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THE BLUE MAN

(A Collection of Five Stories and a Play)

by

Craig A. Holden

B.A., University of Toledo, 1983

Offered in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in English
THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA.
1986

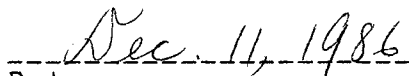
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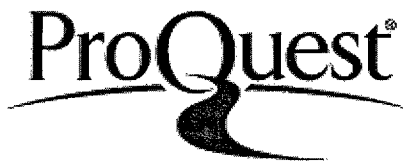
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The Quiet

She can see him still, her husband Frank, feel his barrel chest over her, his thick meaty arms tight from a day's work flexing around her, drawing her to him. She feels the knots in his back, some as large and asymmetric as eggs, some small and hard like marbles. She hears his breathlessness, the air whistling in between his teeth, and she feels breathless herself, remembering.

She watches him roll over, listens to him grunt with satisfaction. She pets his head, smooths his thinning hair, and he curls up and sleeps and purrs.

It has been nearly a year.

"And are the memories painful?" Dr. Marcus asked her once.

"No," she answered. "Not painful."

"Do you like them?"

"Not exactly. No."

"They're healthy," Marcus told her over the rim of his glass. "Do you miss him?"

"Oh, yes," she said.

"I remember his whispering," she told Marcus. "At night. He'd talk about all kinds of silly things from work or about the kids. And he'd keep whispering sometimes until he was almost asleep, until he wasn't making any sense at all, until finally he became quiet."

"Call me Louise," she says to this young man sitting across from her. She nods to encourage him. She has noticed that no one seems to call her that anymore although that is her name and she like the way it sounds. Mrs. Parker, she can't stand. Lou doesn't sound so nice for a woman. Frank called her Louise.

The coffee she made is cinnamoned and hot. He sucks at it anxiously; he is cold, and he is probably hungry. They sit at her kitchen table, him with his knees crossed, waiting for her daughter, Martha, to come home. Martha calls him Stanley. "Oh, Stanley," Louise hears when she listens at night. Louise thinks Stanley is a silly name for a grown man. She calls him Stan.

He lives in a rented motel room--a terrible place for anyone to live, in Louise's opinion. He claims he doesn't spend much time there but she feels sorry for him just the same. Stan is medical student at Case Western, in his second year. Martha told Louise that he has classes for eight hours every day and then that he studies for another

six at night. This doesn't seem healthy to Louise, but she doctors to lead unhealthy lives in many ways. She offered Stan a cigarette a couple of minutes ago and he jumped at it. And Dr. Marcus, whose office she works in as a receptionist, works long hours and he smokes too, and drinks. He has taken her out to the bars on a few Friday afternoons and she's watched him put it away.

"Are you hungry, Stan?" she asks. She wants to feed him.

"No. No, thank you," he answers. He smiles limply and pulls on his cigarette. He is pale and he doesn't say much. He has never said too much in front of Louise. Sometimes she thinks he doesn't seem too bright. Martha says that he is quite intelligent but that he's shy. Shy, Louise says. Doctors have to be able to talk with their patients. Dr. Marcus keeps everybody, his patients and staff, chuckling and at ease. Stan is going to be a pathologist, Martha says. They don't have to talk to their patients, unless they want to.

Louise likes that fact that Stan is so busy with school because he can't spend all his time with Martha. Martha has a three year old daughter of her own to take care of, although she still runs off during the week to have lunch or dinner with Stan or to help him with his cleaning or typing. Still, she can't spend too much time with him until the weekends, when he usually just picks her up and

they go off someplace. Probably over to his room, Louise thinks. Martha's daughter is still not too sure of him. She crawls up on Louise's lap when Stan is there and refuses to look at him. She is with Martha now, shopping for clothes at the new mall.

"What do you think of my granddaughter?" Louise asks Stan. "You like her?" Stan has only seen her three or four times. She is usually in bed when he arrives.

"Yes," he says. "She's a nice little girl."

"She's beautiful," says Louise. "Too bad she doesn't like you." Louise laughs, hard enough so that she has to set her coffee cup down to avoid staining the table cloth. Stan looks down into his own cup and doesn't say anything. He's not very clever at all, she thinks: no comeback, no quick-from-the-hip retort. But she is rooting for him.

"I'm just kidding, Stan," she says. He still looks hurt. She wonders how he is ever going to make a doctor.

She offers him another cigarette, which he accepts. She holds the match as he leans toward her. Her eyes are very, very green. She can tell that he notices, that he is struck by this. He can't sustain the gaze, though, and he looks away.

Martha and Amy march into the kitchen. They are wrapped in matching navy blue parkas and layers of fresh cold air. Their arms are loaded with brightly colored shopping bags.

"Mama," says Amy to Louise. "Lookit!" She throws her bags to the floor and tears into one. Martha smiles at Stan and, after she sets her shopping bags on the table, she reaches for his hand.

"What took you so long?" Louise asks. "Stan's been waiting."

"Lookit!" shouts Amy again. Her voice is muffled. She has a rubber mask over her face. It is a mask of a green monster from the television called The Incredible Hulk. Frank used to play a game with Amy in which he pretended he was The Hulk. He growled at her as he rubbed his hair so it stood out from his head. Then, bellowing, he ripped his shirt open and stomped his feet and beat his hairy chest. Amy would scream and wiggle against whoever was holding her and she would choke and cough in her excitement. She pouted until she caught her breath and then she would ask him to do it again.

Amy raises her arms and roars at Louise. Halloween is in two days.

"We got so many clothes," Martha says. "I got her three pairs of corduroys and a sweater and some shirts."

"Is that thing safe?" Louise asks the medical student. "Is it? A thing like that over her face?"

He shrugs and tries to smile. He feels safe now with Martha, Louise thinks, but he still won't say anything intelligent.

"Show Grandma what you got, honey," says Martha.

"Where's the rest?" Amy asks as she searches through the bag.

"Show Grandma your new clothes," Martha says. She is standing behind Stan with her hands on his shoulders. Martha calls Louise Grandma in front of Amy. She doesn't like it when Amy calls Louise Mama.

"Mom," says Amy.

"All right," Martha says. She kneels and helps search for the costume.

"Wait," says Martha. She leans and whispers into her daughter's ear.

Amy nods with a big grin on her face. They both giggle and run into the dining room with the costume package. Martha is good with Amy, Louise thinks, but she is still too much of a child herself. She loves to play and joke but she has no sense of responsibility. "I'm raising Amy," Louise has said to Dr. Marcus. "I'm her Mama. Martha is nothing more than an older sister to her."

"And she is a beautiful child," Louise has said. "Her father was Italian-American, you know."

Amy is dark with brown eyes and blackish hair that is soft and straight. Louise never met Amy's father but she spoke with him once. He tried, through a lawyer, to get some visitation rights. But he and Martha were never married. Louise called him on the telephone. She said,

"How much money do you have? When are you going to start child support payments and when will you pay for some of the expenses we've had so far?"

"You can't do this," he said.

Louise said, "How much money do you have for lawyers? Because I'll spend every nickel I've got to see that you never lay eyes on this child. I'll drag you through every court in the state first and if you win, I'll take her and run."

He couldn't reply at first. He stammered around and finally said it wasn't fair.

"Who isn't fair?" Louise asked him. "Who had to deliver a baby into this world? Who got off scott free?"

He didn't reply.

"Forget it," Louise told him. "You're free now; keep it that way. Don't get involved in this fight because you'll never beat me, not in a thousand years." He hung up. These college boys, she thought, are all so smart and bold until you slap them down. Frank wasn't like that. He was humble and he respected women. He worked for a living as a tool and die maker.

Stan hasn't looked at her since the girls left.

Martha comes back into the kitchen giggling and she stands behind Stan again and curls her fingers into his hair.

Amy walks in with her arms raised. She has the mask on

over her face and a green cloth over her body. On the cloth is a picture of the muscled torso of The Incredible Hulk with shreds of torn clothing hanging from it. Amy roars again.

"Who are you?" Louise asks her.

"She's The Hulk," says Martha, giggling.

"Thanks a lot," Louise says to her. "What does The Hulk say?" she asks Amy.

Amy roars.

"What else does he say?"

"Mama," says Amy, lifting the mask back from her face. "He can't talk. He dis growls." She pulls the mask back down and stomps her feet as loudly as she can, in her trick or treat costume. Louise only lets Martha take her around to the houses of the people they know, many of the same people Martha collected candy from when she was little.

"Oh, no," Louise says, putting her hands to her cheeks. "Please don't eat me, Mr. Hulk."

Amy pauses again and lifts the mask with one hand and places her other hand on her hip. "Mama," she says. "He can't eat you. He dis growls and beats you up."

"Please don't beat me up, Mr. Hulk," Louise pleads.

"It's not mister," says Amy. "It's increb...what is it Mom?"

"Incredible," says Martha. She and Stan are smiling.

"Increbible Hulk," says Amy.

Louise remembers the day Martha came home from college. Martha was a sophomore at Ohio State and she was a good student, all A's and B's. Louise knew when Martha called and said she was coming home that she was pregnant. Martha loved college and she had friends and she was pledging at a sorority. Louise knew, but Martha didn't tell her until she stepped off the bus into Louise's arms and cried and cried. Louise remembers the bright yellow top Martha was wearing and how her make-up was smeared all over her cheeks.

Louise forgets what happened next. She wonders if she was very hard on Martha, if, perhaps, she hit her. Louise has explained to Marcus that she was in shock. "Frank never talked about that time," she said, "but we hurt him, Martha and I. Somehow that made it easier, my being guilty along with her. She didn't have to suffer alone and Frank couldn't focus his disappointment on one or the other of us."

Louise started remembering again when Amy was born. That she remembers as a blessed time. Everything was right. Their house was paid off and Frank had just become a foreman at the shop so he was making a much better wage than he had been. Shortly after Amy was born, once Martha was back on her feet, Louise took the job with Dr. Marcus. It has been almost four years.

"Can we still get to the movie?" Martha asks.

"I think there's a later show," says Stan. "We've got time."

"What movie?" Amy asks. She is sitting on Louise's lap, leaning against her, but she sits up straight when she hears this talk of a movie.

"It's for grown-ups only," Louise says. "You get to stay here with Mama and show me all your new clothes."

Amy's eyebrows frown. She rolls a wad of air back and forth across her mouth, from one cheek into the other. "I want to go," she says.

"No," Louise says and then Martha says, "there's a Disney movie showing at the mall. We saw the sign tonight when we were shopping."

"Martha," says Louise. Martha looks at her from behind Stan. Stan leans his head back against Martha's breasts.

"Please can I go," asks Amy.

"No, baby," says Louise. "I want you to stay here with me. I'll be all alone without you."

"No," says Amy. "Please." Her face is darkening. She is scowling, getting ready to bawl, and Louise smiles at her passion. Louise thinks of how she will take Amy upstairs and give her a bath and how Amy will soon be playing some game or other in the tub. Martha takes baths along with Amy. They have a time splashing around together and playing with Amy's toys, but Louise doesn't do that.

"That new Star Wars film is showing too," says Stan.

"She's welcome to come."

Louise freezes.

"Do you like Star Wars?" Stan asks Amy.

"I like Darth Vader," she shouts.

"No, honey," says Louise. "It's too late. And Stan and your mom have a date. They don't get to go out together very often."

Amy breaks into tears. Her shoulders heave and she slips from Louise's lap and holds her arms up to her mother. Martha picks her up.

"Really," says Stan. "I'd enjoy it." He is smoking again--he helps himself now from Louise's pack--and the smoke curls up toward the light hanging over the kitchen table. Stan is much taller than Martha, nearly a foot. He is only twenty-six but his thin black hair has receded already to the middle of his head. It is still full around the sides and in the back. He has a long slender nose and brown eyes with startlingly long lashes. His eyes are almost pretty and they clash with the rest of his face.

"Are you sure?" asks Martha.

"Sure," says Stan.

"I'll be lonely if you leave me," Louise says to Amy.

Amy sniffs and wipes at her eyes and says, "Please can I go?"

Martha looks at Louise and raises her eyebrows. Louise feels the three of them staring at her, playing her.

Like I'm the devil, she thinks. I'm raising this child.
I'm her Mama.

"Oh, I don't care," she says harshly. She raises her hands as if to push them out the door.

"You have to come home afterwards and go straight to bed," Martha says.

Amy nods and wipes at her cheeks.

"Such a thing," Louise says. "Taking a baby on a date." She clears the coffee cups from the table. "Don't keep her out too late. I'll take care of this." She nods at the pile of clothes on the floor. They are all standing around in their coats, looking at her. "Go," she says.

She sets the dishes in the sink and then turns and watches them through the window. Amy is holding Martha's hand on one side and Stan has his arm over Martha's other shoulder. Louise sits back down at the table and lights a cigarette and then she begins to cry a little.

They got home an hour ago; Louise heard them come in. She slept then, for a little while, but now she is awake. She can hear Frank purring next to her. He worked second shift often and when he got home, bent and worn out, Louise would fry him up some ham and eggs and toast and he would have a glass of milk and crawl up to bed. "Frank needed more sleep than I did," Louise has told Marcus. "Life was hard for him. All he knew how to do was work."

He died suddenly, of a heart attack. Louise knew he was dead by the time they reached the hospital; she sat next to him in the ambulance and she watched his face grow gray and rubbery. Dr. Marcus met her in the emergency room and then he went into the cubicle where they were working on Frank. Louise caught a glimpse of them pressing on Frank's chest and she saw bags of fluid hanging and people holding needles up in the air, waiting. When Dr. Marcus came out he shook his head and drew Louise to his chest. She remembers his smell--smoky and clean and wise.

The house is still but Louise knows what is happening. The baby is sleeping. Martha is downstairs with Stan.

The world is clear and hard and cold outside her window. She sits up and slips her robe over her night-gown and then she stands. Looking out on to the neighbor's dust porch she can see the gray marks on the railing where the handle of the dust mop has been pounded, and she can see that it has even snowed a bit. The world has been dusted.

She finds a stale cigarette on her dresser and lights it. She uses the glow from the tip to watch the smoke come out of her lungs and mouth. When she pulls on it it illuminates the items on her dresser. Under them, on the dresser top, is a film of powder from her make-up. She walks out into the hallway and down to Amy's room.

Amy lies on her stomach and as Louise watches she feels a tightening in her chest. Amy's hair is spread out like a

fan. Louise holds the cigarette behind her back and leans over the child. Amy's breathing is strong and measured. Louise can smell her breath, milk-sweet and pure.

Louise walks, lightly, to the top of the stairs. She can hear Stan and Martha although they are not speaking. Louise moves down on to the first step, then the second. She is silent as the night; she knows where to step. Her husband built these steps before Martha was born. They do not betray her.

Halfway down she sits, still holding her cigarette, and leans forward. Here the wall ends, the railing begins, and she can see into the living room. Light from the street falls in two columns through the windows and across the room, across the worn gold carpeting and the wooden rocker where Amy loves to be cradled, and across the couch.

They are lying on the couch beneath an afghan which Louise's mother crocheted many years ago. It looks as if it is alive and writhing on its own except for the two heads sticking out at one end and the four stockinged feet at the other. Martha is on top of Stan. Louise watches them and listens to their moaning and breathing. Muted cries slip from Martha from time to time but she holds in her passion because she knows what can be heard upstairs. Louise wraps her arms around her knees and rocks back and forth. She moves with their rhythm.

They strain--Louise can feel the sweat, the shortness of

breath, the lightheadedness--against each other. Martha lifts her head, then her torso, and sits upright on Stan. The blanket falls away. Martha raises her face toward the ceiling and shuts her eyes; her shirt is unbuttoned and her bra has been loosened; Stan's fingers nearly encircle her waist. Louise glances away. She feels the barrel chest over her once more, the arms, tight and weary, smelling of soap and talcum, the heavy head next to her's, whispering. She feels the knotted back. She looks again into the living room and she rocks more and more quickly. The cigarette is dead in her hand.

And are the memories painful?

Yes. Yes, they are. And I am tired of them. And they are not healthy. Not at all. They are not at all healthy.

Then, in a moment of silence, when in the light from the street she sees Martha's eyes and teeth clench, a moment which she imagines is the prelude to a final cry, Louise ceases her rocking and leans forward. She places her foot down on a step in front of her and puts her weight on it. The step is loose and the noise is like a gunshot. They are still. They hold their breath and then sit up with the afghan across their wet naked laps because they think Louise is going to intrude. She leans back so they can't see her and she hears them shuffling, struggling back into their clothes. She pushes her bottom up one step, then another, and in this way inches herself back up the stairs.

She can hear them whispering in the dark. Stan is leaving. Martha pleads with him to stay.

"No!" he whispers.

Martha is silent.

When she was little Louise was afraid of the dark. She imagined things that could hurt her, people that were waiting for her, scary monsters. Then, later, she came not only to accept the dark but to revel in it. She would stay up late, until three or four in the morning, and the darkness became her disguise. I must have influenced my children, she thinks. Martha has always loved the dark, from the time she was little, and Amy is the same way.

She creeps back into her room. From here she can see Stan's old car in the driveway. After a few minutes she hears the side door open and she sees him walk out. He walks quickly; it is cold. He unlocks his car and gets in and turns the engine over again and again until it catches. Then he presses hard on the accelerator and the car roars. When his headlights come on and cut into the darkness she turns and shuts her door, leaving only a crack through which she can watch.

"And why did you do it?" Marcus will ask. They will be having a drink after work.

"I don't know," Louise will say.

He will take her hand and smile at her. "I know," he will say.

"I'm afraid," Louise will answer finally.

Marcus will nod and order more drinks.

"I will miss her when the time comes. I will miss Amy, too. The loneliness will be something new again."

"Loneliness is just another part of it," he will say.

The hall light snaps on and slice into Louise's room.

She can hear Martha climbing the stairs and then she watches her past the door. Martha looks sad, Louise thinks, cheated, not of the climax alone, but of the best part, the lying together afterwards, the sharing of the quiet.

"I remember when it all happened to me..." Marcus will begin to say but Louise will shake her head. She will lift his hand and straighten his index finger and, pressing it to her lips, she will say, "Shhh."

After the Late, Late Show

It was nearly three in the morning on a cloudless August night and they went for a walk in the park because it was too hot in her apartment. They were a little worried about who they might meet up with in the darkness but their uneasiness added to the excitement they felt. They were still new to each other.

When they were deep within the park she knelt on the side of a hill and pulled him on to the grass. The ground was hard and dry. They made love, and afterwards they lay on their backs smoking and staring up at the blackness and the points of white which were the stars.

She smiled and reached up with her cigarette and, across the black, she drew an orange line that connected two stars.

He didn't believe she had done it at first, but there it was in front of him: a line burned across the night sky from one star to another.

"How can you do that?" he asked.

"Watch," she said. She lifted her cigarette and drew another line. Now there were two lines across the sky, connecting the stars.

"Teach me," he said.

So she began to draw other lines, always from star to star.

"Now you watch," he said with some confidence. He grinned. He held up his own cigarette and drew a line across the sky that joined two of the lines she had drawn.

