

# **L O S E R S**

**Charles Marowitz**

## SYNOPSIS

**Matt sees himself as an artist – a novelist, a playwright, a screenwriter – and works assiduously in all of these genres. He is abetted in this illusion by Susan, his supportive girlfriend. But the accumulation of his failures gradually begin to scuttle his self-confidence. His strongest relationship is to his Muse who regularly materializes to spur him on. A conniving producer promises to turn the tide by offering to produce his latest play, but this project also turns awry triggering a monumental depression in the would-be artist. Crushed by a series of devastating personal defeats, he proceeds to lose his girl-friend, his best friend and his faith in himself. Surrounded by losers, he is forced to seek solace in the company of a mindless, (previously discarded) old girlfriend. The resurrection of that relationship confirms his failure both as a writer and a human being.**

**This is a play that examines the self-deceptions that prevent blinkered esthetes from ever coming to terms with their shortcomings. It poses ‘artistic ambition’ as a malady rather than a virtue. It is the story of millions of *wannabes* who refuse to face the truth about their basic inadequacies. It demonstrates the truth of G.K. Chesterton’s observation that: “The artistic temperament is a disease that afflicts amateurs.”**

\* \* \* \* \*

## CAST

<b>JESSE,</b>	<b>mid to late 20s,</b>
<b>MATTHEW,</b>	<b>late thirties,</b>
<b>CHARLEY,</b>	<b>late thirties,</b>
<b>SUSAN,</b>	<b>early 30s,</b>
<b>CONRAD</b>	<b>late forties,</b>
<b>ISAAC</b>	<b>sixties,</b>
<b>MUSE</b>	<b>British, late 20s</b>
<b>RHINELANDER</b>	<b>fifties</b>

### [PRODUCTION NOTE]

[To achieve unbroken continuity between the several scenes, it is advisable for the play to be performed on a split stage; two distinct acting-areas,]

**JESSE, brunette, early 20s, attractive in an unspectacular way; good body. The apartment in which we find her is sparsely furnished in a casual, Bohemian style; comfortable, not luxurious, Its most salient feature is an oversized window through which we can see the high-rise apartment buildings of New York.**

**As the lights fade up, JESSE is in an armchair inclining intensely towards a young man in his late-30s who sits opposite her and who is likewise inclining. The atmosphere in the room is charged and something of great emotional impact has obviously just been said. Both are locked within the same tension. - After a longish pause, JESSE says.....**

**JESSE: Just like that?**

**MATT: I didn't want to beat around the bush.**

**JESSE: Just like that!?**

**MATT: No, not just-like-that, it's been coming for a long time.**

**JESSE: I didn't feel it.**

**MATT: That's part of the problem, Jesse. There are lots of things you don't seem to anticipate.**

**JESSE: After, what is it? - fourteen months?**

**MATT: Time's got nothing to do with it?**

**JESSE: No?**

**MATT: No, for Christ's sake; some things take fourteen hours and some things take fourteen months. You can't time these things.**

**JESSE: But only last week, after the party, we.....**

**MATT: It's not the sex. The sex is fine.**

**JESSE:** But if the sex is good then.....

**MATT:** There're other things beside sex.

**JESSE:** Are there?

**MATT:** Of course there are.

**JESSE;** What are they?

**MATT:** (*irritated*) Don't play dumb.

**JESSE;** No, I mean it: what are they?

**MATT:** There's..... compatability.

**JESSE:** We're not compatible?

**MATT:** Look don't make this hard for me.

**JESSE:** Why not? - It's hard for *me*.

**MATT:** We're not on the same wave-length. - I write, I read, I follow what's going on in the world.

**JESSE;** *I* read?

**MATT:** What do you read?

**JESSE:** I watch TV. I get the news.

**MATT:** You read The National Enquirer.

**JESSE:** That's news.

**MATT:** That's what I mean?

**JESSE:** What?

**MATT:** You think the National Enquirer is news. *The New York Times* is news; the *Atlantic Monthly* is news.

**JESSE:** So it's because I don't read the New York Times. That's why?

**MATT:** Don't play stupid.

**JESSE:** According to you I *am* stupid; - just cause I don't read The New York Times.

**MATT:** This is pointless.

**JESSE;** It's Susan, isn't it?

**MATT:** What is?

**JESSE:** You're going back to Susan, aren't you?

**MATT;** I never left Susan. You know that. I made all that perfectly clear.

**JESSE:** I was "livelier", I was "easier to get on with", I was "better in bed" – that's what you said.

**MATT:** And all that was true?

**JESSE;** Then what happened? - I'm still lively, I'm still easy. We made love only three hours ago.

**MATT:** You're just making this as hard for me as you possibly can, aren't you?

**JESSE:** And me? What about me?

- MATT:** Look – I can’t take you out to meet my friends; I can’t discuss ‘topics’ with you – except TV shows or which Hollywood star is getting it off with which Hollywood starlet. We’re not, we’ve never been, in the same world.
- JESSE:** We’ve been in the same bed.
- MATT;** *(heated)* Will you stop talking about fucking. I’m not talking about fucking. I’m talking about chemistry,
- JESSE:** Huh?
- MATT:** Our chemistry doesn’t jell. We’re on different frequencies; on different planes.
- JESSE:** But for fourteen months.....
- MATT:** It’s not a goddam investment, Jesse. It’s not like a bond that accrues interest and then you cash it in.
- JESSE:** But *you’re* cashing it in.
- MATT;** Don’t try to be cute.
- JESSE:** I don’t get it. - What’s changed?
- MATT:** Nothing’s changed, that’s the point. It’s incapable of changing. ‘Change’ is not in its make-up. It can’t change; it just corrodes.
- JESSE:** Me? - Am I corroding?
- MATT:** *(blurting it all out fiercely)*  
You’re a fucking airhead, Jesse; You’re good in’ the sack, I give you that – and we both enjoyed all that. But I’ve got other fish to fry – big, important things to do with my life; books to write; films, novels,

poetry. I can't attenuate myself because of you; I can't *diminish* myself because of you. I need somebody who understands what I'm doing with my life; where I'm going; who I ought to be!

**JESSE:** *(Beat)* Susan?

**MATT:** Yeah, Susan. If you want reduce it down to one word, Susan, yeah.

*(JESSE goes very still and ruminative for a moment.)*

**JESSE;** Should I take my sponge bag back with me?

**MATT:** I think that would be a good idea.

**JESSE:** Does that mean our movie-date for next week is....

**MATT:** That'll have to be cancelled, yeah.

**JESSED:** And I suppose those two weeks in the Adirondacks.....

**MATT:** *(trying to keep his temper)* We have to forget about that.

**JESSE:** *(pushy)* Couldn't we give it another try, Matt? I can start reading y'know - subscribe to The Times.....

**MATT:** It's finished Jesse. It's all wrapped up! Some things grow and some things go to pot, and when they do, it has to be faced. There's no point pretending there's something there when there isn't. It's the best thing for both of us.

*(JESSE rises, takes up her bag and coat, fights down tears and starts for the door.)*

**JESSE:** You could've just said so. You didn't have to deliver no lecture.

*(JESSE exits quickly slamming the door behind her. MATT downs a drink standing on a nearby table and studiously checks his watch. He then goes to his cell-phone and dials a number.*

**LIGHTS BLACK OUT** *for two seconds then come straight back up. As they do, the doorbell rings, MATT opens it and CHARLEY GOLD, wearing a basket-ball jumper and a back-to-front baseball cap, stands in the doorway.*

**CHARLEY:** Is the dirty deed done?

**MATT:** *(now gay, unrepentant)* Done!

**CHARLEY:** No blood, no bruises, no suicide notes?

**MATT:** Not even tears.

**CHARLEY:** A clean kill?

**MATT;** Clean as a choirboys' ass.

**CHARLEY:** Don't know about that, but it deserves a toast.

*(Goes straight to the bar, obviously familiar with the pad and very much at home there, and breaks out a beer.)*

**MATT:** Pour me one.

**CHARLEY:** *(doing so)* Hard to believe. I thought she'd crown you with the goldfish-bowl or, at the very least, give you a couple of shiners.

**MATT:** She took it like a champ. I have the feeling she's been there before. Anyway, it's a closed chapter, thank God.

**CHARLEY:** Did Susan ever catch wind?

**MATT:** I don't think so. But you never know with women. They play their cards very close to their scrumptious chests.

**CHARLEY:** We going to the Knicks game tonight?

**MATT:** Gotta finish up some stuff.

**CHARLEY:** The Great American Novel again.?

**MATT:** The Great American Short-Short.

**CHARLEY:** What's that?

**MATT:** Short-story (*explaining*) 'short-short.'

**CHARLEY:** Sounds like a midget's cock.

**MATT:** Your head is always dangling around your gonads.

**CHARLEY:** Better than having it up my ass.

**MATT:** Makes a change, ha?

**CHARLEY:** (*banter done with*) I don't know anybody who works as hard as you. Really. You're always knockin' out stuff. How the hell do you do it? Where do you get all those ideas?

**MATT:** Haven't you ever heard of the Muse?

**CHARLEY:** Another one of your broads?

**MATT:** You could say that – but this one's very elusive. When you want her, she's not around. When you think you've lost her forever, she suddenly appears.

**CHARLEY:**        *A flighty broad.*

**MATT:**            We just spent a lovely month together and so, I've got this! (*brandishing a film script*) Here, I'll give you a sample. (*Begins to read from the first page*)

“We open on a New York apartment; Bohemian style; comfortable, not luxurious, Through the window we can see the high-rise apartment buildings of New York. Close-Up on an attractive brunette in her early 30s There is a young man excitedly walking around the room brandishing a letter.....

**LIGHTS FADE** *just long enough for CHARLEY to exit and SUSAN to take his place. When LIGHTS RETURN. SUSAN is sitting in the same chair previously inhabited by JESSE. She is in her early 30s; handsome as opposed to beautiful; a sensible, Easternized mid-westerner. MATT is excitedly walking around the room brandishing a letter.)*

**SUSAN:**            That's terrific, Matt.

**MATT:**            It's not graven in stone but it's about as positive as anything can be in this business. (*Quoting from the letter.*) “The Reader turned in a positive report on the script. It's being circulated among several knowledgeable people here and I hope we can pursue this further as time permits.” - Music to my ears.

**SUSAN:**            Oh, Matt – I'm really happy for you. Finally! - Did Conrad submit it.

**MATT:**            No, *I* submitted it saying it was *from* Conrad. You know these geeks refuse to read anything that's not certified by an agent. When he gets his fifteen per cent, I should ask for a kickback of half of it, for all the work he's done.

**SUSAN:** Don't be greedy; Conrad's been a brick.

**MATT:** *(intensely reliving the experience)*  
 You know, the minute I finished the last page of that 'mother' I knew I'd cracked it. I felt it in my bones. Everything about it was right. It developed, it turned corners, it had twists, turns, surprises, suspense. Christ, it practically wrote itself – as if the Muse was with me when I woke up in the morning and went to bed with me at night. - I don't know what to call it – - inspiration, divinity, luck – but I just knew that I'd finally cracked it and that "Embers" was going to catch fire. – Christ, even the title was prophetic.

**SUSAN:** I have to tell you Matt, I actually prayed for a breakthrough – especially after the last three scripts went down the tubes. – I know you don't believe in all that, but I think Somebody Up There heard me.

**MATT;** And He relayed the message to the studios, right?

**SUSAN:** You can mock it as much as you like, but I've got a hunch about it.

**MATT:** You'll always be a good Catholic girl Susan – but let me tell you something. Once one script breaks out and gets made, it reopens the door for all those others that got lost in the shuffle. After you score big, the Big Guys ask: what else have you got in your ditty-bag and all those dumped works get rejuvenated. – All you need is one winner.

