incredible. I can't believe how lucky I am to have you.

(They embrace, kissing just as RICK enters with drinks. He freezes for a moment, then continues with an assumed nonchalance, setting drinks down as he seats himself.)

RICK

Well, here's that drink you promised me. I trust you'll find yours satisfactory; I fix a pretty mean drink if I do say so myself, and I do.

NEIL

(Holding LORI at arms' length.)

Rick, you would not believe this girl.

RICK

No doubt.

NEIL

I mean she is one special lady. Your bad luck has sure been my good fortune.

RICK

Oh?

LORI

(Affected.)

Neil is just too sweet. I was just telling him how important it is to me that you and he remain friends. I couldn't stand the thought of our marriage causing you any unhappiness. But Neil is convinced that our happiness is your happiness. I do hope that that is the case.

RICK

(Caught in the middle, hesitates.)

I'd like Neil to be happy.

NEIL

(Interrupting.)

There. Didn't I tell you everything would be okay?

LORI

I will never doubt you, my love.

RICK

Wait a minute. I think we need to talk.

LORI

Do you think it's wise to begin a discussion at this hour, and after you've been drinking?

RICK

(Indicating drink.)

I don't think this'll affect what I have to say.

LORI

(Sweetly.)

I'm sure you know best. Remember, though; I did warn you. But you go right ahead; say whatever you like. You two can have a nice little chat--without me, though. I have a hundred things to take care of before our wedding.

(LORI and NEIL head toward door.)

NEIL

I really wish you could stay a little longer.

LORI

I know, but I have too many things left to do, anyway. You understand, don't you?

NEIL

(Almost pouting.)

Yeah, I guess so.

LORI

(Patting him lightly on the cheek.)

There you go. You will remember what we talked about earlier, won't you?

NEIL

I don't think that'll be a problem.

LORI

Just as long as you don't forget what I said. Promise?

NEIL

I promise.

LORI

Good.

(Kisses him lightly.)

Love you. (To RICK.) Oh, be careful, Rick. (To NEIL.) Have fun, but not too much. 'Bye.

(Exit LORI. There is a pause as NEIL walks back and picks up his drink. Both RICK and he take a slow sip before resuming conversation.)

She really is something else.

NEIL

My sentiments exactly.

RICK

(Pause. Then simultaneously.)

Neil/Rick, I need to . . .

RICK AND NEIL

(THEY laugh, which somewhat relieves tension.)

Sorry. You go ahead.

RICK

No, no, you go.

NEIL

I can wait; you go.

RICK

Well, I just wanted to ask your opinion on something that's been kind of bothering me.

NEIL

Yeah? Fire away.

RICK
(Taking large gulp.)

It's about Lori.

NEIL
(Hesitantly.)

Oh?

RICK
(Cautiously, not looking at NEIL.)

Well, her interest in me was kind of sudden. I know we've been friends and all, but what exactly do you suppose she might see in me?

NEIL

I'm not sure I know what you're asking.

RICK
(Carefully avoiding eye contact.)

All you have to do is look at me, and you can't help but wonder what Lori sees in me. I'm no fool, Rick. It's not as if I were hideous or anything, but it doesn't take a braintrust to see that I'm about as masculine as yesterday's linguine.

NEIL
(Takes deep breath and plunges in.)

RICK

(Trying to insert a little levity.)

Maybe she loves you for your mind.

NEIL

(Deadly serious.)

I think you can respect someone for his mind, but to base an entire relationship on it seems unlikely. Look, I know better than to think it's for my body. But, I'm smart enough to recognize that sex has played a big part in Lori's life. I know you had a big sexual thing going. And I know that you weren't the only one she's been with. When Mitch was spilling all that shit about your father--this is crazy--but for a moment I wondered if it was Lori he was with. Really nutsy, hunh?

(RICK opens his mouth as if to speak, then nods in agreement.)

I'm sorry, but I'm really uptight about this. You know I love her, but I'm not blind to her proclivities. And, well, the fact is when it comes to me she's not interested in sex. It makes me wonder if she senses that I'm . . . gay or something.