She laughed at this and they lay in the dark, very close together, and drew line after line above them. Before long there were so many orange lines blazing across the sky that they began to light the world. The darkness was being pushed off the horizon by all the orange lines.

"How do we erase them?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. She lit another cigarette and he could see the puzzled expression on her face. "I really don't know," she said.

He laid his head back on the hard ground and she rested hers on his shoulder. They gazed up at the lines they had drawn and they wondered how they would ever erase them but they were happy lying with each other under the pale light.

Then, as they watched, the orange lines seemed to fade-- rather they were absorbed by a greater orange stretching up in the east.

"It's morning," he said. "Looks like the sun will take

care of our problem."

"Come on," she said. "I'll make coffee. And I think I have some good fresh sausage in the refrigerator."

They walked lazily back through the park, hand in hand, tracing their steps from earlier when it was dark. The air was cool now, with the morning.

He felt glad to be going back to her place for coffee with her. They would sit by the wide window and watch the neighborhood awaken.

He was, however, troubled at the same time. She would say Mmmm as she bit into a crisply browned sausage patty. He could picture her, in fine focus, licking her fingers, poking them one at a time into her mouth and then pulling them out and making her lips smack.

He knew her now. He felt as if he had known her for a long, long time. Her apartment would be just as he pictured it. He imagined the things she would say when they arrived.

The Bridge Group

I was driving and I was a little drunk--happily buzz-brained and steeled, I felt, against their perfumes and their dry powder faces and their cigarettes with red lip prints on the white filters. I could imagine them. The bridge ladies, Jill, my girlfriend, called them. All old, old and dear friends of her mother's from college and the sorority house.

The problem: I was sobering quickly. Jill lives with her parents down in Allen Park, a suburb of Detroit, a long way from Sophie's Bar--all the way down through the city and then out across the I-75 bridge over River Rouge past the docks and old shipyards off to the east and the forest of stacks there always pumping snowy white billows of stench. I like that view from way up in the air over the scummy river.

It's funny that when you leave the city you never notice the smell has gone. It's only when you're coming back in, right after you hit the peak of that bridge and see the

hundreds of grimy brown buildings and the towers over by the river and the ribbons of low hanging smog lacing them together and you settle toward it, that the smell, acrid and metallic and tarry, strikes you. It's not really a bad smell for all that. Tells you where you are.

My white business shirt was soaking and stained under the arms. My back was stuck to the seat and my neck tie was loose around my opened collar. I was supposed to have stopped by my apartment and changed.

It was a Friday evening, the last day of my first month at the offices of Fielbach and Fenner Research and Data, Inc. A drink after work, with a few of my co-workers, turned into five. I ended up buying the last two rounds. The sky was bright when I left the bar but it was almost eight o'clock. I was to have been at Jill's at six-thirty. Meet the ladies, she said, then out for dinner, few drinks, maybe some dancing, back to my apartment. She has a brilliant smile, perfectly ordered, that cost a thousand dollars. She's quite nice to look at.

Grace isn't so beautiful. She bought the first round this afternoon, slid into the booth next to me and pushed her round hip up against my leg. She's a typist with weird penetrating green eyes and short sandy hair. Around the third drink it was to the point of knee squeezing and hot whispers between us. After five we ended up kissing and grinding, for a long minute, in the parking lot.

I had this crumpled up napkin with me in the car. I kept sniffing at it every so often on my way down to Jill's. A corner of it had been soaked in Grace's perfume. It had a sharp scent, spicy and thin. It reminded me of Halloween, very orange and black

The driveway was packed with clean late-model automobiles. One, a rich brown Chrysler, had the price stickers in the window yet. I paused beside it and peered inside and then stepped back to study its lines. I wasn't dying to get into the house. I had a dry pulsing headache. Then Jill walked out on to the grass.

She was wearing this pale blue sun dress--no nylons or stockings or shoes. The dress looked new, nothing unusual with Jill, and I didn't feel like commenting on it. She had her hair pinned up because of the heat. Her mouth was compressed into a little pink dime.

"My dad has always wanted one of these," I said to her. "A New Yorker, he says, but he'd settle for a Cadillac." I laughed. He drives a delivery truck now for a dry cleaning firm all over the greater metro area and even as far as Ann Arbor and Pontiac. He's partial to Chryslers because he worked on the lines at their Hamtramck plant once. That was when he was younger, before my mom left.

"It's nice that you decided to come over," Jill said. She crossed her arms and leaned back against the car.

"Friday," I said. "Pay day. All that. We went out for a few after work."

She nodded. "I wish you'd have called," she said, watching her feet. "Come on." She turned and walked toward the house.

So me, I stepped back in the front yard for one more look at that car. I squatted and closed one eye and held my thumb up in front of me. I don't really even like Chryslers, myself.

Jill waited on the doorstep. "Stuart," she said. She said it calmly, evenly.

"Right," I answered.

My dad has been unsure of what to think of her all along. Sometimes, not very often, we'd stop by his house. Jill always looked awkward and alien sitting there in a dress on his ratty brown couch with a dirty dinner plate or two next to her on the table, a stuffed ashtray next to them and usually a ball game on the television. And he'd fidget and fold up a newspaper or something and slide it under a chair and they'd sit and try not to get caught eyeing each other while I did the talking.

He surprised me a couple weeks ago, though. We were stripping the carburetor out of my car. He's not one to talk about much of anything that really matters but this day under my hood he said something about my getting married. He didn't say much--no fanfare, no slap on the

shoulder or anything like that--but he brought it up.

"Need to think about it," he said. "You thinkin' about it?"

"I don't think about it," I told him.

The kitchen was littered with opened bags of potato chips and pretzels and empty diet soda cans. Cardboard beer cases were stacked in one corner and bottles of liquor stood in lines on the counter next to an ice bucket. The Burnards have a clean modern kitchen with oak cabinets and bone colored counter tops and a wooden table with those deep cushioned chairs on coasters. It was quiet and cool. I could hear laughter and chatter coming from the living room and a television in the family room. Then I was converged upon.

Mrs. Burnard glided in with one of her friends through one door and Robbie, Jill's younger brother, stumbled in through another and everyone was talking.

"Stuart," Mrs. Burnard cried. She pressed my cheeks between her palms and kissed me on the nose. She had never done that before. Her breath was sweet with alcohol. She slipped her arm through mine and said to her friend, "And this is our Stuart. Stuart, this is Joyce Donovan." Mrs. Donovan gave me this, "I imagine I'm extremely pleased to meet you," smile.

"Stuart's in, what is it, marketing?" Mrs. Burnard said.

"Right," I answered. Jill was starting to look pleased. Robbie had collapsed in one of the rolling chairs and his head was cocked toward his shoulder.

"He works for a big research firm here and," Mrs. Burnard continued, "he's starting law school this fall." She grinned up at me and squeezed my arm. "Part-time," she added. "Nights."

Mrs. Donovan shook her head and showed even more teeth.

"Look," said Mrs. Burnard, "there's plenty of food. We've got a nice ham. Potato salad in the fridge. Get whatever you want and come on in." She glanced around and rubbed her hands together.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked me.

I just raised my eyebrows.

"Of course," she said. "Hard day at the office." She winked. "There's vodka, gin, bourbon, let's see..." She tapped a red fingernail against her upper teeth. "Beer, of course," she said. "And there's vermouth if you want a martini."

I held up my hand like I was stopping traffic.

"Martini's good," I said. "Dry. Olive. Little ice."

"Good," she said. "Jill, you can fix it. Our cards are getting cold in there." She patted my arm. "Jill makes a nice dry martini," she said. "Hurry on in." She left with Mrs. Donovan, still smiling, in tow.

I whistled.

"Well," said Jill as she dribbled Tanqueray some ice cubes in a heavy tumbler. "She's happy. They haven't all been together in a long time." Then she measured out a capful of vermouth, dumped it in and stirred it with her finger.

"Drunk as skunks," Robbie said. He snorted. Robbie was sixteen. He was wearing green swimming trunks and an orange T-shirt decorated with an in-concert picture of some rock-and-roll band. Above that he displayed a very recently sprouted mustache framed by two parenthetical looking little arcs of pimples.

Jill handed me my drink and started edging me toward the living room but I leaned back against the counter and said, "Looks like you've been swimming, Rob."

"Yaah," he said. He sneered and nodded once, as if the whole topic was somehow painful. "Over at Jason's. You know Jason?"

"No," I said.

"Yea, well, I keep askin' Dad to put one in out back but he says it's a waste of money. So I gotta go down there all the time. Dad says go down to the county pool." He barked. "I say right. I'll get some kinda stinkin' disease down there and they can't always cure those diseases anymore."

"Right," I said.

Jill slipped her arm through mine and started leading me

to the door. I took a sip from my drink and looked down at it. "Olive," I said.

"Oh, right," she said. She turned to the refrigerator and I headed for the table and sat down across from Robbie.

"So, what else you been up to, Rob?" I said.

"Nothin'," he said immediately. He buried his hand in a bag of chips and dug around. "Good munchies, huh?" he said. He pulled out a handful and cupped them against his chest.

I nodded and tried to look relaxed. The drink helped; already my headache was fading.

Jill slapped the jar of olives down on the table. "There," she said. "So, Stuart." She crossed her arms and walked across the room to the doorway and leaned against the jamb. "Are you O.K.?"

I shrugged and looked sideways at her. "What do you mean?" I said.

"I mean, are you comfortable? Do you need anything else?"

"Like what?" I said.

"Anything," she said. "Food, more drink, a cigarette. I just want to know if you're comfortable."

"I'm fine, Jill," I said. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" she said. "With me? Stuart, what could be wrong?"

"Come on, Jill," I said. I hate it when she gets mad

because she never really gets good and worked up and purges herself. We don't fight like normal people. Our fights are always these subterranean mind games which she orchestrates no matter who is at fault. I'm always at fault, though. Jill never fucks up. I think it's in her genes that she can never fuck up.

"I just want to know if you're happy, if there's anything I can get you," she said. Her head was tipped to one side. I couldn't tell if she was fuming or getting ready to cry.

"I'm fine," I said. "I was just talking to Rob. I haven't seen him for awhile."

"Ah," she said. "I see. Well, that's nice. You two have a nice little chat. If you need anything, I'll be in the library."

"Jill," I said, but she had turned and was gone.

"Jee-zus," said Robbie. "What's buggin' her?" He had his chair balanced back on two wheels and he shifted somehow and his movement started the chair over backwards. He grabbed the edge of the table and kept himself from falling until I righted him.

"Jesus Christ," he said. He crammed a chip into his mouth. "Thanks."

"You been drinking," I said.

He nodded and simpered and held up four fingers. "Already," he said, around the chip. "I'm gonna have more."

Maybe some beer instead. Dad's crashing in there." He stabbed his thumb at the family room and laughed a little. "I just take it up in my room."

I lit a cigarette and watched him.

"Hey, Stu!" he said. "You seen my guitar yet? I'm gettin' a band together with a couple'a guys from school."

"Yea?" I said. Jill mentioned a month or two earlier that Rob had gotten an electric guitar. She was telling me about all the racket he made; it bothered her.

"You gotta come upstairs and see it."

"I don't know," I said. "I should get in there."

"Ah, come on," he said. "Just take a minute. It's not like you're leavin' or something."

He gripped the table and leaned and looked into the family room. Then he stepped across the kitchen and checked around the corner. He looked back at me and then hustled to the refrigerator and removed two bottles of beer. He tucked them up underneath his arm and snapped his head toward the stairway.

"Come on," he whispered.

A snarl of sheets trailed over the foot of the bed and pooled on the floor. Robbie launched himself on to the mattress and the springs and the frame shrieked. He laid an arm over his face and said, "Jee-zus."

I had to move some record albums and another pair of

swimming trunks from the desk chair before I could sit down. Leather clad musicians sneered down at us from the walls. The guitar was leaning against its amplifier in the middle of the floor. A Tiger baseball cap had been speared by the end of it.

Robbie swung his feet back to the floor and sat up. He opened one of the bottled and drank a third or so of it and then he pulled a hand across his mouth. "Well, take a look," he said.

About all I could tell was which was the guitar and which was the amp but I got up and put the cap on my head and bent and studied the set up. "Mmm," I said. "Pretty nice. You getting good?"

"Yea," he said. "I know a couple'a songs." He stood and slipped the strap over his head and played a few chords without turning on the amplifier. The sound was small and tinny as he waved his fingers over the strings. He couldn't stand over one spot on the floor.

Then he stopped playing and grinned at me and tipped the beer bottle back and drank deeply from it.

"Better take it easy," I said.

"Yea, right," he said. He bent and flipped on the amplifier. The red monitor glowed large and bright in the darkening room. There was a sharp electric hum.

Robbie turned and punched a button on a large boxey cassette player. He shut his eyes and bobbed his head to

the simple but deep and resonant drum beat. Then an angry guitar came in playing at double time, bouncing back and forth between the same two chords, over and over, mrau rau rau rau-um rau rau-um. Robbie turned up the volume until the sound distorted and the cassette player buzzed and hummed.

"Robbie," I said.

Robbie cocked his head and kicked his foot against the floor and then slammed into the music. His timing was off and the guitar sounded out of tune but it made no difference; the noise from the tape was buried. Sound careened around the room and ricocheted off the plaster walls and shook the glass in the windows. The floor was shaking too with Robbie's kicking. He was dancing then, strutting and pushing at the guitar with his hips. His eyes were shut and his face was twisted: pained and ecstatic.

I felt my head expand and contract with the pulse that enveloped the room. Even my heart, it sort of scared me, seemed to hold the same beat as the guitar. The chords compressed my chest and they were coming more and more quickly.

"Robbie!" I hollered.

I was standing with one hand against the side of my face and the other stuffed down in my pocket where I felt that perfumed napkin. I yelled again but Robbie wouldn't look

at me. I felt dizzy.

I shut the tape player off first. Robbie played on. So I started flipping switches on the amp. The sound went through some strange transformations as I did this--from the raw cutting sound that he used to a hollow far away kind of wailing to a clean trebly sound until finally I hit the right switch and the circuits cleared of their electric life. There was just a tiny impotent strumming from over by the window where Robbie had ended up. He was looking out at the quiet well-lit street and the ordered lawns.

"What'd you do that for?" he whined. He staggered backwards and leaned against the wall.

I heard the stairs creak.

Robbie slid down the wall and rested on the floor. His jaw was locked; he was breathing through his nose. He looked up at me like he had just been shot and I held the smoking pistol.

He swallowed hard and held the guitar up toward me. In a little voice he said, "Take it." He swallowed again.

I took the guitar from him.

Some woman walked in then. She was expensively dressed--nice dark dress, very well tailored, and about thirty pounds of jewelry on her neck and wrists and fingers.

"How rude," she said.

I laid the guitar on the bed. "You O.K.?" I said to Robbie.

He rubbed his face and sucked air in between his fingers.

"I find this hard to believe," the woman said. "That you could..."

"I'm gonna puke, Stu," Robbie said.

I gripped his shirt and started to lift him.

"Don't!" he said. "I'm gonna."

"I don't know your name," she said to me. "But I think you could have a little respect for the rest of us."

I got Robbie to his feet and said, "Hurry up." He sprinted away, past me and this lady who stepped back in what I like to think of as disgust, out into the hallway and down to the bathroom. I could hear him retching then. I sat back down in the chair and pulled the napkin from my pocket and wiped my face.

"What is going on here?" this jeweled lady said.

"He's shit-faced," I said. I sniffed at the napkin.

"Stuart, please," Jill said. I spun around and saw her staring at me from the doorway.

I, of course, have had my bouts in front of the bowl. It's been awhile now, but I remember once it happened when I was with my dad. He can hold liquor like no one I ever saw. This was the night before they were to bury his old buddy Max Rudnicki. He and Max had worked together as kids and they had been pretty close over the years.

We were on our way home after the calling hours and we drove by this little tavern up on the north side. "Stop," he said. "You want to see where me and Maxie used to go? We used to come here all the time. We gotta have a couple for ol' Maxie."

So he ordered two double manhattans and laid a twenty on the bar. After about the fifth or sixth one I hustled to the john and into one of the stalls. The floor was wet and pissy smelling I remember, and then, after it was out, as I knelt there panting over the stool, I heard him and looked up. His hand was hanging over the divider holding a wet paper towel and a lit cigarette.

"Here," he said. "Wipe your face off and smoke this. Get the taste out. And get up off the floor," he added after I took them. "Don't ever get down on your hands and knees."

"What happened, Stuart?" Jill said.

"Robbie's sick," I said. "He's very drunk. He wanted me to see his guitar."

"All that pounding and noise," the woman said. "I couldn't believe it. You have to play like that."

"I wasn't playing it," I said. "Robbie was playing. I turned the damn thing off."

"Stuart, don't. Please," Jill said. She turned to this woman and said, "I'm sure it was Robbie's fault, Arlene."

There was an ugly silence for a few moments and then

Jill, the future most valuable hostess in the greater Detroit area, said, "Arlene, I'd like you to meet Stuart, my boyfriend. Stuart, this is Arlene Gray."

"Hi," I said. I waved.

"Hm," Arlene said.

"I'm sorry," Jill said to her. "Thanks for coming up and checking."

Arlene looked at me, held me in her gaze for a second, and then she left.

Jill sat down on the bed and started to cry. I got up and moved over next to her and put my arm over her shoulders. I didn't know what to say.

"Do you know who she is?" Jill said. She sniffed. "Her husband is Roger Gray, of Gray and Gibbons."

I knew the firm. Gray and Gibbons was one of the four or five really important law firms in the city. They did a lot of their work for Chrysler and I had heard they had a bit to do with Iacocca's big save.

"It was so simple," Jill said. "All you had to do was come in, say hello to everyone and we could have just left." She sniffed hard and coughed and wiped at her eyes.

"Here," I said. Without a thought I handed her the napkin.

"Why do you have to make everything so difficult?" she said. "You can't just do something, Stuart. You have to screw around until it's this huge goddamn problem for

everyone."

"What problem?" I said.

"What problem?" she said. "You don't know? You offend one of my mom's oldest friends. They pledged together, you know. God, Stuart, she was one of my mom's bridesmaids. Our families used to go up to the lake together. Every summer we went with them until I was twelve or thirteen." She was yelling, in a controlled sort of way. It was something new for Jill. "Robbie ends up making a total ass out of himself and upsetting everyone because you had to see his stupid guitar," she said. "I hate that thing."

"He wanted me to see it," I said. "I wasn't feeding him the beer."

She started to cry again. "Why is it so hard just to do something? Why can't you just do things once in a while and get them over with."

"I don't know," I said.

"Just think about things," she said. "Is that so very much to ask?" She looked over at me. "You could have called and said you were going to be late."

"I know," I said. "You're right."

"What's on this?" she said. She held up the napkin. "It stinks."

"After shave," I said. "Somebody wanted me to try it. You like it?"

"It's awful," she said. "You didn't wear any, did you?"

"No," I said.

"Good," she said. "At least there's that."