*(SUSAN impetuously puts her arms around MATT who acknowledges her effusiveness as if he deserves it.)*

**SUSAN:** It's all going to start to happen. I can just feel it.

**MATT:** And not just the movie, the play's finished as well.

**SUSAN:** You never said! - When?

**MATT:** I gave it a final brush up two days ago and it's ready to sail into the market-place!

*(SUSAN plants a big, torrid kiss on his lips and starts unbuttoning his shirt.)*

**SUSAN:** I'm gonna give you a great big standing ovation right now - just to get you used to it.

**MATT:** *(smiling)* What, before the notices are in?

**SUSAN:** They'll all be raves. So loud even the neighbors will hear them.

**MATT:** *(fondly)* You're such a Catholic slut!

**SUSAN:** You should thank God.

*(AS THE LIGHTS FADE, MATT and SUSAN'S embrace begin to hot up.)*

\*\*\*\*\*

**LIGHTS UP ON CONRAD'S OFFICE** - *just a large circular desk with two telephones, a stack of scripts, a computer and a lot of mess. There is one prominent picture-frame (probably of his wife or child or both) but it is facing upstage and the audience cannot see it. CONRAD is in his mid-40s, a sharp dresser, but, in a conscious attempt to remain hip, choosing clothes too young for his actual age. - MATT is just entering.*

**CONRAD:** Ah, The Son Also Rises!

**MATT:** *(sulkily)* Nobody in his right mind rises for a meeting at 9:00 a.m. in this town.

**CONRAD:** No but it's a day full of board-meetings for me so I have to rise and shine. Do you want coffee and a Danish?

**MATT:** I've had breakfast.

**CONRAD:** Coffee and a Danish has nothing to do with having breakfast. - It's just *nosherai*.

**MATT:** Yours taste like *chaserai*.

**CONRAD:** Ungrateful as always – looking gift-horses in the mouth. Did you see Variety this morning?

**MATT:** I *never get* Variety – either the paper or the real thing.

**CONRAD:** If you got the paper, you'd have more of the real thing.

**MATT:** I'm never in it and make it a strict rule not to read publications that ignore me.

**CONRAD:** A big mistake. Staying informed is what it's all about.

**MATT:** If a bomb goes off in Times Square, I think I'd hear about it – but I doubt it'd make Variety. - Can we stop bantering?

**CONRAD:** Bantering is the spice of life? I think Dr. Johnson said something about that.

**MATT;** Johnson said something about *everything*. Probably bored the shit out of everyone in London – except Boswell who was too busy jerking him off. Can we can the small talk? What's up with the script?

**CONRAD:** (*pushes button his desk and speaks into speaker-phone.*)  
Molly – hold all calls will you? – (*CONRAD lights a cigarette and stirs his coffee.*)

**MATT:** Did they come up with a number?

*(CONRAD stirs his coffee)*

**MATT:** Did they talk casting?

**CONRAD:** They passed.

*(BEAT – as MATT tries to assimilate CONRAD’s word.)*

**MATT:** Wha’dyuh mean ‘passed’?

**CONRAD:** Too close to stuff they’ve already got in the can. Familiar Territory. “Been there – done that”.

**MATT:** But they said in the letter.....

**CONRAD;** The letter is almost a form letter, Matt. Those guys never know what they feel until they read their coverage, then they formulate an opinion – but it’s almost always someone else’s.

**MATT:** It sounded like it was ‘in the bag’.

**CONRAD:** To you.

**MATT:** What you mean ‘to me’.

**CONRAD;** I told you not to get your hopes up. Those west coast ass-crawlers are too busy trying to hold on to their jobs to be able to come up with a personal opinion about anything except how to survive. They’re too busy shaking in their skins to read a script and make a commitment. If they say Yea, and Mr, Big says Nay, they look like jerks. So they say nothing. They write letters like the one you got which keeps the door open until they decide to slam it in your face.

**MATT:** Fuck them. There are lots of other studios.

**CONBRAD:** I've tried more than half a dozen.

**MATT;** There's *more* than half a dozen!

**CONRAD;** And there's only 24 hours in a day and only four of them are spent working.

**MATT:** We can't give up on it. It's the best work I've ever done.

**CONRAD:** That's what you said about the other three.

**MATT:** You thought so too.

**CONRAD:** Correction, Matt, I was non-committal. I said I'd run them up the flagpole. That's my job to run things up the flagpole, but I can't make anybody salute. That's up to them.

**MATT:** What are you saying?

*(The buzzer rings; a secretary's voice says: "Dream Works' on the phone. Shall I tell 'em to call back.?"*

**CONRAD:** *(to MATT)* I've got to take this; it'll only take a minute. Put it through. - Hiya Ned – what do you think? - -- I feel the same. - No question it's got possibilities. ----- For Merry!----- Absolutely, right up her alley. Never done anything like it and you know, that appeals to her. --- A memo? Sure, we can work something up...Based on the previous formula.--- You got it. --- - I'll get back to you with some language by the end of the day; see what you think.---Perfect. --- Me too, I feel the same..... Right on.—Ciao. ---

*(To the intercom)* Hold all calls,

**(THE BUZZER VOICE:** *"I just thought..."*)

I know....just hold the calls!

*(A pause during which CONRAD downs his coffee and pushes the cup aside; only then does he turn to MATT)*

To answer your question, what I'm saying is this is the stop where I get off, Matt. It's not working for you – or for me - and it's better we should both acknowledge it.

**MATT:** *(after a longish pause)* You're pushing me out.

**CONRAD:** I am suggesting you may do better with different representation,

**MATT:** After six years?

**CONRAD:** Some *marriages* never last that long.

**MATT:** I thought we were... I thought of you as a friend, Not just an agent.

**CONRAD:** I'm not cashing in on our friendship – just our professional association. Don't turn this into a soap.

**MATT:** Just because this one goddam film didn't take off?

**CONRAD:** Nothing has taken off for six years, Matt. A couple of rewrite-assignments, a few option payments on stuff that went down the tubes. Hell, you'd be entitled to kick my ass from here to Sunday for all the good I've done you.

**MATT:** Don't start pretending it's me that's walking out on you. Don't play head-games with me.  
*(CONRAD takes a sip of his coffee. MATT decides to lighten up.)*

Can't we keep trying for a while longer ...a year, six months – You owe me that at least.

**CONRAD:** It's been brewing inside of me for a long time, Matt I wanted to break it to you last summer. Susan talked me out of it. All the old arguments. - Loyalty, Tenacity. 'Give it another three months; another six months.' - It's just not happening, Matt. If it was meant to, it would have happened by now. We can't keep living in a daze.

**MATT:** But I'm hot now. There's all kinds've stuff pouring out of me.

**CONRAD:** You're more productive than any client I've ever had. Quantity has never been the problem. But the stuff just doesn't sell. Don't ask me why. I'm not a critic, I'm an agent. I don't know what they want out there. They don't know themselves. But it's just not happening, Matt. That's the bottom line.

**MATT:** We've got so close.

**CONRAD;** (*tactfully*) We never got close, Matt. Not to a real sale.

**MATT:** What about New World?

**CONRAD;** We were playing patsy with an Assistant-to-an-Assistant-to-a-Nobody – some young college-kid who talked a good show. He was so far from the front office boys, he could have been living in a tent on the lawn. He couldn't have sold a plastic cup of lemonade let alone a major motion picture.

**MATT:** Why didn't you tell me?

**CONRAD:** I tried to tell you, as gently as I could. You heard what you wanted to hear. Just like that letter. - It didn't gush. All it said was: "we're looking it over." --- I'm trying to be as straight as I can. - You might be better off with....

**MATT:** With William Morris or ICM? – neither of which give a fiddler’s fuck about me for the same reason you don’t – ‘cause I can’t bring in any bacon – not even bacon *rinds!*

**CONRAD:** (*checking his watch*) I’ve got to get to a board meeting and make some calls. I tried to make this as painless as I could I thought the best way to do that was to give it to you straight. We’ve known each other too long to....

**MATT:** Don’t start getting amiable in your old age; it doesn’t suit you. –

*(CONRAD downs the last of his coffee as something gradually builds up in MATT and then detonates.)*

Fine! – Perfect – Done! Tear up the contract – Send back my stuff. – Rub me out of your Rolledex. But let me tell you this: I’ve got a goddam fire inside of me and I’m going to burn up this town. - The biggest blaze you’ve ever seen. Not just movies, but plays, novels, poetry, I’ve got stuff baking away inside of me,...stuff that.....things that..... You’ll see. You’ll see!

*(Choking up – MATT dashes out of the office, leaving a frazzled CONRAD behind. After a moment, he touches the speaker-phone.)*

**CONRAD:** Get Dream Works back on the line. --- And send up another Danish.

\*\*\*\*\*

**LIGHTS UP. MATT'S living g room. CHARLEY and MATT.**

**CHARLEY:** You want me to bust his knee-caps?

**MATT:** Don't be stupid.

**CHARLEY:** I am one-hundred-per-cent serious, Matt. There's a Sicilian down at the docks who owes me. He'd just ... - crack - (*mimes breaking a stick*) and nobody'd be the wiser.

**MATT:** You're a real pal, Charley but you've seen too many Coppola movies.

**CHARLEY:** I'd like to put his goddam cock in a vise and turn it till he turns blue.

**MATT:** (*wanting him to desist*) Oh please.... please.....

**CHARLEY:** But how can he do that? Ain't there a contract or sumptin'?

**MATT:** The contract ran out three years ago. We've been riding on a handshake for over three years. – Look, forget it.

**CHARLEY:** All those ten-per-centers are a load of pimps. - Fucken assholes.

**MATT;** I can always get another agent. Go to William Morris or ICM. That's not important. The main thing is the work, and that's just flooding out'a me. Screw the movies. When the play gets on, you'll see they'll make a bee-line to me for the film rights.

**CHARLEY:**       *(Beat)* You've got a play?

**MATT:**            Have I got a play, Charley, - It's taken me almost two years to finish it.

**CHARLEY:**        I just can't figure it, the way you churn these things out. You're like a goddam slot machine that's always lit up and paying out.

**MATT:**            You're in it.

**CHARLEY:**        *(BEAT)* Me?

**MATT:**            You gotta write about what you know; that's the Golden Rule. So, how long have we known each other?

**CHARLEY:**        Jeez, since P.S. 64 Don't tally it up. I always get depressed by the arithmetic,

**MATT:**            It's about where we grew up. The lower east side.

**CHARLEY:**        *(ironically)* What is it, a tragedy?

**MATT:**            It wasn't so tragic.

**CHARLEY:**        Speak for yourself. Every time I go down to the old neighborhood I get a migraine.

**MATT:**            It was a fantastic melting pot.

**CHARLEY:**        I wish it *had* melted - then I could'a just tossed it in the ashcan along with all the other garbage.

**MATT:**            Poles, Italians, Ukranians, Krauts, Chinks.....

**CHARLEY:**        All hustlin' to make a buck.

**MATT:** That's what was so great about it. People were trying to stay afloat - trying to survive – trying to *Americanize*, turning their backs on the 'old country'. It was a comedy, a tragedy, a melodrama ---a Morality Play.

**CHARLEY:** So how come we couldn't wait to bust out'a there.

**MATT;** That's the play, Charley; that's what the play is about.

**CHARLEY:** I think I'll wait till the movie comes out.

**MATT:** You creep, here am I immortalizing you, and you don't even say thanks.

**CHARLEY:** *(off-hand)* Thanks *(looks at his watch)*. I gotta get to the Gym. – I'm sorry about Conrad,. If you change your mind *(mimes snapping an arm in two)* just let me know.