RICK

(Directly.)

Are you?

NEIL

I don't know.

RICK

Well, have you ever done anything?

NEIL

No. But I haven't done anything with a female either.

RICK

Well, if you haven't done anything . . .

NEIL

That's not good enough. I don't know if I can explain, but, well it kind of started the other day when I was waiting for Lori to pick me up after a class. I was standing there, and I got to thinking about my sex life, or lack thereof I should say. Anyway, I was standing there waiting and watching, and I began to notice the profs coming and going. It seemed like they were all old and lifeless. I've known some of them a number of years, now. Each year they look a little older and a little smaller. There they were--trudging up and down those steps. And, you know, I'd picture them doing some of the things you hear about. You know--doing it with this and that student--or teacher for that matter . . .

RICK

Like my father.

NEIL

Yeah . . . no--I didn't mean him; I just meant they all seemed to be narrow-shouldered with their bellies protruding. And they had hair parted down low by their ears, if they had any at all. It was all so comical and pathetic. They go to their classes and they go home--back and forth--day after day--year after year. Maybe they have a few brief flings here and there over the years, but in no time at all they're too old to be desirable or a threat or anything but a joke. No one will have them but their wives and probably not even their wives.

RICK

A scary picture, I'll grant you, but what's your point?

NEIL

If Lori doesn't want me from day one--I'm doomed to go back and forth day in and day out just like those profs--growing older and more foolish with each year--and I'm going to end up looking just like them, too. I'd rather die.

RICK

Oh, come on.

NEIL

I'm serious, Rick.

RICK

So, what are you going to do? Kill yourself?

NEIL

I've been thinking about it. Trying to decide what might be the best way. I just couldn't face hurting her that way.

RICK

I don't know how serious you are. I think you're just overreacting to your inexperience versus her excessive experience. I don't know. Have you talked to anybody about this?

NEIL

I'm talking to you now.

RICK

(With sincere intensity.)

Just because you've thought about killing yourself doesn't mean you're obligated to go through with it. I mean, everybody thinks about suicide at some time or another. I think some people think there is one specific moment--one desperate overwrought moment when suddenly a thought flashes like a crossing light: "Suicide!". Maybe sometimes, but more often than not, I suspect it's been there a long, long time. You battle it, you reason with yourself--tomorrow, I'll feel different, or maybe the day after, or surely the day after that. But when you know nothing will change, it's hard to fight that inner voice.

NEIL
(Concerned.)

Rick?

RICK

It's just the certainty of death would be such a welcome relief from the pain of existence. You know when someone dies--someone you really love--you feel an excruciating tightness in your chest and inside your head. It's as if every ounce of your inner being has been torn asunder and is contained only by the thin shell of your skin. If your body could but explode, the pain would end. You want the pain to stop. You try sleep--blessed sleep, but you awaken. Only time can heal. But when death is the death of hope and desire, when time can no longer sooth but only prolongs the pain, then you view the certainty of pain versus the certainty of death, and death becomes the winner.

NEIL
(Just plain worried.)

Are you okay?

RICK
(Still intense.)

Seeing people for what they really are, sometimes I . . .
(Laughs abruptly.)

Sometimes I sound like a flake.

NEIL

You really had me going for a minute.

RICK

Forget it You know what you were saying before about Lori's wanting to be virginal with you? Maybe that's all it is. Sometimes a gal who has been around, and Lori has cut a wide swath through town . . .

NEIL

Now wait just a minute . . .

RICK

All I mean is that sometimes a girl like that will want it to be different with the guy she's going to marry. So, she plays the virgin. For you she is a virgin. That's all. I'm sure she just wants to be really special for you.

NEIL
(Wanting to believe.)

You think that's it?

RICK
(Hesitates. Struggles to say the "right" thing, then blurts.)

No. I'm trying to be Mister Nice Guy, but I just can't do it.

RICK

I'm lying I'm lying through my teeth. Neil, I'm sorry--I'm really sorry, but I can't stand by and see you get hurt. You can't marry Lori; she just wants to use you.

NEIL

I can't believe you're saying this.