Robbie was folded on the floor with his head hanging over the toilet and an arm resting along the rim. He started moaning when he saw me.

"Come on," I said. I pulled a heavy beige towel from the rack by the tub. It was still damp from someone's evening shower. I held up his head and wiped his face.

I said, "Rinse out your mouth and go get in bed." Then I filled a cup with water and went in and set it next to his bed. I moved the guitar and untangled the sheets and pulled them up. Jill walked down to the bathroom when Robbie came in. She didn't look at him. I could barely see anything; the sun had dropped completely but I didn't turn on any lights. I carried the beer bottles to the bathroom and emptied them in the sink and buried them under some tissues in the waste basket. Jill was working on her make-up.

Robbie was sprawled, in his underwear, on top of the sheets. I rolled him to one side so I could pull them back and then I covered him. I touched his forehead and pushed back a damp clump of hair.

"Take it easy," I said.

"Thanks, Stu," he said. "Don't tell."

"Right," I said. I realized then that I had had that

baseball cap on my head the whole time. I took it off and hung it on one of the bedposts.

It was black in the hallway and I just stood for a moment and listened to the ladies downstairs laughing and talking away. They were all having a good time. They were in good moods.

"Ready," I said. Jill was next to me.

She touched my arm and held it for a moment.

"Stuart," she said. Then she wrapped her arms around my neck. She smelled fresh, as she always did, and her cheeks were still hot from the cry. There was a second when I could see out in front of us. Maybe it was the darkness, but I could see how she would be with her own house, her own guests, her own family, and I could see her doing everything just right, moving and chatting and smiling and making everyone feel good about where they were.

"Come on," I said.

All the lights in the living room were on and a bluish cloud of cigarette smoke hung close to the ceiling. Fancy platters of hors d'oeuvres rested on end tables around the room and there were two round card tables in the middle where the ladies were playing. They all stopped and looked up at us when we walked in. Some were smiling; some just eyed me; one pulled her glasses down so she could look over them at me; one was dragging on a cigarette and trying to

see around the smoke; Mrs. Burnard was beaming; Joyce was smiling again too, wall to wall teeth; Arlene Gray glanced up and then back at her cards.

"...boyfriend, Stuart," Jill was saying. "He just wanted to meet all of you. I've told him lots about you." And they all murmured and nodded and I nodded back and tried to smile a little but I don't know if I did.

And Jill said all their names and I didn't remember any of them except Joyce's and Arlene's. And, "Where will you be going to law school?" someone said and I said, "Wayne State," and, "How long have you lived in Detroit?" someone said and I said, "All my life," and, "Did you get that Robbie tamed?" someone said and we all laughed a little.

It was like one of those times when you were a kid and you had to give a speech or you had to stand up and meet the parents on parents' night or you were in a play or something. It happens quickly, like a dream, and then it is over.

Mrs. Burnard stood up and put one of her hands on each of our back and she walked us from the room.

"Thanks," she said to me. "I'm glad you came by."

I nodded.

"What now?" she said. "Are you two heading out?"

It was still early, I figured.

"Sure," I said.

I figured we could still catch a late dinner in the

city, after all.

"I might be late," Jill was saying.

I figured we could still make a pretty good night of it. It was Friday. I had the weekend. And Jill looked festive and happy in the new dress and all. She shoved her arm through mine and I opened the door.

"Take care," Mrs. Burnard said.

I could see the haze of the lights from the city to the north once we were outside and I was thinking how we would be going back over the river on the interstate. I remember thinking how it would be nice if there was a place to stop, when you were right at the top, so you could look out over the city for a minute or two. But it was just a highway bridge, four lanes of concrete and no room for anything else, and once you started on it there was no stopping until you were all the way across and by that time you were back down in and you couldn't see too much anymore.

Sombreros

"Fuck yea," said Mike. "We're in." A piece of cheek beneath his left eye jumped, then jumped again. It was a place they had not been to before. They were trying something new. It was all new to me. I tried to be invisible at the bar. I couldn't shoot so well.

"We break," said the long-necked regular.

"We break," said Mike. He was an old-timer, due to retire in another year or so. He didn't take much shit.

"We break," said the long-necked regular. He was greasy with thin hair that looked like he wiped it back with his palms. He wore a leather vest and a chain which secured his wallet to his trousers.

"Then fuck it," said Mike. His hand was twitching; the middle fingers kept snapping in toward the palm.

"Awright," said the regular. "You can break."

"Break, Dan," said Mike. Dan was only a few years older than me. Mike was our supervisor at the plant. "Watch this," Mike said to me. The tick beneath his eye kept

time, the same time as the automatic riveter or the robot arm that whipped the planes of sheet metal into place. Dan broke. Three dropped, two solids and a stripe.

"Solids," said Dan.

"Drop 'em," said Mike. And Dan did: two more.

The long-necked regular sank a few. Mike sank two. The regular's partner, the fat little trembling guy--I think he had a disease of some kind--missed altogether.

"Shithead," said the long-necked regular. Mike snickered.

Dan cleaned them off and sank the eight.

"That's a round," said Mike. "Three rums."

"Three?" said the regular. "Only two of ya's playin'."

"Partner at the bar," said Mike. "He drinks too."

"Two plays, two drinks," said the regular. He bought two; I bought my own.

Down at the other end of the bar sat two greasy gals. They eyed-me and one, whose grin was half-empty of teeth, nodded at me. I looked away but my head kept turning back toward them, like they were pulling a string.

"Again," said the long-necked regular.

"Rack 'em," said Mike.

Mike broke. He sank a couple. Solids again.

It went on. Mike and Dan cleaned up again, won by four balls. I kept turning my head away from the other end of the bar.

"Another round," said Mike.

"You still got your last drinks," said the regular.

"Back 'em up," said Mike.

"Markers," said the bartender, from his elbows. He held up a little yellow plastic sombrero. "Trade these in for drinks."

"Rack 'em," said the long-necked regular as he paid for the markers. The fat little trembling guy racked.

It went on. Rainbow stacks of sombreros grew up from the bar, tipped, split into more stacks.

"Use 'em," said Mike to me. "Might as well." I traded one in. Switched from beer to rum.

It went on. Mike and Dan let them win a game, handed them a couple of our sombreros. "Keeps 'em biting," Mike whispered to me. They played again, again. Our stacks grew higher. My neck grew stiffer.

"Here," Mike said when it was over and the chalk dust had settled. He handed a couple more sombreros to the long-necked regular.

"Big of ya'," the regular said. He retreated with the fat little trembling guy to their end of the bar.

"Fuck it," Mike said.

Dan and I drank in silence and Mike told us a story about a trucker he knew who bought it on a curve on I-80. "Twenty tons come down on him," Mike said. "Took 'em four hours to saw him out." His cheek jumped. "Five tons an

hour."

Then we talked about Elaine. She was a babe we knew from work. We worked thirds at the Jeep plant. I didn't care about thirds any but I was glad to have a job again, even if it would probably be ending before too long.

"Call her," Mike said. "You could sure use some of that."

"She'll be in bed," I said. It was going on ten in the morning.

The two greasy gals scooted down the bar and sat next to Mike and Dan. "Sombrero?" Mike said. He flipped them each one. One gal, the one with half her teeth, had long stringy hair, zits above her eyebrows. The other wouldn't talk. Dan was next to this one, the mute, and he was flicking bits of napkin at her, making them stick in her hair. Mike was talking to the other, the half-toothless one.

"You wanna drive us up in Michigan?" she said.

"For?" Mike said. He slipped off his barstool and had to climb back on. A muscle in his neck started contracting and relaxing, pulling his chin around toward his shoulder and then releasing it.

"Drive," she said. "Whatever."

"Maybe so," he said. "Got a car?"

"You do," she said.

"He's drivin'," Mike said. He pointed at me.

"Wanna drive us up ina Michigan?" she said to me.

I looked away. She pulled my eyes back and grinned. I traded in another sombrero and started shooting around on the table. Couldn't hit a thing. It was all spinning. I had no control over my arms. I killed my rum and traded in another sombrero.

Then the half-toothless one screamed and slapped Mike. She and the mute both got up and walked back down to their end of the bar. Mike and Dan were giggling. The greasy gal talked to the long-necked regular and the fat little trembling guy and all of them started looking at us. I stuck the cue in the crotch of my arm, like it was a gun I was cradling. I was ready. I was looking at them too. Couldn't stop.

Mike and Dan each traded in another sombrero.

"Think you guys had enough?" the bartender asked.

"Still got five sombreros left," said Mike. "You gonna take 'em away? Bought and paid for?" His fingers were snapping into his palm again, hard enough so I could hear it.

The bartender walked down to the other end of the bar.

I sat up on the table, stick still cradled like a rifle.

"Can't sit on the table," the bartender said. I still sat. The cue raised itself, pressed its butt against my shoulder, and fired--one, two, three, four, five it picked them off.

"Get outta here, why don'cha," said the fat little trembling guy.

Mike looked at them, then at me. His whole face was moving, different parts of it twitching at different times. I saw him raise his glass. He told the story once of how he cleared off a whole bar, over in Akron, with his empty glass, just like he was bowling.

I picked up my drink and said, "Hey!" "Hey," I said. "I'm a fucking puppet." I poured the drink over my head. They all looked at me. Then Mike broke up laughing.

Dan put a little red sombrero on his head and said, "Hey, I'm a fuckin' Mexican puppet."

We were all laughing and then Mike gagged and pressed his palms to his face. He gagged again and his back arched; he began convulsing and spun around and smashed into the bar. Glasses and napkins and sombreros flew everywhere. He spun off the bar and fell into the stools and bounced around and finally hit the floor. He was lying face down, a line of blood running out from his mouth. I felt my arms rise up into the air and my hands rest on top of my head.

Dan said, "He's killed."

The half-toothless one got up and walked down to our end of the bar. She kicked at Mike a few times and said, "He ain't dead."

Mike moaned and moved a little.

"Tol' you," said the half-toothless gal.

"I'm a fuckin' puppet," said Dan.

Mike moaned again. He lifted his head and in the blood I could see some of his teeth. He rolled over on his back and I saw the blood on his face and I could see where he was an old man, older than I had ever pictured him.

"What is it?" said Dan. He was whimpering.

"Fit," the half-toothless one said. She kicked Mike harder, in his ribs.

I remembered hearing something once about Mike, about some brain thing he had.

"Get up," she said. And he got up and she handed him some napkins and he stuffed one inside his mouth and dried his gums. Then he sat down at the bar and propped his forehead in his hands.

"Mike," said Dan. "Mike," I said. But he would not answer us.

The half-toothless one had her hand's on Mike's back and she was leaning over his shoulder, talking to him.

"Shush," she told us.

"Mike," Dan said. "Mike," I said. But still he would not answer us so we went outside to breath. It was very bright out, cloudless, a ringer of a morning. I wished I was out in the country somewhere, walking, hunting, doing something.

"I'm a puppet," Dan was saying. It made him laugh.

After a few minutes we got up and were going to go back in to get Mike, but the doors were locked.

"Hey," Dan said. He rattled the door and knocked on it but it would not open. We peered through the greasy glass and we could just make out the interior. And there was Mike, sitting up at the bar with all the others, and the bartender was leaning on his elbows, grinning and listening. There was a tall stack of sombreros on the bar. Everyone was listening to Mike. He was telling them a story, probably about his days in the army or about one of the whores he knew or something. He was one of the best storytellers. He had been around.

"Come on, Danny," I said. "Time to go."

"But," he said.

"I know a bar," I said.

"But," he said.

I took his arm and led him out into the street and over to our car. I knew a bar where it would be only the two of us and the barmaid and she would laugh and tell us stories about the days before the layoffs, when the young men would come in from their shifts and fight and swear and bite the necks from the beer bottles and she would slap them on their heads to straighten them out. And we would smile and nod, weary with the beers and the hours and her tired voice.

THE BLUE MAN

Kenny Farmer is sitting up on the dead man's belly, a spot he is used to because he is little. He is heaving his fists into the chest, compressing the heart, while Annie forces pure oxygen down the throat and Kurt holds a bottle of normal saline up over their heads so it runs into a vein of the blue arm. Kenny likes it best when they hit the wide glass pneumatic doors and burst into the hot brightness of the lobby. The divers are with them, one carrying another bottle of saline plugged into the other arm, one pushing the cart, and water is running off their black rubber skins on to the linoleum of the long hallway.

Johnny, one of the fire crew from their station, jogs beside them in his yellow slicker. He is empty handed at the moment but he helped load and unload and he acts as escort, making sure nothing slows them, hinders their motion toward the trauma stall. With them also are a couple cops and behind, outside and not to be admitted, are two news crews.

The chest of the man is so cold and stiff from the river that Kenny imagines he can hear it creak when he compresses it. Droplets of water clutch, like tears, to the tiny puckered nipples. Others could do this as well as Kenny, he knows, but sometimes, because he is the one doing, he is the indispensable one. If he quits, they lose.

He tried to tell that to his brother, Davey, one time when they were talking in the garage behind Kenny's apartment building, while Davey worked on his car, a '72 Camaro. "Try it once," Kenny said. "Feel the addiction."

After the curious and slack-jawed faces of the lay people--the mildly injured and their relatives in the lobby--they burst into the ER proper. From the corners of his eyes Kenny can see lines of people along both sides, secretaries and technicians watching, doctors and nurses waiting, and it feels like a parade with spectators waving and cheering and Kenny feels like the beauty on top of the float, smiling tiredly and waving back to the masses. Then, for a moment in his weariness, his arms stinging with exhaustion, it becomes a parade. Kenny is transported; he can imagine it all.

He is surprised because nothing like this has ever really happened to him before at work, not at a moment like this. Ticker tapes settle silently earthward on all sides; he can see them in his peripheral vision. The noise of the people swells and gathers in his ears. The buildings shoot

toward the clouds above. The float rocks beneath. It is more than a daydream; for an instant he can taste the parade.

He smiles at this. He is no beauty, he knows, and he is not waving. He is pumping, pumping, pumping the remotest chance of life back into deadness and as he does Maumee River water bubbles out between the lips of this, the bluest man he has ever seen.

At the Domino Lounge the next morning, Kenny dribbles beer down the back Kurt's uniform. Kurt only half notices. He is busy hustling an X-ray tech who has showed up at this party, a new employee of the Med Center. She's only twenty-two, Kurt tells Kenny.

Annie, who goes out drinking even less frequently than Kenny, is there and so is Edna from the ER. Edna is a surgical tech, a job which includes duties Kenny has never been able to catalogue. He decided a long time ago that she does just about whatever needs doing, from wiping up shit to helping the surgical residents open abdomens to do belly taps.

Edna takes Kenny's arm on her way back from the bar with a new round of drinks, and pulls him away from Kurt. "Leave that boy alone when he's playin'," she tells Kenny. "You come over here and keep me some company."

Kenny drinks a shot of what they call snowballs, Peppermint Schnapps and Vodka. Then he picks up Kurt's shot and drinks that too, then Annie's.

"What you tryin' to do," Edna says to him.

Kenny slips his arm through hers and then lets his head fall to the table with a crack.

"White boys," Edna says.

Kenny gets home around noon. His wife, Angela, is at work. This is good, he thinks.

"You couldn't believe it," Kenny says later that afternoon, to his brother. "I mean blue."

"Kind of grayish?" his brother says. "Don't they just sort of lose their color?"

"Yea," says Kenny. "Usually. But this guy was blue. The color of a bruise, almost. Purple-blue."

"Yea?" says Davey, without looking up. He is sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and reading a magazine, American Car. "Weird," he says.

"And they got him started again," says Kenny. "You couldn't believe it. Because of how cold the water was, almost freezing. They can stay down a long time like that and still live."

"He lived," says Davey.

"Well, yea," says Kenny. "He's alive. They don't know

what kind of brain damage he might have."

Davey lights a cigarette and sets it in an ashtray next to him. "You allowed to talk about this stuff?" he says. "I thought there was some kinda law, you can't talk to regular people or something, you know."

"Yea," says Kenny. "No. It's all right." Kenny is washing dishes which were stacked up all around the sink, and rinsing them and setting them on towels spread out on the counter.

"I mean I never saw anyone jump before," Kenny says. "I mean I never saw anyone make that transition. I see dead all the time, and even just regular dying, but that's something different."

"Weird," says Davey.

Sometime later, but before Kenny has finished with the dishes, Angela, who works three days a week at a flower shop, unlocks the front door of the apartment. She enters the kitchen carrying a grocery sack and a heavy potted plant. She has tied her thin blond hair back in a scarf and she is wearing round, owlsh glasses instead of her contact lens.

"Hi, honey," says Kenny.

She sets the grocery sack on the kitchen table right next to Davey, so close to him in fact that the bag covers much of the magazine he has been reading. He looks up at Angela and then tugs the magazine out from under the

groceries.

"The hell's that?" he says, nodding at the plant.

"It's a rubber tree," Angela says.

Davey watches her.

"It's a type of plant," she says.

"No shit," says Davey.

Angela begins pulling groceries from the sack and putting them away. She starts with the canned goods that go in the cupboard, although there is frozen orange juice and ice cream, which is beginning to melt.

"Thanks for doing those," she says to Kenny. "I appreciate the help."

"No problem," he says.

"It's good to see someone around here lift a finger," she says.

There is a noisy silence for a few moments, the sound of cans hitting wood and water sloshing.

"What time'd you get up, Davey," she asks.

"Dunno," says Davey. "While ago." He lights another cigarette and continues to read.

"He get up before you?" she asks Kenny.

"Yea," Davey says. "I got up before him. You happy?"

"What time?" Angela says.

"I don't know. Three. Four. So what?"

"So he works all night," Angela says. "And you still get up the same time. That's what. Something's wrong with

that, the way I figure." She reaches into the sack for more cans. "What do you do all night?"

"Wack off," Davey says and he stands up, puts his cigarette between his lips and picks up the coffee and the magazine.

"Hey," says Kenny. "Goddammit."

Angela throws the last can into the cupboard and slams the door.

"Sorry," says Davey and he leaves the kitchen, walks back into the spare room he has been sleeping in for the past seven weeks.

"I'm telling you," Angela says. "It's about time. Going on two months is long enough. And the damn garage, his car all torn apart in there. Be nice to use our own garage sometimes."

"I know, honey," Kenny says. "He went out yesterday. He'll get something soon."

"Not until you make him," she says. "And the only way you'll make him is to kick him out of here. He goes out the door, he'll have a job in two days."

Kenny nods as he sets a large black skillet upside down on a towel.

"Give him notice," Angela says. "I'm not saying kick him out the door this minute. Tell him he's got a week or something. Be serious about it, tell him one week and he's out. Blame it on me if you want to."

"I'll talk to him," says Kenny.

"Talk," says Angela. "Tell."

When she's done putting the rest of the groceries away, she says, "You get tied up somewhere this morning?"

"Not really," says Kenny. "I was just talking with some people."

"At the station?" she asks.

"The Domino," Kenny says.

"The bar?" she says. "That dive?"

"Sort of," he says.

"So what," Angela says, "you're starting to drink now, mornings?"