*(As the door slams, the LIGHTS BLACK OUT for a second then immediately flash back on as SUSAN comes through the door. LIGHTS UP. Matt is now slumped in an easy chair; SUSAN reading his mood, approaches gingerly.)*

**SUSAN:** *(cautiously)* It's not the end of the world.

**MATT:** When it *is* the end of the world, this is what it'll feel like.

**SUSAN:** I just can't.....

**MATT:** I know, I know... I don't want to go over it again. It's history.

**SUSAN:** What's important Matt is that you've done the work - you've got the material.

- MATT: Yeah... yeah....
- SUSAN: *And* you've got the new play.
- MATT: What did you really think?
- SUSAN: I told you truthfully.... I think it's the finest work you've ever done. The most honest – the most personal. It's 'about something'.
- MATT: The trouble is you get carried away with what the 'business' wants – what the pollsters say. As if anyone could predict public taste.
- SUSAN: You have to do what *you* want.
- MATT: It's such a monkey-see-monkey-do industry. One spin-off after another - everybody copying everyone else. I don't know why I ever tried to write something about gays and straights. – Just because the subject was 'in the air' I suppose.
- SUSAN: It's a fine script, Matt – whatever anyone says.
- MATT: I think so. I think it came from a real place in here (*pats his heart*). Christ, it's *got to* resemble other things like it. Nothing is ever a hundred per cent original, is it?
- SUSAN: Of course not.
- MATT: “*Like* stuff they've got in the can” says Conrad. *Everything* is like stuff they've got in the can. The whole industry is based on prequels, sequels re-makes, rip-offs.....
- SUSAN: Have you talked to Isaac?

**MATT:** What the hell can he do? He's made his bundle. He doesn't really give a shit about anything else.

**SUSAN:** That's not true. He's been a good friend - to both of us. There wouldn't be an 'us' without him. And he has contacts, could give you good advice.....

**MATGT:** I don't want to go crying to him.

**SUSAN:** Then just put the whole thing out of your head and move on.

**MATT:** It's easy enough to say 'move on' but when you spent two years pouring out your life-blood...

**SUSAN:** I know, Matt. I know...

**MATT:** *(fiery)* You don't! You don't know. You go to bed with it, you wake up with it, you coddle it, feed it, stroke it, watch it take on girth - and then - wham - it gets thrown back in your face!

**SUSAN:** There are other agents.

**MATT:** *(still on the offensive)* You just don't get it, do you Susan! You just don't get it!!

**SUSAN:** I can see what you're going through.

**MATT:** *(exploding)* Oh stow it, will you! I don't need your goddam CPR!

*(There is a pause during which SUSAN tries to deflect the hurt.)*

**SUSAN:** I was just trying to help.

*(MATT wrestles with a mixture of anger, repentance, confusion and pain. When it all comes to a boil inside of him, he breaks out of the bind and grasps SUSAN in an embrace as if he were a drowning-man desperately holding on to a life-saver. SUSAN immediately relents, cuddles and strokes the overwrought MATT . LIGHTS OUT just long enough for MATT to change his position for the next scene.*

\*\*\*\*\*

**LIGHTS UP:**

*ISAAC sits in a beat-up leather chair; surrounded by bookcases in which a wide variety of books of different sizes and shapes lay loosely stacked, conveying a wild sense of disorder. ISAAC is in his 60s; he still has the vestiges of a Jewish accent which four decades of Americanization have not erased. He is balancing a glass of tea in his hand. MATT is at his feet, straddling a foot-stool and pontificatin.*

**ISSAC:** “Life.... is like a pool table where all the balls fly into all the side-pockets, but you still wind up losing.”

**MATT:** *(Beat)* Who said that?

**ISAAC:** Me, what’sa matter, you’re deaf?

**MATT:** *(After a pause.)* I wanted to....

**ISAAC:** I know, you don’t have to tell me. You’ve got *tsuriss*. Listen the only time I ever see you is when you have *tsuress*. - You’re so goddam predictable, Matthew.

**MATT:** Nothing big. I just needed to...

**ISAAC:** For you it's *always* 'big'. The day you have small problems, I'll be cured from piles – which unfortunately is a day that will never come.

**MATT:** Have you had them looked at?

**ISAAC:** Would you voluntarily allow a stranger to poke around with a little flashlight in your rear end?

**MATT:** Well if I....

**ISAAC:** I'd rather live with hemorrhoids than relinquish my personal sanctity. - You understand that?

**MATT:** *(Beat)* I think so.

**ISAAC;** Sma'ht boy. *(getting down to business, inquiring)* And how is my favorite Susan doing?

**MATT:** She's good.

**ISAAC;** She's more than good, she's one of the Chosen. If God had handmaidens, she'd be right up there cutting his cuticles, massaging his back. --- *(getting down to business)* And so, what?

**MATT:** I needed to ask you. To find out. Tell me, *(opting for the circuitous route)*, how many original books have you had published? Is it twelve, fifteen?

**ISAAC:** Two.

**MATT:** *(surprised)* Two? - But I've seen over a dozen listed in the directory.

**ISAAC:** You said '*original* books' – there was just two. The first one said it all and, because it was popular, they asked me to say it all over again in a second book.

I found maybe half-a-dozen new things to say, and they published it. After that there was maybe ten more books which said all over again what I already said in the first two books. - Dets what they call 'a published' author. - I got another name for it.

**MATT:** But you turned them out, all those books; that's what's important.

**ISAAC:** Maybe to them, not to me.

**MATT:** I can't seem to..... I mean I'm churning out a lot of stuff, but I don't seem able to....

**ISAAC:** You were workink on a film-script, no? And also a play.

**MATT:** Yeah, and I'm also working on a novel. I mean the stuff is pouring out of me but I can't seem to break through.

**ISAAC:** Matthew, my darlink, maybe you should ask yourself – Vy am I doing it – for vot?

**MATT:** (*Beat*) What do you mean?

**ISAAC:** I mean vot I say, Matthew, Vy? The world is full of artists. Everybody's writing, painting, sculpting, making music, movies, videos, --- vots going on? Can't people just be salesman, postmen, janitors, butchers, trolley-car conductors?

**MATT:** There *are* no more trolley-cars.

**ISAAC:** Dets a shame. In de old days you could get onto a trolley-car for a nickel and ride all through town. Ocean Parkway, Astoria, Ditmars Boulevard. It was a Voyage of Discovery, You saw every part of the city – just for a nickel. Things would happen to people, they'd

go home and tell their parents or their wives, or their neighbors: “Guess what happened to me today?”- Now they turn it into memoirs, articles, poetry, novels. Who needs all that crep? Why do people have to regurgitate their lives to each other, can you tell me that?

**MATT:** But it’s always been like that. I mean from the’ earliest ancient times – they drew paintings on the walls, in the caves, on the stones.

**ISAAC:** Graffiti, that’s all it was. Delinquents dirtying up de environment so other people should clean up after them! – What is it telling us, all this art, all this graffiti? Ve had horses, ve had kings, vives, concubines, enimals – Ve *also* have horses, kings, vives, concubines, enimals – Who gives ah crep?

**MATT;** Come on, Isaac; you know that Man has always produced art; that art is like, the highest of man’s achievements.

**ISAAC:** Tell it to da Marines, Matthew (if you can still find a live one) – not to someone who’s been around as long as I have; who’s seen all the art, read all da books, listened to all da music. It’s all decoration, Matthew – some of it good, most of it lousy, but none of it’s necessary. What’s necessary is a warm bed, a hot woman, good food: chicken soup, a little chopped liver now and again, a quiet life and dying without tubes up your nose and an oxygen-tank beside the bed.

Vot makes dem think they’re so special - dese artists - that I have to open their books, see dair movies, sit through dair lousy plays (without even an intermission anymore while I’m plotzing to take a piss!) What have they got to tell me det I don’t already know? ‘Life is hard’, - *I know det.* - - ‘People are crooks and sons-a-bitches who’ll rob you blind,?’ - *I know det!* -

Da politicians are momzers who've always got their hands in da cookie-jar and when they're caught, they admit they "made a mistake" - A mistake? Somebody absconds with a couple million dollars and they call it 'a mistake'. What is it? They thought they were pickink up dair laundry and it just happened to be a strongbox stuffed with cash? They were playing tiddly-winks and Oops, it's a mistake, it was really Grand Larceny. - *I know all det.* - 'People fall in love with the wrong people, have hyenas for children and rue the day they ever met. '- *I've been there. I know det. I know it all.*

All they tell me in dair books, dair plays, dair movies, is all stuff I know. So who needs to be told all over again in the movies, in a teeya'ter – and, adding insult to injury, ask me to fork out seventy-five big ones for an orchestra-seat so I can be turned to stone watching a replay of exactly vat I know, *heff* known, *vill always* know, can *never* forget!

**MATT:** *(Beat)* I was going to ask you to read some of my stuff.

**ISAAC:** Certainly, Matthew. Who knows; I may learn something.

**MATT:** *(surfacing from Isaac's spell & assimilating what he has said.)*

I came to see you because I had some hang-ups about my writing, and you're telling me none of it's important. Ibsen-Strindberg- O'Neil-Hemingway-Fitzgerald-Eliot-Miller - the world can do without all of them!

**ISAAC:** Now, you're finally making sense, boychickel.

**MATT:** *(Beat)* I think you're just having me on.

**ISAAC:** Det sounds a little pansy-like to me, Matthew, and I'm not up vit da latest slang. But if you mean I'm just 'talking through my hat', let me assure, I am not! What I'm saying is there's no need for your movies, your plays, your novels. Ve've got enough masterpieces to last us a lifetime. – It's, how da rabbi used to say, *de trop*.

**MATT:** *(letting it all out)* I can't get my film made, my play produced; nobody wants my novel or my poetry!

**ISAAC:** *(casually)* You don't know how lucky you are.

**MATT:** I'm falling apart.

**ISAAC:** A bagel vit butter, some hot soup - you'll recover.

**MATT:** *(Beat)* Isaac?

**ISAAC:** Yes, Matthew?

**MATT:** Go fuck yourself!

## LIGHTS BLACK OUT

The new Lighting takes on a pink, surreal hue as 'the MUSE' arrives. She is dressed in a slinky long silk dress and high-heels, beautifully quaffed and quite unearthly. She speaks in an upper-class British accent. As soon as MATT sees her, he goes a little weak at the knees.

**MATT:** You've been a bit of a stranger, haven't you?

**MUSE:** I do have other commitments, you know.

**MATT:** I know, I just thought...I thought we had....

**MUSE:** We *do* have Matthew and you know I always have your best interests at heart.

**MATT:** I know, but it's been ..... a little while.

**MUSE:** I know, please forgive me. (*Baby-talk*) Say that mommy is forgiven.

**MATT;** (*moonstruck*) You know I can forgive you anything.

*(The MUSE stretches out her arms inviting an embrace. MATT slowly fulfills the request and once he is in her arms, nestles his head in her bosom.)*

**MUSE:** (*cuddling him*) That's my little baby.

*(Still in the embrace, MATT's tone changes.)*

**MATT:** (*softly*) Couldn't you give me another?

**MUSE:** Another? - So soon?

**MATT:** You promised.

**MYUSE:** I said we'd see. I didn't *promise*, Matthew.

**MATT:** But I'm running on empty. I need another one.

**MUSE:** My, but you're a greedy little boy.

**MATT:** What do you say?

**MUSE:** You never seem to get enough, do you?

**MATT:** You don't know what it feels like; the hunger, the torment....  
What do you say?

- MUSE:** I say you're "a greedy little boy"! Do you think I can just churn these things out – like sausages.
- MATT:** I need it. *I really need it.*
- MUSE:** You know a 'needy' person can easily grow tiresome.
- MATT:** Come on, don't tease me.
- MUSE:** Most people would be happy with what you've already had, but not Matthew, - he's never satisfied.
- MATT:** It's no skin off your nose.
- MUSE:** That's not the point and besides, I can't say I appreciate your metaphors. I couldn't imagine losing the skin off my nose. The prospect makes me quite nauseous.
- MATT:** *(approaches her and takes her hand,. and kisses it.)*  
Just one more. You know you wouldn't miss it.  
and it would be so easy for you.
- MUSE:** That's not the point, Matthew. The point is fairness. Why should you have it while others don't? You know you're not the only kid on the block.
- MATT;** I don't much care for *your* metaphor.
- MUSE:** I'm not a writer. I can be excused for crummy diction.
- MATT:** *(getting closer, puts arms around her)* You know, I'm nuts about you. – *(quietly)* I can't live without you.
- MUSE:** That's what they all say, Matthew. And when it's over and things are not up to par, they just turn on you. It makes me want to cry.....or throw-up – I don't know which. Both. First one, then the other.