RICK

I know it sounds wild, but you've got to listen to me.

NEIL

No, I don't. You're being crazy.

RICK

I'm crazy? Well, why don't you ask me where she was last night? Come on . . . Know where she was last night, Neil?

NEIL

Yeah, I know where she was. She spent the night with a friend of hers, so she could get an early start shopping this morning.

RICK

Wrong. She was with me, and she loved every minute of it.

NEIL

You're all fucked.

RICK

That's right! And by her--and the night before that, too.

NEIL

I can't believe you're saying this; I thought our friendship meant more to you than this.

RICK

It means a helluva lot to me. If I didn't care about you, I wouldn't tell you this.

NEIL

Yeah, right!

RICK

Don't you see? She's been lying to you; she lied to me all along. She was the one with my father. She screwed him before she even knew me. I was just a favor she did for him.

NEIL

I really feel sorry for you; you're so twisted.

RICK

I'm not doing this for my enjoyment. Why do you think I was so surprised to find out you were planning to marry her? Well, I'll

tell you--I didn't even know Lori and I weren't an item anymore. She didn't bother to mention it to me even though there were plenty of times when she might have dropped that little bomb on me. Maybe she was just too busy coming.

NEIL

You filthy liar.

RICK

Think! Why would I lie about this?

NEIL

I don't know, but she told me you'd say anything to break us up. I didn't believe her, though. I told her you were my friend and would never do something like that. God was I wrong.

RICK

She told you I'd tell you about last night?

NEIL

She told me you'd make up some kind of lie to get me to break up with her. I said you'd never do anything like that. You know a person all your life, and you really don't. So you might as well drop it, Rick. Have a little dignity.

RICK

But don't you see this is part of her plan? She knows I'll tell you the truth, so she sets me up using the truth as a weapon.

NEIL

You're not making sense. If you're telling the truth, why didn't you mention it before? Why did you wait until she talked to you? Are you sure it wasn't because she made it clear that she didn't love you?

RICK

I wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt. I mean if she really loved you, I'd never say anything. But she's no better than a whore.

NEIL

You'd better get out of here.

RICK

Will you please listen to me?

NEIL

Damn you; you're supposed to be my friend!

RICK

That's why I told you about Lori, you jerk--because you're my friend!

NEIL

(Shoving RICK toward door.)

Why did you have to say anything? If what you said were true, I'd have found out eventually. But this way--if it's the truth, I won't even have a friend to turn to because, as of now, you're no friend of mine. And if it's a lie, what was the point of it?

RICK

Jesus, Neil, you can't marry her--she's all wrong for you. She'll make you miserable.

NEIL

But she's all right for you? Well, you can't have her. Thank God, she saw through you in time. You sure had me fooled. Christ, here I was waiting for my friends to call me and even thinking how great it would be to have you there . . . I guess "all's fair in love and war." Right, Rick? Is that the way you play? Like father, like son?

RICK

(Struggling with NEIL.)

She's lying. Can't you see it? She's got you right where she wants you.

NEIL

All I see, friend, is a self-serving liar. So get out of here.

RICK

For God's sake, listen!

NEIL

Damn you; get out!

(NEIL succeeds in throwing RICK out, forcing the door shut behind him. Immediately, pounding is heard.)

RICK

(Shouts through door.)

Listen to me, you fool!

NEIL

Get out!

RICK

All right, be a dumb jerk; let her walk all over you! But when you get tired of eating your ration of shit, and you want a real friend; I'll be there for you. No "I told you so" bullshit. We're friends, even if you don't think so right now. Got that?

(Pounds door one final time for emphasis. There is a pause.)

NEIL

(Opens door tentatively; RICK is gone. He closes door, leaning against it. The telephone rings. NEIL finally moves to answer it on the fourth ring.)

Yeah? . . . Sorry, I was just cleaning up . . . Yeah, I'm all right . . . Sure I'll be there . . . No, he's not coming . . . How should I know? . . . Sorry . . . No, I . . . I'll be there.

(NEIL freezes, lights fade.)

Curtain.

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