"No," says Kenny. "I said I was just talking. Edna was there, and Kurt and Annie, and Doc Greene was there for awhile. I drank Pepsies. I saw some guy jump last night."

"Jump?" she says.

"The high level bridge," Kenny says.

"Oh, I heard about that on the radio or something this morning," Angela says. "You were there, huh?"

"I mean I never felt like that on a run before, you know. Seeing it happen." says Kenny.

"Dead?" Angela says.

"No," says Kenny. He finishes the last dish, sets it on a towel and unplugs the sink. He dries his hands carefully on another towel, working it between his fingers.

"You should have seen him," he says.

"Why?" Angela says, half watching him, half turned away, as if she doesn't want to hear.

"Blue," says Kenny. "Deep blue."

"Ah," says Angela. "Stop it."

"Took 'em a while to fish him out," says Kenny, "and then I was on his chest."

"Stop it," she says. "You know I can't listen to that stuff." She stands up and carries the rubber plant to the sink and holds it under the faucet.

"I don't have much stomach for it," she says. "You know that." Her voice is thin, distant.

She lets the water run and run. Kenny can see it turning the dirt around the base of the plant into soupy mud. She lets it run until it begins to flow over the edge of the pot and into the sink, carrying some of the dirt of the plant with it.

And when she turns around finally Kenny sees that she is crying, tears dripping from her chin.

"What?" he says, and he takes the plant and sets it on the counter. Angela sits down at the table and takes off her glasses and presses the heel of her left hand into her forehead and cries.

"What is it?" Kenny says, sitting next to her.

She shakes her head.

"Tell me," he says.

"It's nothing," she says. "I just feel like crying

lately. I don't know." And she continues to cry, harder, wetter. Kenny rests his arm across her shoulders and pulls her over to him, hugs her until she grows quiet.

"I wish I was better for you," she says.

"Don't," says Kenny.

"You do everything," she says.

Kenny has to wonder about the blue man. He sees him lying on the stretcher in the trauma stall, attended by ten or fifteen people all fighting for what is left. Edna, on seeing the color, glanced over at Kenny and rolled her eyes. Arterial blood rose thick and black in the resident's syringe up from the femoral artery in the crotch. Edna shook her head then at what should have been bright, almost fluorescent, almost orange, shooting hard up through the needle. Kenny watched the flailing away at the chest, the tube run down the throat, the breathing machines attached.

Edna saw Kenny in the central office after the blue man was stabilized. "Saw him step, huh?" she said. Kenny nodded at her. "Big step," she said. "Crazy shit."

Kenny has to wonder what it was like up on the bridge, not at its peak which is where he would have thought one jumped from, but only part way up, not even half way to the highest point. Maybe the man was afraid. Maybe he got

only that far and he got scared but couldn't turn back so he made his stand right there. Maybe he calculated what it would take to kill, and didn't want to endure any fall longer than it would take. Kenny remembers dreams of endless falling.

Kenny is sitting in his living room. It is late evening and he hasn't turned on any lights, but street light falls in through the window. Angela is out with a girlfriend. Davey is in the garage, working on the chrome power plant under the hood of the Camaro. Kenny is sipping a beer. He knows he will not be able to sleep. "Third shift people don't get days off," he tells Angela. "They get nights off."

He has to wonder. What did the man see at the very instant? Kenny tries to imagine it. He carries his beer and a pack of cigarettes Davey has left lying around over to the window and sets them down on the sill. He watches out, over the yard and the streets.

Thinking about air, thinking about breathing and looking down, Kenny peels the insulating tape from around the border of the window and lifts the window up. The manager was supposed to put in storms this fall but he hasn't, so it is easy for Kenny to unlatch and remove the screen. He sets it inside, on the floor behind a desk, and then he leans out.

Still there were the lights in the downtown blinking on

over the wet, oily streets; still the clotted traffic on the bridge; still the freighters worming their heavy way up the river to the docks and the great cranes waiting with opened jaws; still the police boat beneath with binocularized officers and frogmen waiting for the commitment; still those on the bridge near the man, within a few arms' lengths, talking down, questioning, soothing; the lights of the fire trucks, the lights of the cop cars and the rescue squad, blue and white and red lights flashing, turning, confusing.

"Kenny!" calls Davey as he comes busting through the rear door of the apartment. Kenny looks through the darkness of the living room, through the darkness of the kitchen, toward the back door, wishing there were a place to hide. But Davey doesn't come right in; Kenny can hear him washing up in the bathroom. So Kenny lifts a couple cigarettes from the pack, pockets them along with a book of matches, and leans back out. Immediately to his right is a fire ladder, not a normal city fire escape which unfolds when someone stands on it, but a series of simple iron rungs drilled directly into the brick of the building and spaced about a foot apart. Kenny reaches over and touches one, testing its strength. The coldness burns his hand. He looks back over his shoulder once more and he can hear Davey yelling from the bathroom, "Kenny, let's go for a ride! I got that goddamn cam shaft in." Kenny sets his

beer on the cement ledge outside the window, grasps the rung, swings one leg through the window, then the other and finds a foothold on the ladder. He can hear Davey talking to him and then he pulls the window back down until it is only open an inch. Kenny listens. He hears Davey walk into the living room.

"Kenny!" Davey calls. Kenny peeks through the window. He sees Davey look around and then walk back through the apartment. Kenny turns and faces the street, three stories away. He hooks his heels on a rung so that he can lean back against the building in a semi-sitting position. It is cold outside, November, and the sky is clear with a bright half-moon hanging over the apartment buildings which spread out for acres. Kenny holds a rung with one hand and his beer with the other.

Was there a wife somewhere perhaps, he wonders. Children? And was it all very clear in that last instant? Was it frozen in the eyeballs like a photograph, frozen on the brain, the first perfect memory? Or was it a blur, or was it blackness?

It was frozen for Kenny who was standing far below on the iced-over mud of the shoreline, all the emergency vehicles surrounding him, the colored lights popping, that figure two hundred feet above, everyone waiting for the leap or the surrender, everyone shivering, feeling crampy and sick with cold and fear and wonder. Where the

binoculars came from Kenny does not know, someone handed them to him and he looked, feeling like a voyeur, unable to abstain. Then the man was next to him, the black-framed eyeglasses, the thinning hair, whiskers, sweat on the forehead, the yellow windbreaker over the black and white flannel shirt, some emblem on the breast of the windbreaker, the plaid trousers, the silver wristwatch ticking away.

Kenny sets his Miller over on the ledge and fingers a cigarette from his breast pocket. He slips his arm through a rung and hangs on like this while he lights up. He lets the smoke move on its own out of his body. He is only an occasional smoker.

And what thought finally passed through that caused the fingers to relax, the grip to open, the end to begin? Grief? Confusion? Or was it peace, the passing away of despair? Maybe an embarrassment at the thought of turning back, the thought--finish something for once. Maybe, at the last, it was an absence of thought that allowed the release, maybe the mind finally cleared and there were no doubts, no plans, no family, no pain, no future, no history. It was only the water below and no real thought even of that. Just the urge, the instinct.

Maybe it was an accident, a slip of the palm on wet metal railing, maybe a cramp in the arm, maybe an itch.

Maybe it doesn't make any difference, Kenny thinks. It

doesn't matter now.

Once the man let go there was work to be done. They had strung nets beneath the bridge to keep the body from washing away with the current, but even so it took the divers almost fifteen minutes to find him and get him up. And when they did Kenny and Kurt and Annie were right there to begin working.

But when the man went it was a moment, Kenny thinks, that you don't feel many times in a life. A timeless thing, forever: the man somersaulting backwards once, head down feet up, then over with the feet down, then over once more, part way, lying prone just as one lies in one's bed at night. The wind sucking the body back under the bridge, buffeting it. The delayed crack of life on water after the body had already disappeared, the Oh Sweet Christ mumbled by someone, Annie's cry.

Can I think it was graceful, Kenny wonders. Graceful? A thing like that? The word turns over in his mind.

Kenny hears the Camaro growl in the back and then a few seconds later Davey drives out on to the street. The car is black and all Kenny can see of it are the streetlights reflecting in its shine. Davey slows and then steps hard on the pedal. The tires turn over on the blacktop, scream, kick the car a little to one side and then grab and the front end almost lifts away from the pavement. Kenny can see flames beneath the car but, he thinks, the noise in

itself is the startling thing, louder almost than the helicopter which lands at the Med Center, higher pitched than a siren. Davey shifts and the car leaps, the tires yelp like a hit dog, the engine finds a new voice and the car is roaring, flying through the night.

Kenny watches it away. The manager has complained once already about the noise Davey makes. Kenny knows he will have to do something about it, but he doesn't want to think about that.

He tries to go back to the bridge, to the leap, tries to picture it all but he cannot. So, although it is cold and he is trembling a little, he watches out over the neighborhood, the endless identical blond brick buildings, 40 acres of them, a hundred-plus buildings, maybe no one knows how many apartments in all of them, he thinks. He hears someone shouting somewhere, in a nearby building, something about eggrolls and goddammit. He listens to traffic on the thoroughfare a few blocks away, to a far off siren, to the moon. Then, gripping a rung with his left hand he stands and leans out as far as his arm will let him. He stares down at the ground, looking at the grass, the bushes, the circle of light thrown by the lamp outside the door.

Just at the edge of the light, where it begins to fade into darkness, Kenny spots something. It is almost directly below him and he studies it. It is a shoe, he

decides finally, a shoe some child has left in the grass, a brown shoe with brown laces, well used, a tiny wingtip.

Kenny tries to imagine what it would be like to let go, to fall toward that shoe, to land face first on that shoe after falling three stories. He tries to imagine what the fall would be like and then the impact. He knows what he would look like: his neck broken and cocked, his teeth floating in his mouth, some dried blood. But not too much blood, he thinks, because he would die instantly, like a man he saw once who had a lethal coronary while driving at seventy on the expressway and who hit a bridge after he died and lost control, strange gaping wounds of pale dry flesh.

Angela got home around one and went right to bed. Kenny lay in bed with her, reading by a small lamp on the table at his side, trying to feel tired. He listened to Davey come in, knock around in the kitchen for a while and then he heard the television come on. Then Kenny dozed off himself.

He wakes two hours later to the lamp which is still burning. The clock reads ten after four. Kenny watches Angela and moving slowly so as not to disturb her folds back the covers and swings his feet to the floor. He dresses in a green surgical scrub suit he lifted from the

ER and then walks out and down the hallway to the kitchen.

The television is still on in the living room and Davey is slumped down in the couch. Kenny figures he has fallen asleep but then Davey says, "Hey."

Kenny pours himself a glass of juice and sits in a chair in front of the television. Then he reaches over to Kenny's pack of cigarettes and removes one and lights it.

"When'd you start?" Davey says.

"I didn't," Kenny says. "I just like one now and then."

"When you're nervous," says Davey.

"What?" Kenny says.

"Like when you have to have a serious talk with someone," Davey says. "When you have to lay it on the line."

Kenny watches a young Kate Hepburn throwing goo-goo eyes at a young Cary Grant. The sound is turned all the way down. Grant is yelling something at Hepburn as a collared jaguar steps out from her bedroom and slinks about the white-carpeted apartment.

"Yea," says Kenny. "Times like that."

Kenny gets up and brings the pitcher of juice in from the kitchen.

"Well don't worry about things," Davey says. "I've made some plans, big ones. I'll be out of here soon and Angela can calm down again."

"Don't blame her," says Kenny. "She's right, in some

ways. It's time for you to move on."

"Sure," says Davey. "I'm moving on. I'm moving right on out of here, out of this shithole of a city, out of this whole part of the country."

"You are?" says Kenny.

"Oregon," says Davey and he sits up now and leans forward and lights a cigarette.

"Oregon," says Kenny.

"I got a buddy out there," says Davey. "In Portland. There's jobs up the ass, he tells me. And he sent snapshots. It's green like you never saw, Kenny, in those pictures. Green everywhere. Greg Morinsky, you remember him?"

"Sure," says Kenny. "But why you want to go all the way out there. What if you can't find anything?"

"I'll find something," says Davey. "What the fuck have I found around here? This place is dead."

"Oregon," says Kenny.

"I'm taking off this week. I got the car back together, got myself together, got a little money saved. What else is there? Nothin', man. Nothin' but to get in the rod and go."

"This week," Kenny says. "Just like that."

"Just like that," says Davey and he slaps the heels of his hands together. And Kenny is frightened, suddenly, at the thought of Davey gone from his life in the city where

they grew up, with their parents retired now in Florida.

"You're sure?" Kenny says. "You can stay here for a while longer if you need to. I'll talk to Angela, don't worry about her. Don't go just because of us, of staying here."

"That's not why, Kenny," says Davey. "I want to go. I'm excited. This is something. I been thinkin' about it. I got a letter from Greg about a week ago. I thought it all out. And I said to myself, 'Why the fuck not,' you know. What's the worst that can happen?"

"Why not," says Kenny.

They watch the movie, smoking cigarettes down and grinding them out in the ashtray, drinking juice and not talking.

Finally, when Kate Hepburn has managed to get Cary Grant to a house in the country and then to ditch all of his clothes, so that he has nothing to wear but one of her bathrobes, Kenny says, "It's a good thing, this Oregon."

"You think?" says Davey. "Really?"

"Yea," says Kenny. "You're lucky. All you got to do is go." Kenny shakes his head. "Sometimes that's just the thing I want."

"Do it," says Davey.

"Hmm," says Kenny. "I can't do that." And then he says, "You ever think about suicide?"

"Jesus Christ, Kenny," Davey says and he watches his

brother. "What are you talking about? You got everything here."

"Not to commit it," says Kenny. "Just to think about it. What it must feel like. Whether it's an option."

"Cause of that guy?" Davey says. "That you watched."

"Yea," says Kenny. "I suppose. But do you ever think about it. Just so that you know it's there?"

"No," says Davey.

"I knew a girl once," Kenny says, "Connie Carnelli, who kept one of those football shaped change purses that you squeeze to open, you know, in her hope chest in her bedroom. She showed it to me once. She had five Fiorinals in it that she ripped off from her mother and seven Tylenol Fours from when she had her wisdom teeth pulled. She said she just liked having it there."

"Don't talk about that shit," says Davey. "Don't scare me like that, make me think you gone nuts or something."

"No," says Kenny. "There's nothing wrong with me."

"You need a good drunk," says Davey.

"You think so," says Kenny. "I don't think so."

"Sure, that's just what you need," Davey says.

"Our family's got the disease," says Kenny.

"Shit," says Davey. "Don't worry so much. You worry everything, Kenny."

And then Kenny remembers something. He doesn't know why. A time from when they were kids, camping up near

Cadillac, Michigan. "You remember Lost Lake?" he asks Davey. "We were out in the boat fishing with Dad, not catching much."

"The turtles?" says Davey.

"Yea," says Kenny and they both start to laugh. They were coming back into their campsite, into a long shallow bay in a corner of the lake, the water only three or four feet deep, and clear with a sandy gold bottom. Davey was watching over the side of the boat when he saw some round sand turtles, maybe a foot across, their snouts pointed and scary, lying on the bottom.

"Lookit those," he said. "Catch one, can we?"

"What for," their father said. "Can't eat 'em."

But Davey got the net anyway and leaned over the side and Kenny held his belt loop so he wouldn't fall in. And after Davey made a few passes at the turtles one started scuttling along the bottom next to them. Their father glanced over at it and then, in a sudden change of mood, shouted, "Right there!" He pointed and pulled hard on the handle of the motor and they were off after the turtle, Kenny and Davey both screaming out directions, Davey scraping the bottom with the net and digging up sand, always a few inches behind the turtle. The water was so shallow in spots and their father was turning so sharply, trying to keep up with the turtle, that the propeller kept catching the sand too, kicking it up, and each time the

boat hesitated and then released and was knocked sharply forward or sideways.

Finally they could see nothing in the water around them because of the clouds of sand and their father shook his head and they went in, sweating and pretty happy.

"That fuckin' turtle runnin' to save his life," Davey says, and laughs. "Runnin' like that along the bottom and Dad driving like he was loopy."

Now there are two jaguars on the television, one the pet and one an escapee from the zoo, a man-eater. But Hepburn and Grant don't know this. They are wooing the wrong jaguar, calling to it and trying to slip a leash around its neck.

It is later in the week, in the Domino Lounge.

"Be good for him," Kurt says to Kenny, about Davey and his leaving.

"What he needs," says Edna. "Shoulda done it a long time ago. Boy twenty-four like that. Time come."

They drink through the morning, until their heads settle down toward the table top, drink and smoke and listen to the music from the jukebox.

"Some kinda shit you all brought in last night," Edna says. "What you wanna bring that kinda shit in for us for?" she says. She giggles. It was a car-train wreck,

three dead, two others critical, one with his legs burned right down to the bone itself, what they call a crispy critter.

Kurt is standing up on the table now, dancing, spilling beer down over Kenny and Edna.

"Get offa there!" the bartender yells.

"Don't be hollerin'," Edna says. "My head hurt as it is."

"Get him goddamn down offa there," from behind the bar.

Kurt watches the bartender and when the bartender turns to fill a glass, Kurt flips him off. Then he sits down on the table and slides into a chair.

"I rode with Davey awhile, on his way out of town," Kenny says. "We stopped in at this place I know."

"Kind of place," Edna says.

"Bar," Kenny says. "Place my dad used to go. I remember going down there nights to pick him up, when I was a kid. My mom would be driving, sometimes in her bathrobe or something, you know. She made me go in and get him. He'd be all shitty at the bar, sometimes talking, sometimes just looking around."

"So you go and take your brother there when he s'posed to be drivin'," Edna says.

"He didn't remember it," Kenny says. "But for me it was like some kind of coming home."

"Tired of this shit music," Edna says. "Gimme some

change." She carries a quarter to the jukebox and begins reading the titles of all the songs, which takes her some time.

Kurt is resting his forehead on the edge of the table and letting globs of spit fall to the floor.

"One drink," I told him, Kenny says. "One to go on."

"There's an idea," Kurt says.

"Angela was sick in bed when I got home. I said was she mad at me, you know, but she just said I was weird."

Edna punches in the coin and makes her selection.

"Don't know why they got a song like this on the box," she says when it begins. It is sung by Janis Joplin, a song called Ball and Chain.

"Blues," Edna says. "C'mon." She takes Kenny's hand and walks him to some open linoleum in front of the juke box.

"Dance me," she says. He has no idea how to dance to this song, with its fuzzed out guitars and dragging rhythm, but he and Edna put their arms around each other and just move back and forth, keeping no time but their own.

"This song was done by Big Mama Thornton," Edna tells Kenny. "Originally. You ever hear of her?"

"She said I was weird and I tried to tell her, but she can't listen," says Kenny. He can smell the ointment Edna wears in her hair, can feel it rubbing on to him under his chin.

"Black blues singer," Edna says. "You got to listen to some of that sometime. What you need."

She rests her head against his chest, moves him around.

"I can't sleep anymore," Kenny says.

"Big Mama," says Edna. "Got to have the blues."