**MATT:** I could never turn on you - after all we've meant to each other. - You know I worship you?

**MUSE:** When you're not being rude or surly.

*(MATT draws close and gently kisses her on the forehead. They both cling to each other for a moment.*

You're so *needy*, Matthew, and so irresistible. But don't be coming right back for more, because that would just be *piggy*.

**MATT:** I promise.

**MUSE:** *(looks at him askance)* I don't know what I see in you, Really!

*(The intimacy between MATT and The MUSE hots up; he smothers her in kisses on her face, neck and breast. Suddenly she checks her wrist-watch and break out of the embrace.)*

*(flustered)* Oh, I'm going to be late for the next client. *(powders her nose, refreshes her make-up and starts to go.)*

**MATT:** Can't you stay a little longer. You've just got here.

**MUSE:** 'No rest for the wicked' - nor the angelic, I daresay.

**MATT:** You won't forget, will you?

**MUSE:** *(fondly)* Have I ever? Be a good fellow and don't call for awhile. I'm absolutely chock-a-block for the next few weeks.

*(The MUSE vanishes. MATT painfully tries to adjust to her sudden withdrawal. He puts his hand to his nose and inhales the remnants of The Muse's fragrance as the Lights Fade Out.)*

*LIGHTS UP on a cocktail-bar counter.. CONRAD on one side, SUSAN on the other. There are half-empty glasses standing in front of both.*

**SUSAN:** I thought maybe you'd cancel out, after my call.

**CONRAD:** Why should I forfeit an opportunity to spend an enchanting hour or so with an attractive little lady like yourself. - 'Twould be most unchivalrous.

**SUSAN:** You have the most elegant line of bullshit of anyone I know, Conrad. No wonder you're such a success in this town.

**CONRAD:** I shall take that as a compliment, despite the sardonic undertones.

**SUSAN:** You know it's about Matt.

**CONRAD:** I assumed as much.

**SUSAN:** He's very down you know; I've never seen him so low .

**CONRAD:** Matt has always been something of a depressive. I think he works at it consciously. He thinks it puts him in the same league as Baudelaire and Styron and others of that ilk. He's a natural *wallower*.

**SUSAN:** He isn't, Conrad. You don't know him.

**CONRAD:** No, I guess six years isn't long enough to form an accurate assessment of anyone.

**SUSAN:** I mean you don't *really* know him. He puts on an act with people like you – people in the business. He's got a very soft center.

**CONRAD:** Susan-darling, if this is going to turn into a plea for reinstatement, please spare me. We've parted amicably and it's best for both of us. And you and I have already played that scene before, if you'll recall.

**SUSAN:** I'm not going to try and change your mind about that. What I really want to know – because you've always been a friend - what is it about Matt? Why can't he seem to get over the hurdles. What's keeping him back?

**CONRAD:** It's a fiendish business, Susan. You know as well as I. Everyone out there is questing and a day doesn't pass that fifty new writers don't decide to try their hand at The Great American Novel or The Oscar-Winning Screenplay, or some other delusionary goal.

**SUSAN:** Is Matt any good?

**CONRAD:** *(taken aback by her directness)* You mean morally?

**SUSAN:** You know what I mean.

**CONRAD:** *(Pause)* I half-expected something like this might creep into our conversation today, so I came forearmed.

*(He opens a dossier and takes out a small sheaf of letters; opens one and holds it aloft.)*

This is from the senior reader at Universal re "Embers" "Thank you for thinking of us in regard to the enclosed MS. The fact is it strikes us as decidedly derivative. The writer can certainly put words together, but in the final analysis, they are not words that breathe any new life into the subject. They are routine, not remarkable, and in some areas, even hackneyed, But thank you for submitting it"...etc etc... formal bull-shit, etc."

*(Takes out another letter./)*

This one is from Doubleday; the commissioning editor. “We have persevered with your client’s novel, frankly because we have conducted mutually beneficial business in the past and we didn’t want to scant any suggestion you might care to make. But, it’s now been examined by three separate readers and the general consensus is that the work is meager and imitative of other books like it. There is no distinctive voice here and although the author has a knack for assembling words, the final result is just *that*; an assembly of words without any personal tone-of-voice or distinctive subject-matter. I hope however you will keep us in mind for any future submissions....” – polite bullshit-bullshit etc.

Here’s a shortie from an old college-pal of mine at New World “Dear Connie; I’d save this in case the heating goes off this winter and you need some fuel for the fire. Consigning it to the flames is the only way this script will ever catch fire. – P.S. You still owe me a hundred bucks from the last pinochle session. Hymie.” - *(under his breath)* Tight-ass bastard, that Hymie. - He’ll be collecting his pension before he gets that c-note from me.

Those are just three rejection-letters. Over these six years, I’ve accumulated about fifty – but I’m sure you’d get no joy from hearing them.

**SUSAN:** But editors, publishers, producers have all been proven wrong. There are dozens of books and plays that got knocked back and then went on to win awards and make a fortune.

**CONRAD:** It happens, sure it happens. Maybe one in a hundred. Maybe one in fifty. *(Holding up letters)* These guys are not Edmund Wilsons – first-rate critical minds

with ex-ray vision for literature and scripts. They're just *mahchers* trying to earn a buck and produce saleable goods that'll earn them bonuses and make them look good at award ceremonies.

They could be dead wrong and Matt could be an undiscovered Beckett or a budding Mamet. None of them have great minds, but they all have fat wallets – and it's their taste - or lack-of-taste - that determines what gets a nod and what, the cold shoulder.

I'm just the middle-man. Even with my ineffable charm, I can't change anybody's mind. I've tried for many years to tactfully extricate a producer's head from his rear-end but I've *stopped* trying. If that's where their brains feel snug, comfortable and protected who am I to say Nay.

SUSAN: Are you telling me that Matt has no talent?

CONRAD: I'm not, (*holding up letters*) but they are.

SUSAN: Well, I don't believe it - not for a minute! And if you were any agent at all, you'd fight for your client, no matter what!

CONRAD: I believe Cervantes described that as 'battling the windmills'. My cholesterol count is too high to try anything that athletic.

SUSAN: (*hot and heavy*) I believe in Matt – and all those showbiz creeps can just.....just....

CONRAD: Don't say 'kiss my ass' or you'll have a queue from here all the way to Lincoln Center.

SUSAN: Matt is one of the most prolific writers in this town. You've said so yourself.

- CONRAD:**           **Quantity is not quality, Susan. (*Stops, considers*)  
Look, it's kind'a special being an artist. We all  
want to go down in posterity and be remembered  
for great works. But if we don't, if all they say  
about us when we're pushing up daisies is: 'He  
was a nice guy; a good person; he made you  
feel good. He was a friend in need.' - That's all  
right too, isn't it.**
- SUSAN:**           **You don't believe in him any more, do you?**
- CONRAD:**           **I'm a realist, Susan. Agents have to be realists. If  
they're not, they can't meet the rent-bill.**
- SUSAN:**           **That's what it's all about, isn't it? The rent-bill –  
the money.**
- CONRAD:**           **I don't make the rules.**
- SUSAN:**           **And you don't break them either. You don't even bend  
them.**
- CONRAD:**           **I can't turn Matthew into a genius.**
- SUSAN:**           **No, but you could have let him down easier.  
You could have left him some pride.**
- CONRAD:**           **I'm not a cheer-leader and I'm not a priest.**
- SUSAN:**           **(*with supreme contempt*) No, you're just an agent!**
- CONRAD:**           **(*beat*) Guilty as charged.**
- SUSAN:**           **(*rises, collects her things*) You ought to pay that Pinnacle  
debt to Hymie. - You don't want to tarnish your  
reputation. (*She turns & goes.*)**

*(CONRAD digests the scene then takes out his cell-phone and pushes in a number.)*

**Hello sweetheart. Yes, I will be back for dinner – In half-an- hour. – I love you too, sweetheart.**

*(Thoughtfully, he stows away his cell-phone, assembles his letters and places them back in his briefcase as the LIGHTS FADE OUT.*

\*\*\*\*\*

**SCENE:** A plush desk – which suggests the plush office in which it would be found – but there is nothing on stage but the desk itself. Behind it sits **RHINELANDER**, a corpulent ‘suit’ with glasses in his early 50s. He conspicuously wears a poker-dot tie and a white shirt with broad black stripes. The desk itself, unlike **CONRAD**’s, is almost bare. In front of it, perched on a chair sits **MATT**, ill at ease. **RHINELANDER** is holding a script in his hands.

**RHINELANDER:**

**I wanted us to meet in person because on the telephone y’know, you can’t read body-language or see the look in somebody’s eye. They could be bullshitting you and no one would ever be the wiser. - I hate telephones.**

**MATT:**

**If you’re able to eliminate telephones from this business, you ought to get the Medal of Honor..**

**RHINELANDER:**

**I think someday I will – but it won’t have nothing to do with telephones. Oh yeah, the other thing I can’t stand is when you’re talking to someone and you don’t know if he’s on the can, or takin’ a bath, or getting’ a blow-job. It’s really irritating – You’re making straight talk and he’s fotzin’ around and you never know it. -- But enough of that: I wanted to see you in the flesh.**

**MATT:** Well, here I am.

**RHINELANDER:** (*adjusting his poker-dot tie*) This goddam thing cost me two hundred bucks and it feels like a halter. - But to business: (*holding up the MS*) This script..... this is all your work, right?

**MATT:** Yes.

**RHINELANDER:**  
No collaborators – you didn't base it on anything a book - an article - an old movie....?

**MATT:** It's all out of my own head; it's all mine.

**RHINELANDER:**  
Good, good. I needed to clear that up because you know a lot of people write plays that are like, what you call, *dayjah-vooze*. They think it's theirs but it's really a kind of memory they're having about something they forgot about, and when it gets produced, there's all these lawyers around to remind them of where it really came from.

**MATT:** This is an original script, Mr. Rhineland. It comes from only one place, right here (*taps his forehead*).

(*RHINELANDER nods wisely then holds up the manuscript.*)

**RHINELANDER:**  
This script.... this work of yours...is one of the finest. most original dramatic works I have read in twenty, thirty, *thirty-two* years – since I've been producing plays.

(*MATT is more than slightly thunderstruck, tries to assimilate what he is hearing.*)

**RHINELANDER:**

It's got flair, color, action, interesting characters, intelligent dialogue.... It's a remarkable piece of original work - assuming of course, it *is* original.

**MATT:**

*(evenly)* I can assure you it's entirely my own work. Nobody else's.

**RHINELANDER:**

I don't doubt it. Now that you're sitting here in front of me and you're not just a voice bullshitting me on the other end of the line, I don't - for a moment - doubt it.

**MATT;**

*(BEAT)* Does that mean.....?

**RHINELANDER:**

That means, -- what's your first name again... *(consults script)*

**MATT;**

Matthew,

**RHINELANDER:**

That means Matthew, that I want to produce this play in New York City – whether on Broadway or Off-Broadway, that remains to be seen - but I want to walk down the street and see on the marquee a sign that says; “J.R. Rhineland presents.... *Your play.* – And why do I want to produce this play? Because I want to be involved in something I can be proud of; that will increase the sum of knowledge and understanding in this crappy, god-forsaken, *fahshtinkaneh* world populated by bullshitting sons-a-bitches who don't know the difference between *Arthur* Miller and *Glenn* Miller, *Tennessee* Williams and *Esther* Williams. Grand Opera and Soap Opera!

You see, Matthew - and I think you may have some knowledge of this already - producers just ride piggy back on great writers. We're not artists; we're just 'mahchers' and the only thing that gives us any real dignity is finding and mounting the plays of true artists. If we shine at all, it's by reflected glory - but it's better to shine that way than just have a gleam in the seat of your pants; to invest millions in low-brow horseshit that opens on Thursday and closes on Sunday. If we get any dignity out of this business at all, it's by being associated with serious artists - like yourself.

**MATT:**                   *(Beat)* You're taking my breath away, Mr. Rhineland. I'm just... speechless.

**RHINELANDER:**

Now, most of our productions have been in the northwest, Seattle, Denver, Des Moines, Topeka - but for a long while now my partners and myself have wanted to break into the New York market and we've been looking around for the right property to do it with, and I think I've found it. - I *know* I have found it. - Tell me who's your agent?

**MATT:**                   - - - I'm between agents at the moment.

**RHINELANDER:**

I'll have our lawyers draft up the option agreement and we can go from there. I want to mark down this date in my diary. *(Does so.)* I'm very sentimental about dates. Do you believe in astrology?

**MATT:**                   I don't know much about it.

**RHINELANDER:**

It's a lot of horseshit about stars and planets and celestial beings. Only assholes follow it, but they follow it religiously. Like if Saturn is in Capricorn, Jesus are

you gonna get reamed! On the other hand, if Pluto's got three moons in Uranus, you're *in* - you *got it* - nothing can touch you! I used to have an accountant would only submit the books if Mars was ascending. Otherwise, he'd just sit and dope out his charts. He wound up getting five in Leavenworth for cooking the books. When they arrested him, it must' a been an 'adverse day' but he didn't see it coming with all his crystal-ball gazing. -- A real shmuck and a crook into the bargain.

Stay away from the zodiac, it's worse than the clap.

**MATT:** (*trying to steer things back*) As to the play itself, are there any changes..., and revisions you feel I ought to make.

**RHINELANDER;**

For me Matthew, it 's perfect just the way it is. Let's not get into that rigmarole where the dramaturg, the director, the assistant janitor - everybody puts in their two cents and before you know it, what started out as a classy tuxedo begins to look like a crummy pair of long-johns. I am happy with the manuscript as it stands. - Blissful! - And if you are as well, we got a deal. - Have we got a deal?

(*Holds out his hand.*)

**MATT:** (*Beat*) Deal!

**RHINELANDER:** (*holding onto MATT'S hand with both of his*)  
Y'know that's the most beautiful word in the English language.

\*\*\*\*\*

*As RHINELANDER and desk swivel away, three bar-stools and a small counter are trucked in. CHARLEY, already with beer, is pouring one for MATT.*

**CHARLEY:** Did he give you any dates?

**MATT:** I guess sometime next season.

**CHARLEY:** But he sounds eager?

**MATT;** He's a producer-type. They live in their own world; have their own language. They almost need a translator when they're talking to a writer. -

**CHARLEY:** What's he like?

**MATT;** A vulgarian. – So down to earth you can practically smell the gravel on his shoes. A character out of Damon Runyon. But these guys are just money-men – not mavens. They're looking to make a killing - like everybody else.

**CHARLEY:** But it's a terrific break, Matt. Terrific.

**MATT:** What it does – mainly for me - is clear my head of all Conrad's crap. It confirms something in here (*taps his heart*). I've always known I've had it. But after awhile, listening to all those negative ass-holes, you forget; you forget what your own sensibility's been telling you all along – that you've *got* it– that it's there, that you're worth something.

**CHARLEY:** I guess it's like being in the bush leagues. You have to start there before you get noticed by the big managers but when you do, all that time you served in the boondocks really pays off.

**MATT:** I'm not counting any chickens. It's gotta be cast; they have to find the right theatre, the director, the designer, try-outs, fixes - all that stuff.

**CHARLEY:** It sounds like you're gonna have a lot of fun,

**MATT:** I just want to show those bastards that kept slamming the door in my face that I'm *there*. They'll have to put my name and number into their rolodex whether they like it or not. – And *Conrad*, I need especially to show him.

**CHARLEY:** (*grim*) If you want him offed, just say the word. The pleasure will be all mine.

**MATT:** Charley, you're in the wrong profession with all that health & aerobics stuff. You were born to be a torpedo. You could'a been the Godfather's godson.

**CHARLEY:** (*sweetly*) Flattery will get you....(*tough*)... a kick in the groin. -- Did I tell you, I have this guy from Melbourne, I think he's a fruit, comes into my gym every single day - like clockwork. Always hanging around afterwards to gab with me. He's a little scary I keep waiting for him to make a pass.

**MATT:** Get yourself an iron jock strap.

**CHARLEY:** Yeah, maybe with a combination-lock.

*(They both toast each other with the beer as SUSAN arrives breathlessly and sits at the stool beside MATT)*

**SUSAN:** Couldn't find a cab so I ran here all the way when I got your message. - Is it for real, Matt?

**MATT:** I got the contract this afternoon. It's as real as real gets.

**SUSAN:** (*hugs him*) Oh, Matt – it's like having a baby,

**CHARLEY:** Hey, name it after me, will ya?

**SUSAN:** Who is this producer?

**MATT:** He's out of the Midwest. He seems to be well-heeled. He's certainly high on the script – which makes a change.

**SUSAN:** Oh Matt, I knew something would come through. It's just a matter of hanging on.

**MATT:** Hey, y'know, getting it on is not the same thing as hitting a homer. It just means you've got a chance to get up to bat.

**CHARLEY:** You'll knock it out'a the park, Matt.

**SUSAN:** Have you told your father?

**MATT:** What for?

**SUSAN:** He'll be delighted, won't he? All that subsidy he's been sending you all this time finally paying off.

**MATT:** He *enjoys* financing the errant son. Gives him a purpose in life. As for art, what he knows on that subject could be wedged into a nutshell and it would still rattle.

**SUSAN:** Don't be mean. He's been very generous

**MATT:** (*shrugging it away*) He can afford it.

**SUSAN:** (*restoring the enthusiasm*) And it'll be in the Village, you say?

**MATT:** They've got their eye on a 200-seat house. Just off Sheridan Square, - Solid reputation! - Perfect size!

**SUSAN:** (*inspired, rises*) Let's go out and celebrate!

**CHARLEY:** The first sensible idea I heard yet!

**SUSAN:** Let's go to the swankiest restaurant in town,  
order champagne, caviar and ... and.. *foie de gras!*

**CHARLEY:** *(taking up the call, rising)* And a side order of spare-  
ribs!

**SUSAN:** Let's dance on the tables; let's stay so late, they have to  
kick us out. Let's break a few dishes!

**CHARLEY:** And a few arms and legs!

**SUSAN:** Let 'em call the cops!

**CHARLEY:** I've got friends on the Vice squad.

**SUSAN:** From when they pulled you in, y'mean?

**CHARLEY:** Even before that!

*(They pull MATT off of his stool. He tries to protest but is submerged  
in their insane enthusiasm. All talking together and yanking MATT  
every which way. THE LIGHTS FADE on their merriment.)*

\*\*\*\*\*

# ACT TWO

**SCENE: RHINELANDER's office – i.e. the desk and one chair, MATT is entering quickly.**

**MATT; I got over as fast as I could. It was a late night. What's up?**

**RHINELANDER:**

**Nothing tragic Matthew, but we've run into a kind of a roadblock.**

**MATT: Is it something in the contract?**

**RHINELANDER:**

**The contract is fine. - Standard stuff.**

**MATT: You made it sound like.....**

**RHINELANDER:**

**Well it is, in a way..... a roadblock, like I say. The thing is my partners have had to bail out a turkey in Cleveland and it's eaten up a lot of our liquidity – and just when we were going to put a down payment on this theatre in the East Village.**

**MATT: I don't get you.**

**RHINELANDER;**

**The capitol we need to get the show going has to be found from some other source. - For the moment, anyway.**

**MATT: Can't you float a loan or something?**

**RHINELANDER:**

**If you had more credentials, Matthew, more of a track record, we might be able to fork up the seed-money from some conventional sources, but as it stands.... with an untried writer....in a killer marketplace, we have to be very..... imaginative.**

**MATT:** How do you mean?

**RHINELANDER:**

I mean we have to find different resources... we have to go further afield.

**MATT:** Like where?

**RHINELANDER;**

That's what I wanted to discuss with you. - I can raise maybe fifteen per cent of the budget, but that leaves us several thousand short.

**MATT:** Several thousand.

**RHINELANDER;**

About three hundred thousand to be exact.

**MATT:** (*beat*) Where do we find that kind'a money?

**RHINELANDER:**

Where indeed, Matt. - Where? - From friends, from family, from generous donors, people who believe in the project and recognize its potential, yes, Matthew, even from you.

**MATT;** Me?

**RHINELANDER:**

If you could scare up maybe fifty or sixty thousand, it would help the general effort.

**MATT:** Me?

**RHINELANDER:**

It's not unheard of, Matthew. A playwright believes in his work – he makes a gesture towards it. He recruits his affluent friends, his more substantial relatives and well-wishers. He invests in *himself*. For a return of course; he gets a bigger piece of the pie when the comes time to cut it up.

I had a situation like this in Topeka a few years back. A middle-eastern gentleman in the oil-business got enthusiastic about a property – insisted he would put up the whole budget single-handed in return for a healthy slice of the profits. We drew up the papers, looked around, he'd flown the coop, back to Addis Adaba or somewhere. Rather than collapse the whole deal, the playwright stepped in – spent three days on the telephone with an address-book on his lap – and came up with 90 per cent of the backing. It opened to healthy reviews, he sold it to 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and never looked back.

The other advantage of ownership, of course, is you have stronger control over your own material, It becomes *your* baby and you can dress it any togs you like. That was a big lesson for those early, first-class artists like Chaplin. He bought into his own work and became a multi-millionaire in the old days when a million really was a million.

If one has faith, Matthew, it can move mountains.  
More than mountains, it can move roadblocks.

**MATT:** And if we don't raise the backing?

**RHINELANDER:**

Then our contract, I'm afraid, gets nullified and well... we have to think again.....

*(MATT has been listening intently, immobile, his brain ingesting the information RHINELANDER has been putting out. After a moment, he gets up and looks out front where (theoretically) there is a window and then, calmly, and rather obliquely begins.....)*

**MAT:** Mr. Rhineland, I meant to tell you about this idea I had for a new play. It just sort of came to me – like a light-bulb snapping on - and it's so exciting I want to share it with you.

Its about a tycoon who wants to turn a quick profit and another man who wants to launch an artifact into the world which he thinks is worth sharing, and so, to weasel some hard-cash into his hot little hands, the tycoon manufactures a passion – an enthusiasm for this other man's creation. Not because he shares its vision but because he knows this other man's desire for it is so all-consuming he would do almost anything to have it realized. - Anything that is, but be duped, cheated, humiliated or fucked about.

In fleshing out the main character, one has to ask, what kind of man is it who uses that kind of treachery to enrich himself at the expense of another man's ambition? Well, I'll tell you, it's the kind of a man who goes through life sucking goodness out of his fellow-men and, because he is so completely impoverished himself, has to expend all his energy and ingenuity into ransacking others to maintain the ragged, decrepit thing he calls his soul, but which in fact is nothing but his greed because people like that, though they often use the word, *have* no soul.

So there it is, a little rough around the edges but at its center, clear as a lazer-beam and sharp as a scalpel,

To put all this more succinctly – that is, in language closer to your own: You can take your load of embezzling horse-shit and try to find yourself another patsy to milk dry. As for myself, if I see you crossing the street and I should be in a

**Hummer or one of those fat-ass Buicks from the '50s, you'd better move quickly because I'd sooner grind you under my wheels than lift a little finger to honk my horn.**

*(RHINELANDER is frozen to the spot. As MATT turns to go, he pauses for a moment then turns back.)*

**One final thought, - No one with any taste wears a poker-dot tie with a striped shirt. It's a dead giveaway that one's in the presence a lowbrow slob.**

*(RHINELANDER stands frozen like a statue as MATT leaves and the lights BLACK OUT.)*

\*\*\*\*\*

**LIGHT UP on MATT & SUSAN in MATT's pad. MATT is drinking; SUSAN sitting with her legs tucked underneath her. It is late at night. There is an all- pervasive gloom in the room.**

**SUSAN:** *(after a silence)* Life is full of bummers.

**MATT:** When something is too good to be true, it usually isn't.

**SUSAN:** Something else will turn up. There are hundreds of producers out there.

**MATT:** And about a trillion plays.

**SUSAN:** You've got more than the play. There's the film-script; the novel – God, you're always belting out something or other. It's all got to do with the Law of Averages, and by that law, something has got to break.