Kurt is up again, standing on a chair this time and crooning to a woman sitting at the bar. The woman lights a cigarette and pretends like she is alone in the room.

"C'mon," Kurt says. "C'm'ere, Betty." Kurt looks over at Kenny and Edna. "She's Betty, I can tell," he says. In fact she isn't Betty. Betty used to work the night shift with them at the station until she and Kurt were caught one slow night in an empty storeroom. "I kind of really love her," Kurt had said but she was transferred to another station and soon they didn't much talk anymore.

The bartender is watching Kurt now, his hands in the pocket of his white apron, his lower lip tucked in between his teeth.

Kurt stuffs his hands in his own pockets, and his lower lip between his own teeth, and looks goofily around the room. The bartender turns away. When Kurt sees that the bartender is ignoring him, too, he starts pointing and yelling. But his voice isn't angry. It cracks with excitement, happiness even.

"Hey you," Kurt hollers. "Yea, you!" he says, staring at the back of the bartender. "Aaaaaaahh, fuck ya!" he

yells. Then, in one continuous and beautifully semi-circular motion, he waves his arm toward the bar and follows it with the rest of his body, face first, right over the back of the chair and on to the wooden floor.

Kenny and Edna stop and watch, but neither of them move.

"What he do to hisself now?" Edna says, after a minute.

"I gotta go," Kenny says.

Kurt's nose is dripping blood down the front of his uniform. There are peanut shells and sawdust stuck to his cheeks and forehead as he stares, a little bewildered and wide-eyed, around the barroom.

"That's it," the bartender says, lifting the gate in the middle of the bar and coming out. "Crazy goddamn drunks. Pull this crap and next thing I got a lawyer pounding on my door. You just get the hell outta here, pal." He squats next to Kurt, without touching him, and watches the blood.

Kenny lets Edna go and walks over to Kurt and the bartender and kneels. He grasps Kurt's face between his palms and tips it back and looks at his nose. It is not broken, Kenny can see, and the bleeding is no kind of danger.

Edna looks down at Kurt and Kenny and the bartender.

"I gotta go," Kenny says.

"What?" Edna says. "You ain't never seen no blood?" She laughs.

Kenny lifts Kurt by his shirt and drops him into a

chair.

"Betty!" Kurt hollers.

"Just shut up," Kenny says. "Drink a beer and shut up."

Edna's song ends, and a new one, something current and unmemorable, begins. She finds another quarter and plays the Janis Joplin song again.

"I'm going home," Kenny says. Kurt is sitting in his chair, the stein of beer in his hand tipped so that some of it is draining out over the lip. Edna is dancing on the linoleum. Her hands are clasped behind her and she is watching her feet which she places, carefully heel to toe, as if something depends on her getting them just right.

Kenny finds Angela buried under half a dozen blankets and some sweaters and jackets she has piled on top. The pillow beneath her head is soaked. Her breathing is heavy and deep. Her eyes are open.

"What are you doing" Kenny says.

Her face is flushed, a pink neon in the closed-curtain dimness of the room. Kenny pushes a dampened clump of hair back off her forehead. He can feel heat radiating from her face even when he holds his hand several inches away.

"Did you get the chills?" he says.

"The field," she says, looking away. "Windy."

Kenny throws the clothing to the floor and folds back

the blankets one at a time, down to the wetness of her flannel shirt.

"Sweating it out," she says. "Have to sweat."

"Not fevers," Kenny says. "You'll kill yourself. We have to get it down."

She closes her eyes.

Kenny finds the large stainless steel salad bowl and fills it with cool water and carries it into the bedroom. He unbuttons her shirt and slides it back over her shoulders. Lifting her with one arm, he removes the shirt entirely and then lays her back. He dips a towel, wrings it, and starts on her face, then her neck, then her shoulders. He can feel the heat of her on his own face, the heat he is driving from her body.

"Mmm," she says, eyes still closed, voice thick and groggy.

He washes between her breasts, down her sides and on to her belly. He imagines the water turning to steam, she is so hot, vaporizing and curling off her in clouds. He pictures the mercury in a thermometer falling.

As he washes, she watches him. He can see in her eyes that she is awake now, safe.

She tries to prop herself up on her elbows but he holds her down.

"What time is it?" she asks.

"Four," he says. "Just be still."

"Four," she says. "It's all day."

"Don't ever use that many blankets when you have a fever," he says.

"Water," she says.

There is a glass on the night stand and he holds it to her lips, his free hand supporting her head, so she can swallow. When she is finished he replaces the wet pillow with a dry one and helps her lay back.

"You were out again," she says. "What's the matter?"

"I'm O.K." Kenny says.

"You're not," she says. "You work again tonight?"

"Yes," he says.

She picks up the glass of water herself, this time, and drinks. "I'll be all right here," she says, after she sets it back.

He nods.

"You can call in sick for me in the morning," she says.

"I'll be here when you get back."

The blankets smile up around her chin as the day begins to end, as the light falls away in the West. Kenny can smell the sleep beneath them. He imagines her nakedness beneath the covers, her throat, her hips. She pulls an arm out and touches his hair.

Kenny lays on the covers next to her, close to her. He will rest some at least. Maybe he will really sleep, he thinks, right up until the moment he has to go back into

work. For the first time in days he feels the sweetness of exhaustion wash over him, and then he knows it is only a matter of letting go.

FLASHBACK

(A Play in Three Acts)

Characters

FRED, a hippie, around 25, and later a businessman, 40
MARCIA, his girlfriend, about his age
RUDY, a genie, ageless, but for this he should look 30ish
CHICO, a hippie friend of FRED'S, late twenties
PENNY, girlfriend of CHICO, about his age
BRIANNA, a young girl, 18-20, and later FRED'S wife
BEN & RHONDA, friends of FRED and BRIANNA
GROVER, an old friend of BRIANNA'S
BLUE COUPLE, a mysterious man and woman, dressed strangely and in blue
DWINDLE, tight-lipped businessman type, around 50
Three or four ROCK GROUPIES

Synopsis of Settings

ACT 1

FRED'S apartment, Columbus, 1967

ACT 2

FRED'S dining room, Cleveland, 1982

ACT 3

FRED'S apartment, Columbus, 1967

ACT 1

SCENE 1

SCENE: A ratty apartment in Columbus, Ohio. A greasy and litter strewn kitchenette is to stage left. The kitchenette has a small refrigerator, stove, sink, etc. On the rear wall, toward stage left, is a poster of a peace sign and near that, toward stage right, is a larger black and red poster of Jimi Hendrix. There is a table and chairs in center stage. On the table is a bong, a tape recorder, and a nutcracker with a bowl of nuts. An electric guitar is leaning against its amplifier somewhere near the table so that it can be reached from the chair. There is a concrete block somewhere. Outside door is at stage right.

FRED is sitting at the table. He is shabbily dressed in blue jeans, a vest and shirt, long hair and a full beard, and round John Lennon glasses. He is smoking a joint and wiping at his eyes. MARCIA is trying to clean up the clutter in the kitchenette.

FRED

This is some powerful shit, man.

MARCIA

Do you have to smoke all the time, Fred? Can't you just be straight sometimes, once in a while?

FRED

Sure, Marcia. I can be straight. You know, if I want to be or something. But, you know that shit Chico's been working on down at his lab?

MARCIA

No. What's Chico working on now?

FRED

Oh, I thought you heard about it. It's supposed to be the best thing since acid, you know. He's been, like, perfecting it down there and I have to smoke a little reefer now to mellow me out because I just took a hit of it before you got here. It's called DD25. (Pause) Well, that's just the lab name, you know. We haven't thought of a good name yet.

MARCIA

(She has been staring at FRED)

You just took a hit of Chico's new drug?

FRED

Yea. I can't wait for it to happen, man.

MARCIA

You don't even know what it is, you took a hit?

FRED

I know what it is.

MARCIA

No you don't. It could do anything to you. Are you crazy?

FRED

I don't think so.

MARCIA

You're going to die sometime, you know, Fred.

FRED

Yea. I suppose. Everybody else does.

MARCIA

(She walks over to him)

(Softly) From the drugs, Fred. You can't just keep doing this to yourself and expect not to get hurt. I'm worried about you.

FRED

Oh, this ain't dangerous, Marcia. It's gonna be great. Chico worked it all out, the chemistry and stuff.

MARCIA

Chico knows you took it?

FRED

Nah. I'm gonna surprise him. I'm keeping track of all how I feel and shit, you know. (Holds up a tape recorder) Like this. I'm gonna record all what thoughts and stuff I have while I'm tripping so Chico can tell, you know, how it was. (Pause) I might not be able to remember.

MARCIA

Has anyone ever tried this?

FRED

Nope. I'm the first. I'll be, like, the next Kesey, you know. And Chico will be the new Owlsley. How cool.

(FRED smiles and closes his eyes as if he is dreaming.)

MARCIA

Fred, listen to me. This is insane. It's crazy.

FRED

Marcia, calm down. Nothin' bad's gonna happen.

MARCIA

You don't know that. I can't watch you keep on like this. You rationalize everything away, your whole life.

FRED

Just relax.

MARCIA

Something has to change, Fred. (Pause) I love you. You know that? That's why I say these things. I'm not trying to nag, really. But you've got to do something with yourself.

FRED

Why?

MARCIA

Oh, God.

(SHE sets the dishtowel back on the counter and puts on her jacket.)

I think I'm going to leave for a while. You can clean your own apartment. I'm going for a walk.

FRED

Where?

MARCIA

Just out. I'm getting really tense. (Pause) You were going to take me to a movie today, you know.

FRED

We can go later on, tonight or something.

MARCIA

(Shakes her head.)

I'll talk to you later.

FRED

Marcia.

MARCIA

Just thing about things, will you?

FRED

Marcia!

(HE watches the door as it closes behind her.)

Jesus Christ.

(FRED sits for a moment at the table and then rises and paces. The HE comes back to the table and picks up the tape recorder. HE holds it up in front of his face and inspects it. Then HE places it back on the table and turns it on. HE holds the microphone to his mouth.)

Hello. (Pause) This is Fred Greene coming to you live from Columbus, Ohio. History is being made here today as I am, like, trying the new drug DD25 for the first time ever in history. DD25 was invented by my friend Chico Duende. I am going to record all my thoughts and whatecer as I make this journey where no man has ever gone. (Pause) Oh, cool.

(HE sits down at the table and does nothing for a moment. Then HE picks up the guitar and flips on the amp. HE plays a short rock riff--I.E. "Gloria" by The Doors. Then HE turns off the amp., leans the guitar against it and begins cracking nuts and tossing the meats into his mouth. After about three or four nuts, HE picks up a walnut and tries to crack it, but he cannot.)

Jesus Christ, man. A petrified nut.

(HE tries to crack it again, exerting great force. HE holds the nutcracker and nut down between his legs and squeezes and grunts. HE doubles over, still grunting and squeezing.)

Damn!

(HE slaps the nut down on the table, picks up his guitar and raises it over his head, as if he is going to smash the nut with it. Then HE realizes what he is doing, looks up at the guitar, and carefully sets it back down against the amp.

With hands on hips, HE looks at the nut, picks it up and tries to crack it with the nutcracker again. It still won't crack. HE is really struggling with it. Finally HE lets out a great yell of

frustration and throws the nut at the wall. HE watches it for a moment and then walks over and picks it up.)

Fuck man. I ain't never seen a nut like this.

HE looks at his hands, one at a time. HE picks up a different nut and cracks it easily. HE dumps the contents on to the table, picks up the uncrackable nut again and studies it, shaking his head. HE finds the concrete block and pulls it over to stage right of the table and sets the nut on it. Then he finds a pair of pliers and a hammer in a drawer by the sink. HE pounds the nut with the hammer but still it won't crack.)

I don't get this at all. This is some strange business, man.

HE really pounds the nut this time, hitting it repeatedly with the hammer. HE is in a bit of a frenzy. Finally he stops and rises and exits stage left. HE steps back in with a huge mall hammer, so big that he can hardly carry it.)

This is insane, man.

HE re-positions the nut on the block. HE is standing between the nut and the block, with his back to the table. HE rears back and brings the hammer down full force on the nut. There is an explosion. A large puff of smoke rises in front of FRED and the nut. FRED falls back against the table and knocks off the tape recorder but he isn't aware of this. It is lying in front of the table. RUDY is now present. RUDY is dressed in a 1940's style suit complete with bowler. He is brushing dust from his jacket, re-adjusting his tie, etc.)

FRED

Hey. Where'd you come from?

RUDY

(Now RUDY stretches and begins walking around the room. HE speaks with a British accent.)

Oh, that feels wonderful. One forgets how good it feels to stretch, to walk about, to breathe fresh air.

(Then HE sniffs at the air and makes a face of mild disgust.)

In any case, you've earned yourself some wishes, chap. (Counts on his fingers.) Three or four, I'd guess.

FRED

Hay, man. Like, who the fuck are you? Who threw that bomb in here?

RUDY

(Looks around as if alarmed.)

Bomb! What bomb?

FRED

The explosion.

RUDY

(Looking relieved)

Oh, that. That was no bomb, my dear fellow. That was the nut you cracked. I was in it, you see.

(RUDY takes off his hat and sets it on the table.)

FRED

Oh, right. (Pause) Hey, wait a minute. You tellin' me you were in that nut. Inside it?

RUDY

Precisely.

FRED

No. Wait a minute, dude. How could you fit in a little nut like that?

RUDY

Oh, the problem isn't fitting in. The problem is getting out once you've got inside. Understand?

FRED

Getting out. (Pause) Yea, I can dig that.

RUDY

I don't know for how long I've been in there. Fifteen or twenty years, I dare say. I was trapped. Once trapped, I'm at the mercy of circumstance. You know how that is.

FRED

Right, man. I know what you mean.

(HE picks up a roach and starts to light it.
HE stops, and puts it back down.)

Hey, wait a minute. You tellin' me you were in that nut?

RUDY

Why, yes. I do believe I said that. (Pause. HE looks at FRED.) Don't you hear well?

FRED

What? (Pause) Wait a minute. I must be...

(FRED looks around at the table. His face
shows a sudden understanding.)

Oh, yea. Chico was right, man. This is some weird shit.

RUDY

Pardon?

FRED

Oh, nothin'. It's just...(Laughs) I can't believe it's so real. (Touches RUDY) I ain't never tripped like this, man.

RUDY

(Looks down at FRED'S hand.)

Tripped? What are you talking about?

FRED

This new chemical. You know. You should know.

RUDY

I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about.

FRED

Never mind, man.

RUDY

Why do you keep calling me 'man'?

FRED
Oh, you know. It's just...I don't know. Why does everybody else do it?

RUDY
Everyone calls everyone else 'man'?

FRED
Of course.

RUDY
Even the women?

FRED
Yea. You know.

RUDY
No. I don't. The women call the other women 'man'?

FRED
You know. They don't exactly call each other that, but, it's like...(Pause). Where you been, man?

RUDY
I told you.

FRED
Oh, yea. Right. In the nut. (Laughs) I forgot. Jesus.

RUDY
What year is it?

FRED
What year?

RUDY
I believe you do have hearing difficulties. Let me have a look.

(Tries to look in FRED'S ear.)

FRED
(Pulls away)
I hear all right, dude. (Pause) It's 1967.

RUDY
'67. My goodness. Twenty-one years I was in there. People must have stopped eating nuts.

FRED

Oh, you know all the packaged shit people eat now. Fresh stuff is, like, rare, you know.

RUDY

It must be. (Pause) Where am I?

FRED

Where? Oh, Jesus. (Rubs his head) You're in Ohio, man.

RUDY

Ohio. That's in America.

FRED

Land of the free.

RUDY

Imagine. Twenty-one years and five-odd-thousand kilometers. Strange, isn't it.

FRED

That ain't hardly the word.

RUDY

I'm sorry. Where are my manners? I'm Rudy. (Offers his hand)

FRED

Rudy. Yea. (Laughs) I'm Fred, dude.

RUDY

Fred dude.

FRED

Just, Fred.

RUDY

Fine.

(FRED is chuckling and looking at RUDY.
RUDY is eyeing FRED back.)

RUDY

So, I'm in your debt, my friend. I owe you. Let's see...

(HE pulls a chart from his jacket pocket and inspects it.)

Hmmm. (To himself) Twenty-one years. Five odd thousand kilometers. That's...four. (Looking up at FRED) My, my, it's certainly your lucky day. Four wishes.

FRED

What?

RUDY

Wishes. I'll grant you four wishes.

FRED

Four wishes?

RUDY

Surely you've heard of this kind of thing. I was trapped, you released me. Now I must reward you. (Pause) And I am grateful to you. Really.

FRED

Really. (Laughs) Four wishes. Oh, this is great. Wait 'til I tell Chico about this. He'll shit, man. He's gonna make a fortune.

RUDY

A fortune? Is that your first wish?

FRED

No, no, man. I don't want no fortune. I was talking about Chico, about where you came from.

RUDY

What are you talking about?

FRED

DD25. I told you. That's why you were, like, created.

RUDY

Perhaps you misunderstood me. I told you where I was. (Pause) Listen, Fred. I am a genie. You know what a genie is? (HE nods at FRED; FRED nods back.) I mean, I'm only a minor genie, it's true, but a genie nevertheless. I was created a long, long time ago, about a thousand years ago.

FRED

A thousand years.

RUDY

Which is relatively young for a genie.

(FRED starts to laugh.)

RUDY

What's funny about that?

FRED

A thousand years old and you just happen to pop up in my apartment in Columbus in 1967.

RUDY

I told you. I've been trapped in that nut.

FRED

Oh, right. And how'd you get in the nut?

RUDY

It's a weakness I have. Small, tiny places like that. I find them very relaxing; they're the only place I get any rest. But when I get small like that and crawl in someplace, I'm very vulnerable because I can use almost none of my magic then. No genie can.

FRED

So what happened?

RUDY

Well, I was in England, after the war, mopping up, you know. There were a lot of wishes being made during the war, of course, and a lot of promises being made to genies, and I was living there claiming payments and granting wishes. One evening I crawled into that Walnut through a little wormhole and curled up to take a nap. (HE shrugs) And something went wrong. When I woke up there was no light, no escape. And there was nothing I could do about it. I was stuck. Somehow something had got stuffed in the hole in the nut.

FRED

And suddenly you're here.

RUDY

How I ended up in Ohio, I don't know. Anyway, it wasn't so very bad. I decorated, you know. I could work tiny magic, I found. Not enough to escape but enough to make the place liveable. Sofa and chairs, a phono and a radio. I had a little snooker table and a full wet bar and a...

FRED

Wait a minute. You tellin' me you had a couch inside that nut?

RUDY

Yes. And a nice dining room table and a...

FRED

Where is it? I want to see it. (Looks for nutshell.)

RUDY

Oh, there's nothing left now. It all disintegrated when you released me.

FRED

So it's all gone, the little couch and stuff?

RUDY

I'm afraid so.

FRED

Yea, sure. (Pause. He looks around and laughs.) Yea, I get it.