**MATT:** Like my heart, you mean.

**SUSAN:** Now don't get morbid on me. It's not the end of...

**MATT:** *(simultaneously)*...end of the world. Don't say it, for Christ's sake, because it feels like almost every day the world does come to an end. Then there's a remission, the temperature climbs down, the patient leaps out of bed and, in a couple of hours, he's back in Intensive Care. God must be a really sadistic bastard to play it out that way, over and over again.

**SUSAN:** *(PAUSE)* You want a refill?

**MATT:** No I'm too crapped-out to even get drunk.

*(He settles back in the couch and shuts his eyes as if to shut out the world. SUSAN tries to find a way to effect recovery but rejects all the ideas that come to her. - The silence deepens. - Finally, Matt, opens his eyes, scrutinizes the glass and retrieves a memory from his memory-bank*

Did I ever tell ya: there was this kooky-looking guy in my class who everybody envied. Editor of the literary magazine, the school-paper, co-author of the end-of-term show, published at seventeen, TV staff-writer at twenty, profiled by all the slick magazines at twenty-five, married three times, moved to Europe, disappeared at thirty – forgotten three years later. If I told you his name now no one would recognize it – except maybe a few alumni from the old school.

He was, in my wonderstruck eyes, 'an artist'. I wanted to *be* him. Even though he eventually became as memorable as a bit-player in silent movies that only half-a-dozen film-buffs might recognize, I wanted to be *him*. I wanted to equal *him*. I wanted to show the world that I could beat him at his own game – and be remembered – 'live on' like they say, 'through my work'; become the subject of adoring biographies; after a while, have one's reputation studiously reappraised, the subject of analysis and controversy - a '*recognized artist in*

*my own lifetime*'. - Not one of those pathetic bastards whose work is unearthed by some scholar two centuries later when he's moldering in his grave.

It was as screwy an ambition as wanting to be an astronaut or President of the United States but, at that age, it gets you into a hammerlock and if you're one of the damned, you stay in it for the rest of your life. In a world that's always littered with plenty of specimens of 'the real thing', you go through your life envying, despising, celebrating, cursing the thing you can never ever be. – It's a disease, y'know; it ought to be classified as such, even though no cure has yet been found. It kills millions – they drop like flies – day by day, year by year, or just quietly fold their cards, leave the game and join the rest of the faceless crowd.

SUSAN: Stop being morose.

MATT: And you stop giving me CPR – your favorite pastime, I've been kicked in the teeth, I'm entitled to cry in my beer if I feel like it. - Have a little empathy, can't you?

SUSAN: Giving into self-pity will....

MATT: (*hot*) .....do me a helluva lot of good! Who better to pity myself than myself? Who knows better where the wounds are? Where it hurts the most?

SUSAN: You've got to pick yourself....

MATT: (*simultaneous with SUSAN, but mockingly*) ... .. brush yourself off and start all over again. – Jesus, do you *really believe* all those boiler-plate clichés really help anything?

SUSAN: I know you're disappointed about....

MATT: "Disappointed"?! - - That's like saying a terminal cancer-patient is 'slightly under the weather'.

**SUSAN:** (*BEAT*) What do you want me to say?

**MATT:** (*steaming*) What am I, your coach? – your mentor? If all you can do is ply me with bullshit sentiments, I don't need you.

**SUSAN:** There's no reason to get....

**MATT:** What - ? 'stropky'? - 'aggressive'? - 'pathetic'.? – Why not? Why can't you just accept the state I'm in, instead of always trying to spread sunshine.

**SUSAN:** (*Beat*) You're worse than usual tonight.

**MATT:** And you're as predictable as Greenwich Mean Time. Do you ever listen to yourself - plastering scrappy little band-aids on severed arteries.... Playing Miss Goody Two Shoes!

**SUSAN:** I think you better stop, Matt.

**MATT:** (*breathing fire*) I don't want to stop I want to get this whirlwind out of my system. I want to *say* just what I'm *thinking* – just like I *feel* what I'm *feeling*.

**SUSAN:** (*rising*) Then I better go.

**MATT:** (*evil*) Susan, you should've gone a long time ago. We've been dead meat for months – couldn't you smell it?

**SUSAN:** (*Beat*) I try to buck you up and -----

**MATT:** You've no idea what goes on in my brain-pan, or my heart for that matter.

**SUSAN:** I thought we.....

**MATT:** (*in a fury*) There is no 'we'! There never was a 'we'. There's *you* feeding me bromides and *me* choking on them - hating you for insulting my intelligence and invading my space!

**SUSAN:**     *(tight-lipped)* I guess I got it wrong.

**MATT:**     *(through gritted teeth)* I guess you did! *(looking her straight in the eye)* Do you know when you start coming on like Florence Nightingale, your face gets pinched and scrawny like a potato. You ooze sympathy the way a wound oozes pus and I feel like jabbing my fingers into the back of my throat to bring up all the crud and vomit that's down there. -- That's what your goddam bedside manner does to me!

*(SUSAN throws one last, wounded-angry-startled look at MATT turns on her heel, picks up her bag and exits. MATT puts down his glass and takes a swig from the bottle as THE LIGHTS FADE.)*

.....

**ISAAC & MATT:** *ISAAC'S place. ISAAC has a large bundle containing many manuscripts at his feet.*

**MATT:**     Did you read it?

**ISAAC:**     Netcherally.

**MATT:**     Well?

**ISAAC:**     Qvite an output you got dair.

**MATT:**     Just get down to it, Isaac. I don't need any foreplay.

**ISAAC:**     You know a long time ago - in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in fact - a young writer gave Samuel Johnson, - you know the author, the critic - a copy of the book he'd just written and asked him for an opinion. He was qvite a vag, you know, Johnson, sharp as a tiger's tooth. Well, says Johnson, "There are many things in your book which are both Good and New. But the problem is - vot is Good is not New and vot is New is not Good." – Boswell never tells us what the author's reaction to this was; I would think

he was pretty shattered. But publishing being what it is, it wouldn't surprise me if the book went on to become one of the best sellers of the 18th century.

**MATT:** Is that what you're saying about my stuff?

**ISAAC:** Not exactly, Matthew – I just wanted to show you that soliciting opinions from other writers goes back a long way. And it's a very tricky business.

**MATT:** OK, point made. - What about my stuff?

**ISAAC:** There is a lot of it, Matthew; plays, a film-script, a novel – poems even. Your nose has obviously been at the grindstone. But that's not necessarily a good thing.

**MATT:** Lots of writers have worked in different genres. Miller and Williams wrote both plays, novels and films. Hemingway wrote novels, short-stories, journalism, even a play. Scott Fitzgerald apart from all the fiction, worked on movies.

**ISAAC:** Versatility is a good thing – unless it becomes a matter of 'Jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none'. All those writers you mention first made it in one genre and just overlapped into others. A tree that's solid in the ground can branch out all over the place, but first it must have its own deep roots – a solid foundation.

**MATT:** What are you trying to say?

**ISAAC;** The play is a play, *granted!* The movie is a movie, *true!* The novel does what novels do – story, character, plot - *definitely!* But to master the form, that's not the same as filling it with real content; *special* content. You know what they say about bad Elizabethan sonnets: three quatrains and a couplet, but no poetry.

Maybe, you're spreading yourself too thin, Matthew. Maybe you should concentrate your resources; put all your talent into vun object; vun work-of-art.

**MATT:** But is any of it any good; is there any talent *there*?

**ISAAC:** (*scoffingly*) Talent's a dime a dozen. Everybody's got talent. The supermarket-bagger who writes dramas; the college kid who churns out songs for the high-school rock group; the dentist who writes poetry when he's not yanking out teeth. They're all 'artists' Matthew, or at least they think they are, and every so often one of them gets 'discovered' – a new idol, a new icon, a new star. They bask in their fifteen minutes of fame and then they're replaced, forgotten, flushed down the toilet. It's become a rite of passage. Everybody catches one ring on the merry-go-round before they drop back into obscurity, so why shouldn't you? It doesn't need to be great art anymore, Matthew; just '*commodity*'. That will do the trick and thank God it is that way; because we can *all* produce commodities – but not one in a million can turn out a work-of-art. – So why even try? Who cares? Who's even listening?

**MATT:** (*Beat*) You're a cynical son-of-a-bitch, Isaac, do you know that?

**ISAAC:** It's been pointed out before, yes.

**MATT:** In my mind you were a published author – a man who had made it. Picture in the papers, reviews in the New York Times: a professional. A man who had mastered his trade and been rewarded for it. And now you tell me it's all a scam; that there's no such thing as art – only.... *product-placement!*

**ISAAC:** You're not listening, Matthew. I'm saying people are so content with commodities, they don't need the real thing any more, and so the real thing has dried up. Who starves in the garret today? Who gives up his life-blood to paint one exquisite picture, to write one perfect book? Who needs a

five course haute cuisine dinner when he can have a Big Mac and a 7-Up? – There’s no appetite for the real thing anymore, that’s what I’m saying,

**MATT:** Is that what my stuff is – Big Macs and 7-Ups?

**ISAAC:** You need to dig deeper; you need to find your own voice!

**MATT:** (*Beat – takes aim*) Y’know Isaac, you haven’t published a new book in twelve years. You’re living off a reputation you made when you still had hair and could still pull the more gullible sophomores.

**ISAAC:** Are you telling me something I don’t know?

**MATT:** You dried up so long ago, you’ve no idea what modernity is all about. *Christ, you don’t even use a computer!* You keep talking about mummified writers like Samuel Johnson because the past is the only reference-point you have. I don’t know why I ever came here in the first place.

**ISAAC:** You’re right. I spend a lot of time in the past. But when you look at the present, can you blame me?

**MATT:** Well I live in the present and I like it there.

**ISAAC:** But, from what you tell me, it doesn’t much like you Matthew. And if you think the present is some kind of hemisphere where there is no past, you are sadly mistaken.

**MATT:** Nobody gets anywhere looking backward. All there is is the here-and-now.

**ISAAC:** I won’t philosophize with you, it’s a useless pastime. like playing poker with jelly-beans instead of money. You asked for an opinion, I gave it to you. If you wish to reject it, you’re perfectly entitled to do so,

**MATT;**       *(suddenly hot)* I do reject it – and I reject you as well!  
 You're a pretentious old fart who doles out homilies as if they  
 were intellectual gems. You're a dried-up writer living on past  
 glories that were never all that glorious to begin with. You  
 get a charge out of being some kind of guru to the young, but  
 you have nothing to give. You're just a spent force and when  
 you turn to ashes – a time not all that far away - nobody will  
 remember your books, your name or your bullshit!

**ISAAC;**       *(thoughtful pause) (not angrily)* You have a lot of anger,  
 Matthew. Sometimes that's good in a writer – so long as it  
 doesn't backfire. - That *wouldn't* be so good.

*(He lifts the large package of manuscripts and offers them to  
 their author. MATT stands frozen for a moment before the  
 manuscripts which now seem like so much waste-matter to him  
 suddenly grabs the package out of ISAAC's hand, turns and  
 goes.)*

\*\*\*\*\*

**LIGHTS UP** on **MATT** and **CHARLEY** at **MATT's** pad. They are both  
 drinking beers.

**MATT:**           What did she say?

**CHARLEY:**       She was pretty cut up, couldn't make out half of it she  
 was blubbering so much.

**MATT:**           She'll get over it.

**CHARLEY:**       I was a little surprised. I thought you had something  
 going there.

**MATT:**           For awhile there was, but things don't last. There's  
 always a point where it starts to cool – where it becomes  
 routine, and that's when you have to jump off.