RUDY

Well, in any case, I'm grateful. I was getting awfully bored in there.

FRED

Oh, I can dig it. (Laughs) Chico's gonna die when I tell him this.

RUDY

Who is this Chico you keep mentioning?

FRED

Chico (pause) Owlsley. (Laughs)

RUDY

Yes. Well...(Pause). Listen, Fred. Let's take care of these wishes so I can be on my way. I'm anxious to see what's become of the world. (Pause. Looks FRED over) Then again, maybe anxious isn't the word.

FRED

Four wishes. (Pause) Oh, no, man. I've read that book. I know what happens when I take those wishes. (Laughs) Like, I wish for money and you drop a three hundred pound sack of gold on my head and break my neck or something. (Laughs) No thanks.

RUDY

No, no. You did me a favor. Now I have to reward you. I have to. There's no other choice. I'd lose all of my powers if I didn't. Whatever you wish for, I must grant.

Oh no, man.

FRED

(HE holds his hands toward RUDY as if to push him away.)

You ain't trickin' me like that.

RUDY

This is insane. I'm not trying to trick you. I have to reward you for releasing me. Trust me.

FRED

Trust you.

RUDY

Come on, think of anything you'd like. I'll give it to you. Anything at all. Four wishes. What would you like?

FRED

(Pause. HE thinks.)

Nothin'.

RUDY

Nothing?

FRED

Yea. What do I need? (Sweeps his arm about the room.)

RUDY

Exactly.

FRED

Exactly, man.

RUDY

Look, there's, say, money. A huge sum of money. Women. Houses. Land. Travel. You could go anywhere. Ever been to Europe?

FRED

No, man. You don't dig it, do you. I'm into, like, non-materialism, you know. I just groove on things and don't go around grabbing up everything. Dig?

RUDY

Non-materialism?

FRED

Right. Like Zen and shit, you know.

Oh, God.
RUDY

(HE'S baffled)

Well, look. How about four non-materialist wishes then. How about health, a long life.

That's materialist, man.
FRED

My Lord.
RUDY

O.K. I got one. How about peace everywhere, starting right now.
FRED

I can't do that.
RUDY

Well, see then, dude. What kind of a genie are you?
FRED

Listen. A wish like that--it's not within my power. That would change the entire world. I can't do that. I only have the power to change one life at a time. That's the way it works. (Pause) And I can change physical objects.
RUDY

(RUDY points his finger at the block next to the table. It turns into a bottle of wine. RUDY picks it up.)

Care for a drink?

This is some strange shit. (Rubs his eyes.)
FRED

But world peace is out. Sorry.
RUDY

If I really did have some wishes, you know what I'd want?
FRED

Please tell.
RUDY

FRED

I would want just what I got. I would want it so nothin' would ever change. I would want things to stay just like this.

RUDY

You're crazy. How can anyone or anything not change?

FRED

I don't know. If I was wishing, that's what I'd wish for. It would be your job.

RUDY

Doesn't work like that. You're going to change no matter what I do. I'm not a god. The wishes just help assure that things change in the way you want them to. That's why you'd better wish carefully.

FRED

No. I like it just like this. I don't want to change.

RUDY

I can't believe this. What's happened to the world? What heppened to greed and avarice and desire and blind ambition? All those nice things that made life so easy?

FRED

It turned on, man. It got cool.

RUDY

Cool?

FRED

Groovy. Hip. Funked out. Check it out.

(He picks up his guitar and plays and sings a loud rif from "My Generation" by The Who--"People try to put us down, etc...")

RUDY

(Holding his ears)

What was that?

FRED

Some Who, man.

RUDY

Who?

FRED
Yea. Great shit, ain't it.

RUDY
Who?

FRED
Yea, right man.

RUDY
What are you talking about!?

FRED
The Who, man.

RUDY
Are you on some kind of drug or something?

FRED
That's what I been tryin' to tell you. DD25. That's where you came from.

RUDY
Oh. (Pause) You mean you really are on a drug. And you think...(Pause).

FRED
That's where you came from. I'm hallucinating. (Pause) Only it's never been like this before.

RUDY
This is a problem.
(RUDY looks worried. He rubs his chin and watches FRED)

My goodness.

FRED
Hey, mellow out, dude. You wanna smoke?
(Offers his joint to RUDY)

RUDY
(Inspects it)

What is it?

FRED
Reefer. (RUDY looks puzzled) You know. Dope. Weed. (Pause) Cannabis, man.

RUDY
Ah, cannabis. (Holds up his hand) No, thank you.

FRED

It's wicked, man. Some of that gold shit from Mexico.

RUDY

Thanks anyway. (Shakes his head.) I'm not sure what to do with you, Fred. You really think I'm just a hallucination?

FRED

That's what I been tryin' to say.

RUDY

Listen, Fred. This is important. You have four wishes coming to you. There's no way around that, now. Once granted, they can never be taken away. It's a law. I'd lose everything. And there's a time limit of fifteen years. (RUDY pauses and looks at FRED) You're going to get those wishes. Someday, somewhere, you'll wish for something. And I just might be there to hear it. If I am, it will come true. So be careful what you say, Fred. I'm serious about this.

FRED

Sure, dude.

(He takes a hit on his spliff)

RUDY

God.

FRED

Oh, don't sweat it, dude. If you get in trouble or something I'll go and testify in Genie court that I refused. (Laughs)

RUDY

I'm serious, Fred.

(FRED laughs)

RUDY

I can't follow you around all the time. But I'll drop in on you from time to time. And when you wish, I'll hear it.

(RUDY puts his hat back on)

FRED

Whatever, man. (Pause) Well,

(Holds his hand out at an angle for a soul handshake)

Later, dude.

Uh, right.

RUDY

(Looks at FRED'S hand and then takes it)
Later, man. (Pause) Does everyone talk like that now?

Everyone, dude.

FRED

And they dress like that? (Points at FRED)

RUDY

Yep.

FRED

Hmmm.

RUDY

(RUDY rubs his chin, then takes his hat back off and sets it down.)

How's this?

(RUDY'S British accent disappears. He now speaks with a mid-western accent.)

Hey, dude. I'll catch you later. Peace, man. I'm gonna go smoke some reefer, dude.

Hey, that's pretty good. How do you do that?

FRED

Like I said, man, times change. You gotta change with 'em, you know, or you're fucked dude.

RUDY

Oh, this is some weird shit, man. Wait 'til I tell Chico.

FRED

Later.

RUDY

(Exit RUDY)

(FRED sits back down at the table and picks up a nut from the bowl, looks at it, and shakes his head.)

(Enter MARCIA)

MARCIA

How are you feeling, Fred?

FRED

OH, HI, Marcia. I'm not sure. You should'a seen what just went down here. Although I guess you couldn't of seen it. But there was this Genie...

MARCIA

I guess the drug works, huh.

FRED

Yea. I guess it does. (Pause) But I don't feel any different.

MARCIA

You're just seeing Genies.

FRED

Uh-huh.

MARCIA

We really have to talk about this whole thing, Fred. I'm worried about you.

FRED

Not now, Marcia. O>K?

MARCIA

You'd be a lot happier if you were straight.

FRED

I'm happy. I'm doing what I like. What's wrong with that?

MARCIA

And what are you going to do with yourself, Fred? You don't have any ambitions at all. You're just a stone head. (Pause) You just turned twenty five. I think it's time you started thinking about this.

FRED

(Yells) I'm happy! Why can't you deal with that? Why are you always bitching?

MARCIA

You have to change. I'm scared for you.

FRED

Can't you just get off my back, man. I just had a really wild trip and I'm trying to sort it out. I just want to think.

MARCIA

(Stares at him. Long pause.)

Fine, then. If that's what you want. (Walks to door. FRED picks up his guitar.) Just sit there and think, Fred. Sit there for the next fifteen years if you want to. Sit there for as long as you have to. (Pause) I don't think I'm coming back here anymore, Fred.

FRED

(Playing chords on guitar)

Fine. (Chord) That's fine with me, you know. (Chord. Then stop. Pause.) Sometimes I wish you'd just leave me alone. (Chord) You're a real pain sometimes.

(MARCIA looks at him with a very hurt expression. She starts crying softly. He is playing guitar.)

(A puff of smoke rises from behind a box next to the door. MARCIA has her back to it, but FRED sees it. HE immediately stops playing.)

(FRED stands, mouth open, and stares at the smoke. MARCIA turns and leaves.)

FRED

Hey!

(Lights down)

ACT 1

SCENE 2

SCENE: A while later. FRED is sitting at the table cracking nut after nut after nut. There are nutshells all over the floor. As he finishes cracking a new one, he tosses it to the floor. Enter CHICO and PENNY. They are both dressed in typical hippy garb.

CHICO

Look, Penny. I said was was sorry. I'm sorry man.

PENNY

(Ignoring him)

Hello, Fred.

FRED

(Preoccupied)

Hey, Penny. Hey, Chico.

CHICO

(To PENNY)

What do you want me to say? Huh?

PENNY

Nothing. Don't say anything.

CHICO

Look. Smoke some reefer or something, mellow out a little, you know.

PENNY

I don't want to mellow out.

FRED

(Looks up at her)

You pissed or something, man?

PENNY

(She looks at FRED. Pause.)

Yea, Fred. You could say that.

FRED

Like, what's the problem?

PENNY

The problem is that Don Juan here can't seem to keep his hands where they belong.

CHICO

Penny, I didn't touch her. I did not touch her.

PENNY

Oh, no. I could tell. It was a perfectly innocent conversation you were having.

CHICO

It was. I was just talking to her.

(To FRED)

We were down at the bus station, you know, picking up a package. You know that shipment of micro-dot that was comin' in? Well, my friend, Grover, up in Cleveland, sent it down to me, right? Only he sends this chick along with the package. Brianna.

FRED

Brianna?

CHICO

Yea.

FRED

Weird name.

PENNY

It fits.

CHICO

Turns out he had to get her out of town for some reason and so he sent her down here to, like, hang out for a while.

FRED

Yea? How come?

CHICO

I don't know, man. She didn't say why or nothin'. Anyway, like, we're just talking--Penny had taken off somewhere, to the bathroom or somethin'.

PENNY

I had to make a call. I told you that. You were just too preoccupied.

CHICO

So anyway, I'm talkin' to this chick when Penny comes back, and now she won't hardly talk to me.

PENNY

They weren't just talking. She had her hands all over him. Inside his shirt, on his neck, on his face. (Pause) Talking.

CHICO

I told her how I kept having these back pains, you know, like I can't move sometimes it hurts so bad. You know about those.

FRED

Yea, sure.

CHICO

And she said she knew this massage technique or somethin', you know, so she was just showing it to me.

FRED

Right in the bus station, huh.

PENNY

You ever hear of massaging someone's chest because they had a stiff back?

FRED

(Thinks)

No, man. Not really.

PENNY

She's just trouble.

FRED

Yea, well, where is she? I'd like to meet this chick.

CHICO

I told her if she needed a place to stay she could, like, drop by here. Maybe she'll stop over.

PENNY

(Staring at CHICO)

You invited her over here?

CHICO

Yea. She didn't have no place to stay. And she's young, you know. What's she gonna do? Besides, I owe Grover a couple favors.

PENNY

I don't care what you owe Grover. She's not going to stay here.

CHICO

Too late. I already told her.

PENNY

Then you better hope she deosn't show up, because I'm leaving if she does.

(SHE turns and stalks into the
bedroom--exit stage left.)

CHICO

Women, man. Mess you up.

FRED

Tell me, dude. I didn't want to say nothin' while Penny was around because her and Marcia are pretty tight, you know. But Marcia split on me, man.

CHICO

No. For good?

FRED

Yea. She's gone.

CHICO

What happened?

FRED

It started when I took a hit of that new stuff of yours, that DD25, and...

CHICO

No! You didn't really take none of that shit, did you?

FRED

Yea. Why?

CHICO

Fred, Fred. You weren't supposed to take none of that shit yet. It ain't perfected, man. (Long pause) We took some too.

FRED

You and Penny?

CHICO

Yea. Before we left.

FRED

Yea?

CHICO

It's worthless shit, man. A total failure. We didn't feel nothin'. I mean nothin'. (Pause) I can't figure out where I went wrong. I thought for sure it was gonna be a real mind blower.

FRED

No, you're wrong, Chico. I got it all on tape, man.

(FRED gets up and looks for the tape recorder. As he does this, BRIANNA enters unnoticed.)

FRED

Chico, you're gonna be a star, man. You're gonna sell a ton of this shit.

CHICO

What are you talkin' about?

FRED

DD25. I had the most amazing trip of my life. I mean amazing.

CHICO

You did?

FRED

Yea. There was this little guy. God it was so real.

BRIANNA

Sounds wild.

(FRED looks up at her and smiles.)

CHICO

Hey, Brianna. This is Fred.

FRED

Hi.

BRIANNA

Hello. (Pause) So what was it like?

FRED

(HE is staring at her. She is very pretty. Pause.)

What?

BRIANNA

This trip.

FRED

Oh, it was bizarre. I cracked this nut and the little guy came out. He said he was a Genie.

(Enter PENNY from bedroom. She doesn't notice BRIANNA.)

CHICO & PENNY

(In unison)

A genie?

PENNY

Do you feel all right, Fred?

BRIANNA

Wow.

(Now PENNY looks at her.)

PENNY

Oh great. I'm so glad you could make it.

BRIANNA

(To CHICO)

Is she always this hostile?

CHICO

Wait a minute. You took a hit of the drug and then you saw the genie? You talked to this dude and shit?

FRED

Oh, yea. We talked for a long time. Here, I got it all on tape.

(FRED sets the tape recorder on the table, rewinds, then plays it. We hear a "boom.")

TAPE

Hey, where'd you come from, man?

CHICO

So, like, what you're saying is the stuff really works.

FRED

Right on.

BRIANNA

God. How exciting.

TAPE

Hey, man. Like who the fuck are you? Who threw that bomb in here?

CHICO

Bomb? What bomb?

TAPE

The explosion.

PENNY

What explosion?

FRED

When I cracked the nut, man. It exploded.

PENNY

(SHE looks at CHICO then at BRIANNA.)

Maybe you better sit down, Fred.

TAPE

Oh, right. (Pause) Hey, wait a minute. You tellin' me you were in that nut? Inside it?

BRIANNA

This is incredible.

TAPE

No, wait a minute, dude. How could you fit in a little nut like that?

PENNY

This is insane. You guys are crazy. I'm gettin' out of here. (SHE starts toward the door.)

CHICO

No, don't leave. You know what this means? The stuff really works. We're rich!

FRED

Hey, I'm the only one on the tape. It really was all in my mind.

TAPE

Right, man. I know what you mean. (Pause) Hey, wait a minute. You tellin' me you were inside that nut?

CHICO

Course it was in your mind, dude. What do you think? Where else could it be?

TAPE

What? (Pause) Wait a minute...I must be...(Pause) Oh, yea. Chico was right, man. This is some weird shit.

CHICO

See. I told you. It's gonna sell like mad.

BRIANNA

What were you thinking? I mean, did you really think you were talking to this guy?

TAPE

Oh, nothin'. It's just...(Laughs). I can't believe it's so real. (Pause) I ain't never tripped like this, man.

PENNY

Chico, is she really going to stay here?

CHICO

I told you, she ain't got no where else.

BRIANNA

Yea.

TAPE

Never mind, man.

PENNY

I don't want her here.

CHICO

Penny, I don't know why you're being like this.

TAPE

Oh, you know. It's just...I don't know. Why does everybody else do it?

FRED

(HE has been in deep thought since he last spoke.)

It just didn't seem like a trip to me, you know. It was too real. And I didn't, like, see colors or lights or have smells or anything and I didn't feel any different.

TAPE

Of course.

CHICO

Penny! Wait!

(Long pause)

FRED

I guess that's kinda stupid, ain't it. Sayin' maybe it was a real Genie.

BRIANNA

Oh, I don't know. You can never tell about those things.

FRED

No. It;s stupid. I was just trippin' like mad, that's all. (Pause.)

BRIANNA

Just you and Chico live here?

FRED

Yea. But Penny stays here a lot. (Pause) And Marcia used to.

BRIANNA

(Without acting particularly interested.)

Marcia? She your girlfriend?

FRED

Was. She ain't no more. She was always gettin' pissed about something, you know.

BRIANNA

Yea, I know. I think, like, monogamous relationships like that are doomed, you know. I mean the whole concept is just, like, outdated. I mean, free love, you know.

FRED

Oh, yea. I always liked that idea. I really think that's the way it should be, you know, because you can't, like, maintain a relationship for that long without gettin' on each other's shit all the time. That's why I'm thinkin' it's better this thing between me and Marcia is over.

BRIANNA

Yea. It's hard, but it's probably best.

CHICO
Penny, just try to be cool.

TAPE
Yea. You know.

FRED
You said it didn't work for you, right. Maybe it wasn't a trip I had. Maybe there really was a Genie.

(ALL stop and stare at him.)

BRIANNA
You think so?

FRED
(Switches off tape recorder.)

Yea, maybe it really happened.

PENNY
You're still tripping. I knew it. He's still tripping.

BRIANNA
But there's only one voice on the tape.

CHICO
What are you talkin' about? Of course you were tripping, Fred. The drug works!

FRED
No! I got it. Genie's voices can't be recorded. That's it.

PENNY
This is just too bizzare for me. I'm going. (Picks up her purse.)

BRIANNA
Jesus. Just relax, will you.

(PENNY makes a face at BRIANNA and then stomps out. CHICO runs after her.)

FRED

My problem is I'm always gettin' too involved like that, you know.

BRIANNA

I had a boyfriend once, but it was the same thing. He was always gettin' jealous and stuff like that. I couldn't handle it after a while, so I took off. (Pause) That's the thing, you know. They always try to change you. They can't just let you be the way you are.

FRED

That's really true. (Pause) Is that what happened with this Grover guy?

BRIANNA

Grover? Yea, sort of. It was all kind of weird, you know. But it was the same thing. I was, like, living with him, you know. I don't mean living with him--just crashing there for awhile. He's in a band up there and they're pretty successful and all that. But after a while he started acting like I was his property or something. I'd want to go and do something by myself or whatever and he'd get all tense and mad. Finally, he kicked me out. I didn't really want to stay around Cleveland after that anymore, so he said he knew some people down here and I could make this delivery for him and maybe stay here for a while.

FRED

Cool. I'm glad you're here. And I won't, like, try to change you or anything.

BRIANNA

Really. I think you have to, like, let each person be whoever they are, and don't mess around with that because it's, like, beautiful, you know. Whatever you are.

FRED

Yea. (Pause) Hey. You ever hear about a bar over on State Street called the Worm Hole?

BRIANNA

No.

FRED

Great bar. I'm not much into the bar scene, you know, but this place is cool. They've got all the black lights and strobes and shit like that. And great music. It's wild.

BRIANNA

Cool.

FRED

Maybe we can check it out sometime. Tonight, maybe.

BRIANNA

Great. I'd like that. (SHE points at his guitar.) You play?

FRED

Yea, you know. A little. I'm heavy into music, though.

BRIANNA

I love music. Music is, like, the encapsulation of all emotions for me. Like, when I listen to music, I'm just lost to everything else, you know.

FRED

Oh, yea.

BRIANNA

And right now it's so exciting, what's happening. Music is making a statement like it hasn't ever done before. It's political, you know, and social. It's really a force in our society.

FRED

Yea.

BRIANNA

And that's something they'll never pollute, you know. Music is, like, so pure you can't pollute it.

FRED

Oh, yea. Hey, are you into the Rascals?

BRIANNA

Yea, some. I haven't heard much.

FRED

Listen to this.

(HE picks up his guitar, flips on the amp., plays and sings a verse from "Good Lovin'.")

BRIANNA

Wow. That's pretty cool. You're good.

FRED

Great song, huh. Hey, you're pretty cool. You got some good ideas, you know. You must, like, think a lot.

BRIANNA

Oh, yea. I think it's important, you know. (Pause) So, you're really into music. That's great. I wish I had something like that.

FRED

Yea. Music is sort of my life. If I ever have to, like, get a job or something, I'd like to make it in the music business. Not to exploit it or anything, you know.

BRIANNA

Sure.

FRED

But I just hope that can be my living someday. I'd really like that.

(From behind the box in the corner there rises another puff of smoke. FRED sees this but BRIANNA doesn't. His mouth falls open; he rises and moves toward the box.)

Holy shit.

BRIANNA

What's wrong?

(FRED bumps into the table, nearly knocking the wine bottle off, but he catches it as it falls. Then he realizes what it is.)

FRED

Hey, did you bring this in here?

BRIANNA

No. (Pause) Are you O.K.?

FRED

Yea. It's just...mind drugs can get really strange, you know.

BRIANNA

Really.

FRED

(Pause)

You ever think about how weird life and shit is?

BRIANNA

Oh, yea. I think about that sometimes. It does get strange. But you can't really think about it, you know. You just have to keep going on.

FRED

Yea. I guess that's it.

(Looks at bottle and then at BRIANNA.)

You thirsty?

(Lights down.)

ACT TWO

SCENE: A plush dining room during a party fifteen years later. There is a long table with platters of hors d'ouvres and bottles of champagne with glasses. Behind the table, toward stage left, is a window. To stage left of this is a bar. Above the table, on the rear wall, is a large banner that reads: HAPPY BIRTHDAY FRED. There is also a clock on the wall which the audience can read.

There are several smallish groups of people standing about the room talking. One group comprises BEN, RHONDA, and BRIANNA, who is now FRED'S wife. They are passing a small hand-held mirror back and forth. Each in turn sniffs a line of cocaine from the mirror. Another group comprises GROVER, DWINDLE, and a female GROUPIE or two. (This is a rich Rock and Roll party.) DWINDLE is dressed very conservatively but GROVER looks kind of eighties rock wild and the girl(s) is(are) in the Cindi Lauper mode. There is another group of rock hangers-on off to one side, smoking a joint, drinking, and just generally looking weird. In this group is the BLUE COUPLE. They are decked out in strange punkish clothes, all of which are predominantly blue; they should be readily distinguishable by this. They even have blue hair. The BLUE COUPLE look at each other often. They enter and exit in a sneaky, stylized manner, drawing a lot of attention to themselves, at least from the audience. Rather than having them on stage at first, the act can open with their entrance.

FRED is at the table filling his plate or he is at the bar mixing a drink. He is dressed conservatively if casually in jeans (the same jeans he wore in Act One), a shirt and tie and a sport coat. He has short hair and no beard.

As the scene opens, all groups are talking but the audience can't really hear what's being said. When BEN speaks, conversation level in other groups drops but they each continue with their own conversations.

BEN

Your turn, Fred.

FRED

Sure, Ben.

(HE sets his plate down, walks over to them, and does a line.)

Great blow, isn't it. I really got a deal on it, too. That's the best part.

BRIANNA

(SHE is pretty drunk and giggly. She stumbles against FRED and spills some of her drink on him.)

Isn't he wonderful. My Freddie.

(SHE pats him on the shoulder.)

RHONDA

It's so good to see you two back together again.

BRIANNA

And he really deserves the best tonight, you know. He's this far from being a millionaire.

(SHE holds up two fingers to show distance.)

And he's only forty. (Pause) Four stores. My Freddie, the businessman. Who would have believed it? (Giggles.)

FRED

Brianna! I asked you not to...

RHONDA

Four stores. Fred, is that true? Are you opening another one?

FRED

(Throws BRIANNA a look.)

Well...maybe it's true. It's still in the planning stages. But don't say anything to anyone about it yet.

BEN

That's terrific, Fred. (Offers hand) Congratulations. Another Genie Records and Tapes. I love it. Where's this one going to be?

FRED

If it happens, it will be in that new mall they're starting to build out in the south end.

BEN

It should do great.

FRED

Yea, well, we'll see. Just keep it quiet for now.

BRIANNA

Oh, don't be so modest, Freddie. You know it's gonna be a mint. (SHE giggles and slops her drink.) They did one those, whaddaya-call-ems, some kinda survey, sales projections, that kinda crap. (Giggles. Waves her hand.) They showed that new store will probably double our business.

FRED
(More loudly.)

Brianna, please.

(DWINDLE looks over.)

RHONDA
Oh, we won't say anything. Don't worry. I just think it's great how fast it's all happened for you. How long since you two moved up here?

FRED
Since we moved to Cleveland? Twelve years.

RHONDA
How fabulous. Listen, Ben. We better go and mingle, huh?

BEN
Yea, sure. Later on, Fred. Thanks for the toot.

(FRED nods. Exit BEN and RHONDA.
FRED gives BRIANNA a look again.)

GROVER
Hey, Fred, buddy. How's it goin'? Hi, Brianna.

BRIANNA
Hello, Grover.
(She steps up to him and they Kiss lightly.)

GROVER
So, Fred. I hear you got some wicked snort.

FRED
Yea, sure.
(Hands a vial to GROVER. GROVER and GROUPIE start snorting. BRIANNA sits down. DWINDLE, who is controlled and tight-lipped, and FRED move off to one side.)

FRED
Hey, Mr. Dwindle. You having a good time? Anything I can get you?

DWINDLE
No. I'm fine, Fred. (Pause.) Listen, Fred. What was it I overheard Brianna talking about? I hope it wasn't the mall thing.

FRED

Oh, no, Mr. Dwindle. She didn't say anything that's going to cause any problems. She just likes to talk money, you know. That's all.

DWINDLE

Good. Good, Fred. Because, you know as well as I do, if word gets out...(HE shrugs.) Just remember, it's more than one store involved here. This is the big time now, right?

FRED

(Smiling nervously.)

Right, Mr. Dwindle.

DWINDLE

Good, good. (Pat's FRED'S back.) Nice party you're having, Fred. Nice, uh, (looking around) mix of people.

FRED

Thanks, Mr. Dwindle.

(Exit DWINDLE. BEN runs in with no shirt on.)

BEN

Hey, come on everybody! We're getting naked in the pool!

(ALL run after him except BRIANNA and FRED.)

FRED

How many times did I ask you not to say anything yet, Brianna? I said the deal's not firm yet, the building isn't up yet, and I don't want word of this getting around. There's a lot happening that you don't know about.

BRIANNA

Hey, you know what Rhonda told me?

FRED

And you drink too much, you know that.

BRIANNA

She said some friend of yours is supposed to be coming over in a while. Some old friend from Columbus.

FRED

(Stops. Looks at her.)

Columbus? Really?

BRIANNA

Yea. I think she was a girlfriend of yours or something.

FRED

Girlfriend? Not Marcia.

BRIANNA

Yea. That's her. I guess she lives up here now and she's hanging around with some business guy you know. (Laughs and stands.) Be careful, Freddie. I might get jealous.

(Exit BRIANNA.)

(FRED goes to table, picks up his plate, and walks to the window. He is standing like this, looking out, eating a little now and then, when RUDY enters and inspects the spread on the table. RUDY is dressed in very hippyish clothes; HE has long hair and a headband. HE is wearing a paisley shirt with puffy sleeves and over that a striped vest. HE has a large peace symbol hanging from a chain around his neck. HE is wearing blue jeans and sandals.)

RUDY

Wow, man. What a trip. Nice pad, man.

FRED

(Looks around, then stares at this strange character.)

What's going on here?

RUDY

Wow, this is, like, wild, you know. I ain't eaten in a long time, man. Great party.

(Starts filling a plate.)

FRED

What are you doing?

RUDY

Your birthday, ain't it man? You Fred Greene? I just stopped by to wish you a happy birthday and to see if there's anything you want. I been away for awhile.

FRED

Who in the hell are you?

RUDY

Yea. I guess it's been a long time, ain't it. I been kinda tied up for the last ten years or so. Kinda stuck, you might say. I just got back today. (Pause.) What year is it, anyway?

FRED

What year?

RUDY

Yea. What year. Don't you hear very well, dude?

FRED

Who in God's name...

RUDY

Hey, come on, Fred. Don't tell me you forgot all about me. It looks like you done all right 'cause of me. (Looks around.) Genie Records and Tapes. Groovy name, dude.

FRED

(Approaches RUDY, peers at his face.)

Rudy?

RUDY

Hey, in the flesh, man. How you been? (Offers FRED a soul handshake.)

FRED

Christ. I can't believe this. (Pause) Genie Records. Rudy, did you really...(Pause) What am I saying? Who are you?

RUDY

Hey, dude. Don't get hostile. I just stopped by to say hey. Besides, Fred, we got some unfinished business.

FRED

Such as.

RUDY

(Pulls out a notebook.)

Well, first there was the girl problem. "I wish you'd leave me alone" were your exact words. So I took care of that. Then there was the comment about (reads) making a living and staying in music. Well, dude, you weren't really cut out to be a guitarist. Face it. So, like, the record store deal was the only thing I could think of.

FRED

(In a daze.)

You did start the business.

RUDY

What did you think, man. I told you, whatever you wished for.

FRED

And all this time I thought I was just a great businessman.

RUDY

Oh, you done great, Fred. I just got you started.

FRED

Genie Records and Tapes. I'll be a...Hey, you didn't get me started. There's this guy, Mr Dwindle. He's the one. He set me up with financing, got me connections to distributors, all that.

RUDY

Dwindle? Oh, sure. He does a lot of work for me. He's big in the business world, you know. He's my connection into all that. Yea. He's supposed to be over in Detroit right now. You know that big downtown rennovation they're doing over there? One of the big contractors there saved one of our dudes. This contractor's kid got him to turn himself into a beetle or something, I don't know, man, and he corked him up inside a pop bottle. I guess he was going to take it to school and uncork it for show and tell. Weird, you know.

FRED

You're wrong. Mr. Dwindle is here.

RUDY

Here? How come? He's supposed to be in Detroit.

FRED

We have a realyy big deal going right now and it's in a crucial period. So he's here watching over things. We're in a sort of partnership. In fact, he's at this party.

RUDY

Hmmm.

FRED

(Shakes his head.)

This is too strange.

(Picks up mirror from table, does a line of coke, then offers it to RUDY.)

RUDY

No thanks, man. Messes with my magic, you know.

FRED

Some good Guatemalan. (Pause--FRED looks at RUDY.) Hey, wait a minute. I get it now. It's the drugs, isn't it. I've heard of this happening. You get going on something and then you flash back to your mind-drug days. You're not really here, are you.

RUDY

(Looks around.)

Yea, man. I think I am here.

FRED

No, you're not.

RUDY

Yes, I am. Look Fred, don't start this shit again. Like I was saying, we still got some business, dude. I got to take care of this deal with you.

FRED

(Starts to laugh.)

Why are you dressed like that? And why do you talk like that?

RUDY

What? I adapted. Like I said, dude, I change with the times.

FRED

It's 1982, Rudy. Nobody does that anymore.

RUDY

Really, man?

FRED

Yea. Where have you been?

RUDY

Oh, you wouldn't believe it. I was at this demonstration over in D.C., around '68 or '69. And somehow I got carried away and took one little hit off some reefer, you know, and Jesus, it knocked me right out. I crawled into this empty wine bottle to take a nap, right, and next thing I knew, somebody had put the top back on. I guess they thought there was some wine left or something, but the bottle got left behind and there I was. I been in a sanitary landfill for the last fourteen years. (Pause.) But you shoulda seen it in there: color T.V. and a bunch of bean bag chairs and some groovy beads hanging from the ceiling. It was boss.

FRED

Rudy, the sixties are over. They ended in 1974. You'd better change or something.

RUDY

You think?

FRED

Yea. I want my hallucinations to be in style, you know.

RUDY

Yea. You're right. (Pause) I'll be back.

FRED

I hope not.

(Exit RUDY)

(FRED watches after him and then rubs his eyes, shakes his head and takes a drink of champagne. Enter BLUE COUPLE.)

BLUE MAN

Hey, are you Fred Greene? We wanted to meet you since it's your party and all. We heard you're opening another record store. Awesome.

FRED

(Under his breath.)

Jesus.

BLUE WOMAN

Congratulations. That's, like, fantastic.

FRED

(Forcing a smile.)

Thanks.

BLUE MAN

We heard it's gonna be in the new mall?

(FRED rubs his eyes.)

(BLUE COUPLE look at each other, then back to FRED.)

BLUE WOMAN

Is that true?

FRED

Yea. Maybe.

BLUE MAN

You must know Mr. Dwindle.

FRED

How do you know about Dwindle?

(BLUE COUPLE look at each other again,
then back at FRED.)

BLUE MAN

We just do. We're, sort of, friends of his.

BLUE WOMAN

Yea. Friends of his.

(THEY look at each other again, then look
back at FRED, then they turn and exit.
The whole encounter should be kind of
spacey.)

(Enter BRIANNA, staggering and
disheveled looking.)

BRIANNA

Oh, God, Freddie. I'm a sick little girl. I been bad. I vomited on that new
carpet in the hallway.

FRED

Nice.

BRIANNA

(Suddenly changing moods. She perks up
and puts her arms around FRED'S neck
and tries to kiss him but he turns away.)

What's a matter, Freddie? You mad at Brianna?

FRED

(Hands HER a vial of coke.)

Here. Go play.

(Exit BRIANNA. Then, enter
RUDY--dressed in suit now and with
short hair.)

RUDY

What year did you say it was, Fred?

(When FRED sees RUDY again he covers his face with his hands.)

FRED

I thought it was just a bad dream. (Pause) Rudy, what's happening? Why am I seeing you?

RUDY

Because I'm standing here, Fred. Now, what year did you say?

FRED

1982.

RUDY

That's what I was afraid of. (Counts on his fingers.) It's been fifteen years, Fred.

FRED

What has?

RUDY

Since you released me from the walnut.

FRED

Oh, yea.

RUDY

You don't understand. I told you then, I only have fifteen years to fulfill those wishes. What was the date?

(FRED shrugs and RUDY digs in his pocket for an appointment calendar. He finds it and reads.)

RUDY

June 12th. What's the date today?

FRED

June 11th. My birthday. (Then as if in pain.) I'm forty.

RUDY

I've got 'til midnight, Fred. Then I'm finished. You still have two wishes left. You're going to have to wish for something.

FRED

Oh, please don't start this again.

RUDY

You're not happy with the way things have turned out so far?

FRED

Happy?

RUDY

Yes, happy. You've got money, you're in the music biz, and you've got a beautiful wife. You've got it very good.

FRED

Right. Do you know, Brianna just moved back in here last week. She was gone for two months. Our whole relationship has been like that, Rudy. We were divorced once, for Christ's sake, for almost a year. And then we got married again. Why is that? (Pause) We're sort of bound to each other but neither of us is happy most of the time.

And the money. I've just about lost every I deal I ever had.

RUDY

Oh, spare me, Fred. What ideals did you ever have?

(FRED turns away.)

RUDY

What is it?

FRED

I don't know. I'm forty. I guess I'm just a middle-aged fool like I never wanted to be.

RUDY

Aren't we all, Fred. Look at me. (Rubs his hands down his suit.)

FRED

Right. I'm a middle-aged guy. You're just a middle-aged hallucination. That's a little bit different. You don't have to go through the agonies of getting old.

RUDY

I do if you don't make a couple wishes in the next half hour. (Pause) I've got to go now, Fred. But remember, I'm back now and I might be listening again at any moment.

FRED

(HE has turned and is looking out the window again.)

Right.

(Enter BRIANNA and GROVER.)

BRIANNA

(Very stoned.)

There he is, Grover. My big businessman.

GROVER

(Takes out FRED'S cocaine and mirror.)

Hey, Fred. I heard about your new store. That's great, buddy. Congratulations.

(Does a line then offers it to FRED.)

You want some of this? Nice stuff. Brianna gave it to me.

FRED

Brianna gave it to you. (Turns to her.) Would you please, please stop telling everyone about this store. How many times do I have to tell you--it can't get around yet. No one can know.

BRIANNA

Come on, Freddie. Everyone's proud of you.

FRED

I don't care! Just shut up about it. Understand?

(BRIANNA sits angrily.)

GROVER

What's the deal with this, Fred? Why you being so tight-lipped?

FRED

Grover, listen. I really can't...

GROVER

Hey, come on. How long have we known each other? Haven't we helped each other out? Trust me.

FRED

(Pause) Yea. O.K. But keep it quiet. It's confusing, but I'm involved in more than just another record store. (Looks around.) I'm one of the financiers of the whole mall.

GROVER

Wow.

BRIANNA
(Stands)

You are?

FRED

My partner, Mr. Dwindle, is coordinating things. The other backers are part of an organization called the Trinity Alliance.

GROVER

That bunch of Jesus Freaks?

FRED

Right. They call themselves fundamentalist investment specialists. They've got lots of capital behind them.

GROVER

O.K. So?

FRED

So, you know all this recent fuss about messages from the devil being hidden in rock-and-roll songs and about selling paraphernalia in record stores and all that?

GROVER

Oh, yea. And if they find out you're the other backer...

FRED

Exactly. They pull out. And the thing is this--a lot of money has already been spent, money that can't be recovered. And the Trinity Alliance hasn't come through yet with their biggest chunk of cash. As soon as that happens, we're O.K. But until it does...

BRIANNA

Oh, Freddie. You should have told me.

GROVER

We'll keep it quiet, Fred. Don't you worry.

(FRED nods.)

(Exit BRIANNA and GROVER. FRED returns to the window, looks out, and lights a joint. Enter MARCIA. She is in a dress; her hair is different, older looking.)

MARCIA
What a nice place.

FRED
Hello.

MARCIA
Fred! It is you?

FRED
Marcia. (Pause) I can't believe you're really here. You live in Cleveland now?

MARCIA
Mmm hmm. I just moved up here a couple of monthes ago. I took a job as a clerk in a record distributorship, Omen Records. Well, of course I've been hearing this talk of a Fred Greene who owns a chain of record stores. I didn't know if it was you or not. Then my boss told me about this birthday party. I just wanted to see if it was the Fred Greene I used to know.

FRED
It's me.

MARCIA
It's really good to see you again.