- CHARLEY;** She asked me to feel you out.
- MATT:** There's nothing to feel out. She was always dealing with outside stuff. She never got inside of me. She'll find a broker or a lawyer and land on her feet.
- CHARLEY:** So you don't want me to play the peace-maker?
- MATT:** Charley, the one thing I found out in this life is that every relationship has its time-span – some of them go on for weeks – some for years – but there's always a point where they run out of shelf-life and have to be dumped. And if you don't make that move when it starts to get stale, it just brings you a load of misery. – - I mean, how come *you* never got nicked by a broad – with all those titty little girls in leotards doing' aerobics all over the place.
- CHARLEY:** Nor for want of trying, old cock. I don't seem able to cut it one-on-one, y'know. I run out of conversation; I think I'm boring the shit out of them and then I can't find anything to say and so I probably *am* boring the shit out of them. - It becomes a vicious circle.
- MATT:** Don't you crave a regular piece of ass?
- CHARLEY:** Sometimes, but then I pump a few bar-bells, do some pilates, a few spins on the exercise-bike and the itch goes away.
- MATT:** And when it comes back....?
- CHARLEY:** I head straight back to the equipment.

**MATT:** It's all got too much of me these past few weeks – with the play, the relationships...I need to get away. I thought we might take a few weeks in the Adirondacks, breathe some fresh air, do some hiking, horseback-riding - that kind'a thing. I've made a temporary reservation for a cabin up by the lake.

**CHARLEY:** I'd love to Matt, but I can't.

**MATT;** You got an assistant at the gym, let him hold down the fort!

**CHARLEY:** It's not that, its -- remember that guy I told you about who used to hang around the gym all the time and bend my ear.

**MATT:** The fruit?

**CHARLEY:** Well it turns out, he's not a fruit, he's kind of a millionaire. Inherited a whole bunch of 'spondulicks' from his family in Australia and wants to open a gym up there. That's why he was so interested in watching me all the time; he was kind'a checking me out. Anyway, he's made me one of those offers that you can't refuse. He wants to bankroll me to open a high- class health club in Melbourne – with me running the whole shebang, He's offered me a five year contract.

**MATT:** You're not gonna take it, are you?

**CHARLEY:** I already signed up.

**MATT:** For *Australia* – for five years?

**CHARLEY:** It's a big opportunity Matt and in a year or so they're gonna be redeveloping the whole area where my gym is now, so I'll be bull-dozed out of there anyway.

**MATT:** Jesus, Charley.

**CHARLEY:** I was planning to tell you about it but I thought what with Susan leaving and the play falling apart, this wasn't such a good time.

*(Feeling the need to justify himself)*

It's a kind'a adventure. I never been to Australia. Christ, I never been anywhere past the Jersey Turnpike. And it's not like I won't be coming back here to visit. I guess I'll be back at least once a year, maybe more.

**MATT:** Sure...sure....

**CHARLEY:** I mean Jesus Matt, you're the best - and the oldest friend I've got in the world. I can't stay away from you for long. - It'd tear me up.

**MATT:** Yeah...sure...

**CHARLEY:** Maybe you could come out and visit. They're gonna set me up in a big apartment right next to the gym.

**MATT:** Sure....

**CHARLEY:** *(still justifying)* I thought long and hard about it and I figured, maybe a change of location will change my whole life. I mean, New York is great but when you're born here and lived here all your life, it gets kind'a..... predictable.

*(MATT is thoughtful and silent.)*

Hell, the best times I've had here have been with you. We go back so far....I mean, we'll never lose contact. I'll always wanna hear about the stuff you're doing. I'm sure the play'll be picked up, it's gotta be. It's the best goddam play I've ever read.

*(MATT remains thoughtful and silent.)*

It's not like we'd be splitting for good. I hope you don't think that. That's the last thing I'd want. I mean, Christ, you're my life-line.

**MATT:** *(suppressing his anger and sense of betrayal)*  
Do you know anything about Australia? Do you even know where it is?

**CHARLEY:** 'Down under' somewhere, right?

**MATT:** It's full of convicts, bozos, animal-trainers, and Aborigines. You'll go nuts down there.

**CHARLEY:** It'll be a fully furnished gym. I guess this guy know what he's doing; he's spending enough.

**MATT:** You can't just switch cultures, Charley! It will *cut off* your life-line. To everything you're used to.

**CHARLEY:** It's not a desert island, for Christ's sake, it's just another country. They all speak English.

**MATT:** Aussie is not English, Charley. It's some hybrid language they stole from the natives and the Limeys. *(Conscious he's coming on too strong,)* I just don't want you to make a decision you're gonna regret.

**CHARLEY:** The money's good, Matt; he's paid me a hefty travel advance. The guy seems to be straight.

**MATT:** It's your decision... I mean, if you want to throw your life away in some crapped-out, primitive----- I mean, the reason it's 'down under' is because it's like a bad cake, it never rose to the top. It's *always* been in the Bush Leagues, -- I just don't want to see you throw your life away.

**CHARLEY:** I'll have to take my chances. There're always return flights to JFK.

*(PAUSE in which CHARLEY wants to stop feeling besieged and MATT wants to butch down his anger.)*

**MATT:** Sure, look. - I have to see a guy about a book.....

**CHARLEY:** Right, right,.. *(checks his watch)*. Jesus,, look at the time; I gotta be at the gym in twenty minutes. - I'll.... I'll buzz you later. Um, this evening, I mean, OK? - Maybe we could go and have a beer.

**MATT:** Yeah, maybe.

*(Awkwardly, CHARLEY, rattled by inexplicable guilt and confusion, makes his exit. MATT sits for a moment smoldering with an irrational but agonizing sense of betrayal. He then takes out his cell-phone and slowly begins to dial a number as the LIGHTS FADE)*

\*\*\*\*\*

**LIGHTS UP** on SUSAN, *in a bathrobe, no make-up, in front of a tape-recorder with a wine-bottle, three quarters empty, beside it. It is well past midnight.*

**SUSAN:** *(a little woozy but not utterly drunk, achieving sobriety as she proceeds.)*

I didn't want to write all this in a letter because I wanted you to hear my voice. If I had more gumption, I would've come over and delivered all this straight to your face. But that would have been hard for me to do and, as you often said, I'm just too much of a well-brought-up Catholic girl to...to... you know.

What you need to know is not so much that I loved you, but that I loved you so much it didn't matter to me whether you were a great artist or just a mug. In some ways, I think I would have preferred it if you'd just been a mug. - Being a 'great artist' is a great strain on ordinary people that really care for you.

In a way, you being a writer was always like having an affair with someone who regularly kept a mistress. No matter how close we seemed to get, there was always this 'other party' needling away at us – creeping in all times of the day and night – demanding your time and your attention. I think I could have handled another woman – like I did Jesse. - Oh yeah, I knew all about her. That's why people have catty friends, so that they can take you out to lunch, let you know the guy you love is having it off with some sexy airhead and then graciously pick up the check while your heart quietly breaks. - It wasn't easy but I accepted Jesse – more easily than I accepted your goddam, interfering Muse.

The thing is Matt, and you'll find this hard to take maybe, I accepted you even when I realized you weren't a great artist, and probably never would be. - I could never say that to your face. - You'd probably bop me one if I did, because I know how much all that means to you. - But the truth is, you're just a loveable wannabe – like so many people in this town – actors, writers, dancers, sculptors, – all floating on a pink cloud but living in cloud-cuckoo land.

You'll think I'm trying to get back at you for being dumped, but that's not it, Matt. Not at all. – What hurts, and it *really does hurt*, is that I lost you to the *mistress* – that interfering bitch that would never leave you alone, that dragged you the computer day after day and kept stuffing your head with sugar-plum dreams about 'Oscars, Tonys, Emmys, vacations in the south of France and your picture in all the papers. It would have been easier to have lost you to a big busty hooker who was turned on by hot sex with unshaven intellectuals – than to the Muse. Every time you brought her up, I'd say to myself under my breath, '*Fuck the Muse!*' – but as it turned out, the Muse fucked me. - - - Is that irony or what?

No, Matt, I loved you not for what you were, but *in spite of* what you were! Which according to the Sisters I grew up with, is the greatest love of all. I can't even blame you for pushing me out of your life – because, again according to my faith, deceitfulness is always punished – and there is no penance for the kind of sins I'm guilty of because they're as much against myself as they are against you.

*(sober)* As soon as I walked out the door, I stopped loving you. I thought: he's done me a favor. He's given me a good reason to stop faking. I'd never again have to say: "God, Matt, that's a great play, a great story, a great poem." There'd no longer be a reason for deferring to the Mistress. The shackles fell from my feet as the scales fell from my eyes, and I was free. And *I want to stay free*. It's a great feeling, Matt. I hope, one day, you'll feel it too. - I hope that..... that.....

*(She switches off the tape-recorder, watches it spin for a moment then resolutely stop. She reaches for the bottle and finishes it off as The LIGHTS FADE.*

\*\*\*\*\*

**LIGHTS UP:** *ISAAC sitting in his familiar seat, waiting for MATT to speak. MATT is trying to decide how to start. A longish pause and finally ISAAC says...*

**ISAAC;** Nu? - You wanted to talk. So talk.

**MATT:** I wanted to... apologize. I was really out of line at our last session. I don't know what came over me. Some kind of negative demon took hold of me. I said a lot of things that were stupid and hurtful and.... I'm sorry,

My sessions with you have been some of the most instructive I've had in my life. Some of the things you told me opened up... new vistas for me – made me see things about writing that had never entered my head. They broadened me as a writer even though you..... I mean, you were very honest with me about my

shortcomings and I appreciate that. - It's not all that easy to get frank criticism... everybody is, to some extent, faking or covering up, or talking out of both sides of their mouth. But you were straight - honest - with me - and although it hurt, I came to appreciate it. - To see it as a gift.

And so, I wanted to explain about last time, and *truly...* and *sincerely...* apologize.

ISAAC;            You've broken up with Susan.

MATT:            *(Beat) (surprised)* You heard.

ISAAC;            She told me. We're old friends you know. And you'll remember it was I that introduced you to Susan.

MATT:            I know...

ISAAC:            Some of da things you said to her, if dey are true, and Susan is not given to prevarication, were qvite hard.

MATT:            We had some words. ...I can't get into all that.

ISAAC:            Det's a shame; det you can't "get into all that" I mean. Because how you treated Susan, you also treated me - that's to say, you were unkind and cruel and self-destructive. You alienated a very sweet person, a good person, a woman who supported you in every thing you ever attempted. Who loved you and believed in you. Who talked to others on your behalf; who, it could almost be said, sacrificed herself for your sake. And how did you respond to all of that? You gave her her walking-papers. You were crass, blunt and brutal.

MATT:            Relationships don't last forever. Sometimes they just wear out,

**ISAAAC;** Or you wear them out.

**MATT:** (*offhand*) Whatever.

**ISAAC:** (*suddenly hot*) Don't 'whatever-me' Matthew. I'm not one of your Hip-Hop, Rap-Crap generation that demeans women and pisses on everyone they meet. 'Whatever' is a word I have come to loathe, Matthew because it means – neither good nor evil - neither right nor wrong – it's a conjunction that brings together neither verbs nor pronouns. It's a word for people who, when they are accused of evil-doing, shrug their shoulders – as if to say: Morality? - Vat's det? - In this super-duper Information Age, we have no need of it. It's not on 'our radar screen'; we can't Google it up on our lap-tops. It is part of the nullity that people who use it would like to spread throughout the world. – It's not for me, Matthew. I'm too old-fashioned; I still believe in the old virtues; the very ones all the Hip-Hoppers, with their pants falling down around their *tuchess*, piss on. But they won't piss on me, Matthew because no sooner will they whip out their *shmeckers* than I will whip out my kitchen-knife and give them the longest circumcision they have ever seen,

**MATT:** I don't know where you're going with all this.

**ISSAC:** I shall tell you Matthew – in words of one syllable, but even if I use two or three, you will still get the point, because you are a smart fellow and literary with it.

We are all allotted just so much time in this world and we all want more – to live, if not forever, then long enough to see our rivals and our enemies packed into pine boxes and shoveled into the ground. And we have to use that time wisely: thinking, enjoying, talking with friends who because we give them a lot, may give us

back only a little - but time after time - so eventually the debt is repaid. We have to monitor our time wisely, and the thing we must never do is waste it because it is the most precious thing we have, Time. And so we have to discriminate. With whom shall we spend this precious substance that is essentially our life-blood? With whom shall we commune, converse, co-habit so that our time on this earth will be made valuable, amusing, productive and pleasant.