FRED
(Pause) What a strange night.

MARCIA
Why? What's happened?

FRED
Well, seeing you out of the blue like this, for one thing, feels funny. And a few minutes ago I had, I don't know what to call it. A flashback, I guess. I've never had that happen. (Pause) Remember when I was seeing Genies?

MARCIA
Yes.

FRED
I just saw that Genie again.

MARCIA
Oh, no. Are you all right?

FRED
Yea, sure. I feel fine. (Pause) I'm under some strain with the business and all right now, too. So, it's a lot of things. (Pause) I guess that's what forty is.

MARCIA

I wouldn't know. I'm only thirty-nine.

FRED

(Laughs)

Well, sit down. Tell me about your life. It's been 15 years.

MARCIA

Fifteen years. (Pause) I've been good. I was married and divorced, you know, and I just got this job up here, which is a pretty good job, I think. I like it.

FRED

Good.

MARCIA

You're married?

FRED

For the time being.

MARCIA

Ah.

(Long pause.)

FRED

Hey, did you ever see Chico when you were still in Columbus?

MARCIA

Oh, sure. I ran into him every six months or so it seemed. He and Penny got married, you know.

FRED

No kidding.

MARCIA

Yes. And have you heard what he's doing now?

FRED

No.

MARCIA

Well, he finished his degree in chemistry finally and the last I heard he was making a bunch of money working for Dow--fertilizers or something.

(FRED laughs)

MARCIA

Yes, they're doing well.

FRED

(Pause) Do you ever miss back then? Do you ever wish you could just go back for a while, to look around, to see what it was like?

MARCIA

No, not really. I'm happy like this.

FRED

Sometimes I think about that. About how it would be nice if it could be like that again. It was so simple. Having a business and money and all that--it's a real grind sometimes, you know. (Pause) Sometimes I wish it hadn't happened this way. The people were nicer then.

(There is a puff of smoke from behind the table which FRED sees but MARCIA doesn't.)

FRED

(Stands.)

Oh, my God.

MARCIA

What? What's wrong?

(FRED stares, rubs his face, etc.)

MARCIA

Fred, what is it?

(Enter DWINDLE)

DWINDLE

Greene, can I talk to you. (To MARCIA) Excuse us.

(FRED approaches DWINDLE. Exit MARCIA.)

FRED

Mr. Dwindle. Is something wrong?

DWINDLE

Vibes.

FRED

What?

DWINDLE

Vibes. I'm getting bad vibes about the mall deal. Something's in the air and I don't like it.

FRED

Vibes? You're worried because you have bad...(Pause) Say, do you know someone named Rudy?

DWINDLE

Rudy? That his last name?

FRED

(Pause) I'm not sure. He's a little guy, kind of strange, you know.

DWINDLE

Hmmm. Nope, doesn't sound familiar. Anyway, Greene, I don't like this. I hear talk of your new store in the mall. You were supposed to keep this quiet. If anyone connects us and the Trinities, we're screwed. They'll never see this deal through. And we need that capital.

FRED

I know, I know, Mr. Dwindle. But how would they find out? I know everyone at this party.

DWINDLE

They've got spies, Greene. They worry about this kind of thing--want to know who they're doing business with. You never know who's lurking about.

FRED

But I know everyone here.

(Enter BLUE COUPLE. They approach the table and start filling plates.)

DWINDLE

You're sure? There's no one here who looks strange to you?

FRED

No. Everyone's either my friend or Brianna's...(HE notices the BLUE COUPLE at the table). Wait a minute.

DWINDLE

What? (Looks around) Who are they?

FRED

They told me they knew you.

DWINDLE
Me? Well, who are they?

FRED
I don't know.

DWINDLE
But you said you knew everyone...

FRED
Maybe they're Brianna's friends. (To COUPLE) Excuse me, folks, have you seen Brianna?

BLUE WOMAN
Who?

BLUE MAN
Who?

FRED
Brianna, my wife.

BLUE COUPLE
(In unison)
Oh, your wife. (They look at each other, then at FRED.) Nope.

DWINDLE
Who are they?

FRED
I don't know.

DWINDLE
(Agitated)
What do you mean, you don't know?

FRED
So I was wrong; I don't know everyone here.

DWINDLE
Well, you better find out who they are, Greene.

(COUPLE starts to leave.)

FRED
(Acting jovial.)

Hey, you two. Come on over here. Tell me how you like the party. Are you having a good time?

(COUPLE look at each other, shrug, then walk over to FRED and DWINDLE.)

FRED
You're having fun?

COUPLE
(THEY shrug and then speak in unison.)

Sure.

FRED
Good, good. (Pause) So, where do I know you from? Wait, I know. You must be the new sound technicians Grover hired for his band, right?

(COUPLE look at each other, then speak in unison.)

COUPLE
Right.

FRED
(Aside to DWINDLE.)

Grover didn't hire any new sound technicians.

DWINDLE
He didn't?

FRED
No. He doesn't even have a band any more.

DWINDLE
What? All right, you two. Who are you really? What are you doing here?

(BLUE COUPLE look at each other, shrug their shoulders, and step backwards.)

BLUE MAN
I'm surprised you didn't recognize us, Dwindle.

DWINDLE

Should I?

BLUE WOMAN

Oh, yes. Because we were at a meeting with you just last week.

DWINDLE

Meeting? What meeting?

BLUE MAN

The meeting you had with...(pause)

COUPLE

(In unison)

...The TRINITY ALLIANCE!!

(BLUE COUPLE tear off their blue disguises, including hair. MAN is wearing a frock and clerical collar. Both are wearing large crucifixes around their necks.)

DWINDLE

Spies!!

BLUE MAN

Yes, we're spies, Dwindle. We've been watching you. And we know what you're up to now. We've heard rumors of your involvement with this...this smut peddler.

BLUE WOMAN

With this agent of the devil!

BLUE MAN

With this pusher of paraphernalia!

BLUE WOMAN

With this satanic messenger!

FRED

Oh, God.

BLUE MAN

It's too late for God now, you creep. You're finished.

DWINDLE

Now, wait a minute, you two. We can work this out.

BLUE WOMAN

Oh no, Dwindle. It's too late for that, too. We warned you. We'll have nothing to do with his type. And if you're in business with him, then you're not in business with us.

BLUE MAN

We're withholding the rest of our funding. We warned you. It's over.

(BOTH exit.)

DWINdle

(Running after them.)

Wait! I can explain! There's been a mistake. Wait!

(Exit DWINdle.)

(FRED sits with his head in his hands.
Enter RUDY.)

RUDY

Well, that worked pretty well, didn't it, Fred. Now you won't have to hassle with money or business any more.

FRED

(Locking up.)

You again?

RUDY

And now you only have one wish left to make. Then I'm free.

FRED

(Miserably)

What are you talking about?

RUDY

Your business is ruined. This is the beginning of a long decline for Genie Records and Tapes. You said you wished it could be simpler, what a grind it was. Now it's over.

FRED

Are you telling me you set the whole thing up?

RUDY

I just made it happen, Fred. It was always set up. Everything is always set up. The world is an infinite number of possibilities. I just make one or the other happen.

FRED

Come on. You expect me to believe that?

RUDY

I don't care. All I care about is whether you make your fourth wish before midnight.

FRED

(Shaking his head.)

I must be going mad.

RUDY

Oh, I don't think so, Fred. That is unless you want to. Do you want to go mad?

FRED

What?

RUDY

All you have to do is wish.

FRED

(Yells.)

I'm not wishing for anything! All I want is for you to leave me alone.

RUDY

Now, Fred.

FRED

Don't you 'now, Fred' me, you little runt. All I ever wanted from you was nothing. I wanted no wishes, remember. You're no genie. I told you in the first place what I would wish for. I said I wanted nothing to change.

RUDY

And I told you that was imposs...(RUDY stops cold.)

(Long pause.)

No change. I had forgotten that.

(FRED sits back on the couch with his head in his hands. RUDY reflects for a moment and then runs off.)

(Enter BRIANNA, GROVER, BEN, and RHONDA.)

RHONDA

There he is.

BEN

Got any more of that coke, buddy?

(Enter other GROUPIES. Some go to table; some join group around FRED. FRED looks up at them all and then he cracks. He leaps to his feet.)

FRED

Cocaine!? You want more cocaine!? Sure! Here!

(HE stands on the couch and begins pulling vials from his pockets and throwing them. Maybe sprinkling cocaine on them.)

What else do you want? Take anything! How about a nice painting, Rhonda? This cost over three thousand dollars.

(HE removes a painting from the wall and hands it to RHONDA.)

How about this lamp? Hand-made in Greece. A thousand dollars. Here!

(Hands is to someone.)

BRIANNA

What are you doing?

FRED

Me? What's the matter, Brianna? None of this stuff is ours anymore, anyway.

BRIANNA

Have you lost your mind?

FRED

Yes! I'm crazy! Batshit! And I also just lost the business, thanks to your big mouth.

BEN

Calm down, Fred. Pull yourself together.

FRED

Ben! You look like you need some new silverware. Here.

(Grabs a handful of silverware and stuffs it into BEN'S pockets.)

BEN

He's loony.

(Enter MARCIA.)

MARCIA

Fred!

FRED

(HE starts tearing off his clothes.)

Who wants clothing? A silk tie, \$25.00!

(Throws tie to onlooker.)

A mohair jacket, \$300.00!

(Hands it to GROUPIE.)

A hand stitched shirt, \$50.00.

(Throws it into the air.)

MARCIA

What's happening? Fred!

BRIANNA

(Points at MARCIA.)

It's her fault. She had to come over here and upset him.

(To MARCIA)

Why can't you just leave him alone?

MARCIA

What are you talking about?

FRED

Marcia! From the good old days. Here, you need some furniture for your new place?

(Drags a chair over to her.)

Take it. It's yours.

MARCIA

Oh, Fred.

FRED

Remember what that old apartment looked like, Marcia? That dump. (Laughs) I'm a long way from there now, aren't I. Yessir. I made it, Marcia. I'm a big damn success story now, aren't I.

MARCIA

Just sit down, Fred. Everything will be O.K.

FRED

It will? Did you hear that, Brianna? Everything will be O.K.

(FRED goes to the table and picks up a stack of dishes.)

FRED

Who needs plates?

A GROUPIE

Uh, I do, man.

FRED

Here.

(Starts throwing other plates, breaking them.)

BRIANNA

(Screaming)

Stop it!

(BRIANNA runs from the room. An alternative to this is to have her dragged out trying to keep someone from

removing a piece of furniture or some other object. This scene can be used to clear the set in preparation of Act Three.

GROVER follows BRIANNA. Others, except MARCIA, start to file out, carrying things with them. FRED watches them.)

FRED

All I wanted was for the old days to last, Marcia. I told him that. I told him that more than once, you know.

MARCIA

Who, Fred?

FRED

I told him I just wanted things to stay like that. But he changed everything.

MARCIA

Fred, sit down. I'll call a doctor. You just rest.

FRED

No doctors. Just...leave, will you. Just leave me alone.

(MARCIA looks at him and then runs from the room.)

(FRED stops for a moment and then runs to the table. HE lights a joint and drags heavily on it; then he does some mighty lines of cocaine; then he guzzles from the bottle of champagne. HE wanders downstage, stares about, and then passes out cold.)

(Lights down slowly to a near black out. Maybe colored lights can be used here, deep blue or purple. The set change to Act Three happens without a complete blackout. All FRED needs to do is get back into his long hair. He should only be wearing blue jeans, which he also wore in the first act. The walls close in, props are added, and we are back in 1967.)

ACT THREE

SCENE: Same set as Act One, an hour or so later. FRED is lying unconscious on the floor, in the same position in which he ended Act Two. The concrete block and mall hammer are still next to the table; there are nut shells all over table and floor; the tape recorder is lying in front of table; RUDY'S hat is still where he set it.

(Enter MARCIA)

MARCIA

Fred! Oh, God.

(She runs to him)

What happened? Are you all right?

(FRED starts to wake up.)

FRED

(He is groggy and unsure of himself)

What?

(Enter CHICO)

CHICO

Hey, Fred. What happened, man?

(To MARCIA)

What happened to him?

MARCIA

I'm not sure. I just found him like this. He took some drug before I left.

CHICO

What do you mean, some drug?

MARCIA

He said it was something of yours, something you invented.

CHICO

Oh no, man. Fred, you didn't really take none of that shit, did you? You're crazy, dude. That stuff would probably knock an elephant out, the way it is.

FRED

(He sits up)

What happened?

MARCIA

Just rest. (To CHICO) Should I call a doctor?

FRED

No. No doctor. (Long pause) What year is it?

CHICO

What year?

FRED

Yea, what year. Don't you hear very well, dude?

CHICO

Oh, yea. I hear real good, Fred. But I think you better stay away from the chemicals for awhile, you know?

(He looks around at apartment.)

What happened in here, man?

(Gets up and looks at nut shells on table; picks them up and lets them fall through his fingers. Then he picks up the mall hammer and hefts it. Shakes his head.)

What were you doin', Fred?

FRED

(To MARCIA)

You came back.

MARCIA

I told you I was coming back. I just needed...some fresh air.

FRED

Fresh air. Yea, I can dig that. But I thought you, like, took off on me, man. I thought you were gone.

MARCIA

No. I'm here.

FRED

(Looks around)

You guys know anyone named Brianna?

CHICO

Brianna?

FRED
Yea. From Cleveland.

CHICO
Weird name.

FRED
Yea. You didn't see her at the bus station?

CHICO
No, man. I haven't gone yet. I was just gonna go get Penny and...(He looks at FRED). How did you know I was goin' to the bus station?

FRED
I don't know, man. I just knew. You know? (Pause) You're gonna pick up some micro-dot from Cleveland.

CHICO
Freaky.

FRED
(Thinks)
I don't know.

MARCIA
I think you need some rest, Fred. Why don't you get in bed and try to sleep for awhile.

FRED
(Looks at her)
Yea. Rest. (Pause) But have you seen the bedroom lately? It looks like a bomb went off in there.

CHICO
A bomb?

FRED
Yea.

MARCIA
I'll take care of it. Then you get some sleep.
(She stands and goes into bedroom. Exit stage right.)

CHICO

Well, dude. I got to go and pick that stuff up. (Pause) Maybe I already told you about it, that's how you knew.

FRED

Yea. Maybe. That must be it.

CHICO

Right. Well, I'll see you later.

(Exit CHICO)

(FRED stands and walks about, looking at things. He sees the tape recorder lying in front of the table and he picks it up. It is obviously broken. Tape is pulled out, etc. He sets it on table. Then he sits down at the table, looks at the nuts, and picks one up. While he is studying it, there is a knock at the door.)

(FRED gets up and answers it)

(RUDY enters, dressed in the same suit he wore in Act One. He is carrying a huge suitcase.)

RUDY

Hello there, friend. Rudy's my name; sales is my game. Anything you want, I sell it. And if I don't sell it, well, I can get it. You say you want to travel, you're tired of you're life? I've got package deals to all the best vacation spots in the world. You need a car? I can get you a deal you won't believe on any model you can name. And take a look at what I've got here.

(RUDY pushes past FRED and sets his suitcase on the table.)

FRED

What the hell?

RUDY

(Opens suitcase)

Anything you want, and at prices you can't beat, my friend. What did you say you're name was?

FRED

Fred, dude.

RUDY

Well, Mr. Dude, just take a look at this blender, a modern appliance no kitchen should be without. (Hands it to FRED) Or how about some records? You look like you enjoy rock and roll. (Pulls records from case) I get these on a special deal from a distributor in Cleveland. How about a new cassette tape recorder? You record things? This little baby picks up the smallest sounds from clear across the room. (Hands it to FRED) Or how about...

FRED

Wait a minute, dude.

RUDY

You see something you like?

FRED

No. I don't want any of this shit, man.

RUDY

Well, there are plenty of other things in here you might like. A nutcracker, for instance. I see you eat nuts. (Points to bowl on table.) Well, this little number makes quick work of any nut you've got. Scientifically designed to save time and effort.

FRED

Stop! I don't want anything.

RUDY

What are you talking about? Everyone wants something, even if they don't know it. It's a proven fact. Why, we've done surveys that show there isn't a single person in this country who doesn't want something.

FRED

I don't.

RUDY

You don't?

FRED

No. I don't want nothin', all right. I'm happy with what I got, dude.

RUDY
(Taken aback)

You are?

FRED
Yea. I am. (Pause) Hey, did I ever see you before?

RUDY
I don't know. Did you? But I'll tell you how you can remember faces you've seen before. (Reaches into bag) Like this. (Pulls out a camera) I'll let you have it for twenty bucks. It's worth five times that, my friend.

FRED
No, man. I don't want nothing.
(He throws everything back into the suitcase and slams it closed)

Nothing, man.

RUDY
All right. I can see you're one of those kinds of customers, one of the tough nuts to crack, as we say in the business.

FRED
Right. I'm happy with what I got.

RUDY
I can see that. I can see that about you. You look like someone who's happy with what he has.

FRED
Right. That's me.

RUDY
(Offers his hand)
Well, Mr. Dude.

FRED
(Takes hand)
Fred.

RUDY
No, Rudy.

FRED
No, man. I'm Fred.

RUDY

Ah, Fred. Well, Fred. It's been a pleasure trying to do business with you. I'm glad I got to meet you.

FRED

Right, dude.

RUDY

That's one thing about this job, you know. Even if I can't sell much, I at least get to meet a lot of interesting people.

FRED

Sure.

RUDY

And even though we had just a few moments together, I'll remember you, Fred.

FRED

You will?

RUDY

Yes. I will. The man who needed nothing new. That's what I'll remember you as, Fred.

FRED

Right.

RUDY

(Latching suitcase)

Well, I must be off. There's much to do, you know. Most of the people I meet need all kinds of things, Fred. You'd be surprised at what they think they need.

FRED

Yea?

RUDY

Yes. And I can't disappoint them. So, I'll be going.

(RUDY lifts the suitcase and walks toward the door. Then he spots the bowler. He sets the suitcase down and picks up the hat.)

Is this your hat?

FRED
(Inspects it)

No, man. It's not mine.

RUDY
(Puts it on his head.)

Good.
Thanks so much.

(Exit RUDY)
(MARCIA comes out of the bedroom.)

MARCIA

Who were you talking to, Fred?

FRED

Just this salesman guy.

MARCIA

Really? I didn't hear anyone come in. (Pause) What was he selling?

FRED

Oh, the usual shit, you know.

MARCIA

Oh. (Pause) Well, the bed's all fixed up. Why don't you lay down for awhile.
Rest.

FRED

Rest. Yea. That sounds good.

MARCIA

Good. I worry about you, you know. (Pause) Well, come on, then. I think I
might take a nap with you.

(She heads back into bedroom.)

Why don't you put that bottle of wine in the frig. so it'll be cool. We can have
it with dinner.

(Exit MARCIA stage right.)

(FRED stares after her, then runs to
table and picks up wine bottle. He holds
a hand to his forehead and sits down at
table.)

(Lights slowly fade to black.)