We all make decisions like that, whether consciously or not. It's why we are *in* to some people and pretend to be *out* to others, We are saying to ourselves; there is just so much time, and it's a sin to squander it. And even if not a sin, then a bore, a waste, an insult against our selves because there is no playback button on life.

So Matthew, the long and the short of it – and I'm afraid it's been more long than short, I cannot accept your apology because you are one of those people with whom I feel I am wasting it. And it is too short, too precious, too unrenewable to squander even a second of it.

Rosh Hoshana is coming up and I have agreed to help at the synagogue, so you'll have to show yourself out.

*ISAAC leaves promptly. MATT stands stark still for a moment. Like a moth pinned to a glass-plate. The Lights cross-fade into the pink hue as The Muse slowly rematerializes*

**MATT:** Finally....

**MUSE:** I can't tell you how busy I've been....I haven't stopped for a moment.

**MATT:** I've been calling and calling....

**MUSE:** I know sweetheart; I got all the messages, but there was nothing I could do. One day *you'll* know what it feels like being constantly in demand. (*Beat, reconsidering*) Or perhaps not.

**MATT:** What about your promise?

**MUSE** If you only knew how frantic I've been, you'd be a little nicer to me.

**MATT:** Why can't I count on you.? Why are you' always playing hard to get?

**MUSE;** I'm not 'playing' anything Matthew. I *am* hard to get. We had all that out many times before. I'm not your slave, you know.

**MATT:** (*backtracking – trying to be reasonable*) I know, know...you've got other responsibilities.....

**MUSE:** *Countless* responsibilities.... and I can't shirk them just because you get yourself into a flap.

**MATT:** Let's not quarrel. - I'm just so happy to see you again.

**MUSE:** It certainly doesn't sound like it.

**MATT:** I am, I *am*...I've been praying for you to come back... You know I can't get on without you and now,..now all kinds've things have happened... bad things....

**MUSE:** I don't want to hear about them, There's nothing more tedious than having to trump up sympathy for other people's misfortunes. - Don't lay that on me, Matthew.

**MATTHEW:** Don't you want to hear about anything?

**MUSE:** Nothing dreary, Matthew. It drains the color from my cheeks and makes me look ghastly, and I put so much effort into looking my best. So please, unburden yourself elsewhere. Don't you have a girlfriend, or a mother, or a nanny perhaps.

**MATT:** *(realizing he will get no sympathy from this quarter)*  
Have you....have you got anything...anything for me?

**MUSE:** *I'm* running on empty, Matthew. These are hard times – for all of us.

**MATT:** But last time you promised.....

**MUSE:** I never *promised*, Matthew. I don't give iron-clad guarantees. I'm not a bank, you know. And you can't just keep making withdrawals without making some deposits.

**MATT:** I'd do anything for you?

**MUSE:** That's not the point Matthew.

**MATT:** What is the point?

**MUSE:** The point is – I'm overstretched - overextended – over my head - just too many clients, and so, I'm afraid , we'll have to call it a day.

**MATT:** *(Beat)* What?

**MUSE:** I'm sorry, but that's just the way it is. It's been coming for a long time and I haven't known quite how to broach it to you. But there's no point in pretending that everything is hunky dory when it's really, so-to-speak, in the toilet.

**MATT:** But you can't just...

**MUSE:** I'm afraid I *can* dear and I'm afraid I *must*. It will be better all round. Something else is bound to turn up. it's always darkest before noon.....or sunrise...or whatever that stupid saying is..

The demand has grown greater than the supply, Matthew. Happens all the time of course, it just sneaks up on you. But once it arrives, there's no escaping it. We have to play the cards we're dealt – and if we're not dealt any, we have to play those. -- Oh I'm so frazzled, I don't know *what* I'm talking about!

*(Looks at wrist watch.)* Oh dear, look at the time! I have to run. – I'm sorry I wanted this to be gentle and civil and as amiable as possible but, I just can't spare the time. I know that sounds callous and I daresay it is. But we all have to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and get on with it. That's all one *can* do – is just 'get on with it'. *(looks at watch)* And I'm afraid I have to get on with it straight away.

*(Kisses him impersonally on the cheek.)*

Don't fret darling; something will turn up. You're a conscientious fellow and .... a good sort...and an all-round... *(looks at wrist-watch)* I really do have to run! - Ta ta, darling.

*(THE MUSE vanishes in a puff of smoke. MATT reaches out his hand but of course, there is nothing there.) LIGHTS OUT.*

*IN THE DARKNESS, we hear the sound of a doorbell being frantically rung – three, four, five times. Then the sound of a door-buzzer. It too is pushed three or four times. Finally, we hear the sound of fists pounding frantically on a wooden door. This segues back to the sound of the buzzer again being pushed. As the LIGHTS COME UP, we see a tousle-haired, sleepy-eyed CONRAD in a dressing-gown backing into the room and a slightly frantic, clearly intoxicated MATT. No furniture; no dressing; bare stage.*

- CONRAD:** What the hell is going on? It's four in the morning!
- MATT:** *(more than slightly pissed)* Four in the morning, what-the-hell!? The milkmen are up, farmers are tilling the soil, whores are peddling pussy...
- CONRAD:** *(Beat)* You're totally blotto, aren't you?
- MATT:** Blotto?? – Blotto?? - isn't he one of the Marx Brothers?
- CONRAD:** *(riled)* What the hell is up, Matthew?
- MATT:** I am 'up' Conrad and I have been up for quite a while. And now *you're* up as well. - We're both up.
- CONRAD:** It's four in the morning, for God's sake,
- MATT:** *(shakily rhetorical)* "But look, the dawn in russet mantle-clad walks o'er the dew of yon... yon ..yon Sibelius..."
- CONRAD:** Go home and get some sleep!
- MATT:** *(another recitation)* "Home is the sailor, home from the sea, And the hunter is....." back from his cunt.....
- CONRAD:** Matt, for Christ's sake....
- MATT:** *(like a preacher)* Christ died to cleanse our sins....  
*(throwaway)* They need another wash - stronger detergent, I dunno....
- CONRAD:** Matt....
- MATT:** Door-mat, yeah, wipe your feet before you enter....  
That's me..door-mat – step all over me – I don't give a shit....

- CONRAD:**        *What the hell do you want?*
- MATT:**            I want to know, agent-man, I *need* to know... to know for sure...truthfully that is... that I...ugh....*(he winds down)*
- CONRAD:**        Go and get some sleep. We'll talk in the morning.
- MATT:**            No, Connie-baby, we have to talk right now. *(Abruptly)* Right Now! -- I need to know... *need* to know...right now..... *(trails off)*
- CONRAD:**        What?
- MATT:**            Huh? *(confused)* What was I saying?
- CONRAD:**        *(getting bored)* You need to know....
- MATT:**            ...Need to know, right. *Got* to know. *(slowly piecing together the question)* Have - I - got - any - talent, Connie-baby? *(swallows)* Do you believe.... I have ... any talent?
- CONRAD:**        *(incredulous)* Is this what you got me up for in the middle of the night?
- MATT:**            You are a maven of talent, Conrad. Everybody knows that. You buy and sell talent all day long – like a goddam slave-owner, you auction off talent to the highest bidder, so if anyone will know the answer to that question, it is you, So tell me. - DO I HAVE ANY TALENT?
- CONRAD:**        Matthew, go home; take a cold shower or a hot bath, or both. We'll talk tomorrow.
- MATT:**            I am not going anywhere, Connie-baby until I get an answer to my question?

**CONRAD:** You're making an ass of yourself., Matt.

**MATT:** God's already taken care of that, Connie-old-boy.  
Long time ago.

**CONRAD:** Are you going to be sensible and go home?

**MATT:** (*grim and menacing*) I need an answer, Connie.  
I - *have to* - *have* - an answer!

(*CONRAD looks hard and long at MATTHEW and realizes there is no deterring him.*)

**CONRAD:** There's no answer to that question, Matthew. Just a lot of different opinions.

**MATT:** I want *your* opinion, Connie – just *yours!*

**CONRAD:** I guess you have talent, Matthew. Or else you wouldn't be able to turn out the stuff you do. If you had no talent, you couldn't write books, plays, film-scripts. So obviously, you have talent.

**MATT:** But is it 'real content', Connie; '*special content*'?

**CONRAD:** I'm no judge of that. You know that. We've been there many times before. This is no time to.....

**MATT:** Right, we've avoided straight talk – you and me – many times before. But I want some straight talk tonight, Connie. No more bullshit. That's all we've ever had is bullshit. I am goddam fed up wth bullshit! – *Do I have any talent* – goddammit, it's a simple-enough question – answer it for Christ's sake!

**CONRAD:** I've told you a dozen times, it's all a matter of...

*(MATT punches CONRAD on the chin. He is too weak to land a strong punch, but it is enough to unsettle the other man. CONRAD, on the floor, rubs his chin, inspects for blood. There is practically none. Takes out a handkerchief and dabs his chin with it. MATT has a moment of clarity, realizing what has just happened.)*

**MATT:** Gosh, I'm sorry Connie... I don't know what – Why I --- what I..... Are you ....

**CONRAD:** *(cautiously, bitterly and gradually)* Like I say, Matthew; it's all a matter of opinion but since you are soliciting mine, let me tell you frankly. In my professional opinion, no, I don't believe you have any talent. You have a knack - a knack for putting together words – for juggling language, but content – *special content* – no Matt, you've got nothing to say. Nothing that hasn't been said before a thousand times, in a thousand different ways, - better – clearer - with more style, more nuance, more point.

You're what the limeys call a wanker, Matt, somebody who jerks off with words maybe because he can't get any satisfaction any other way. You come all over yourself but you don't give any pleasure to anyone else. *Nobody else* wants to know. Why should they? Why should anybody? – No Matt, the real answer to your question is, Give up! Stop kidding yourself and trying to kid your friends and those people that care about you. Forget about it. Become a teacher, or a social worker, or a postman or a pastry-cook. Give it up, Matt; *give it up* – just like it's given *you* up.

*(Pats his mouth with the handkerchief; slowly scrambles up onto his feet.)*

I'm gonna put some ointment on this thing and go back to sleep. - You can do whatever the hell you want.

*(CONRAD, holding his handkerchief to his mouth, shakily exits. MATT watches him go, and and says almost inaudibly - either about CONRAD or himself, it isn't clear.)*

**MATT:** *(sobbing softly)* I'm sorry Connie..... really sorry.

**THE LIGHTS FADE OUT.**

\*\*\*\*\*

*(LIGHTS COME UP. - JESSE is discovered, as in Scene One, on the couch. She is wearing an alluring outfit, obviously artfully chosen. MATT is perched on a chair opposite her. He is not only sober, but somber and subdued, as if some quintessential light deep within himself had been extinguished.*

**JESSE;** You could'a knocked me over with a feather when you called. I thought I'd never see you again.

**MATT:** Like I told you, I was a more than a little stressed out when all that happened. Not really myself. - I apologized, didn't I?

**JESSE;** You were pretty mean though.

**MATT:** It was some craziness inside of me. Things got on top of me.

**JESSE:** I'll say.

**MATT;** Can I get you another drink?

**JESSE:** *(coldly polite)* No, thank you.

**MATT:** I've had a lot of hard knocks since I...since we stopped... a lot of disappointments.

JESSE:            **(BEAT) Susan?**

MATT;            **You heard.**

JESSE:            **News like that gets around fast.**

MATT:            **That was never.... We were not.... That's all ancient history now.**

JESSE:            **Not all *that* ancient, is it?**

MATT:            **It didn't work out. It wasn't like anything *we* had.**

JESSE;            **That's not what you said before.**

MATT:            **Christ, I hope you're not going force me to get down on my knees. I said I was sorry.....that I was to blame.**

JESSE:            **Time doesn't stand still, Matt.**

MATT:            ***(Beat)* What d'you mean?**

JESSE:            **I mean I wasn't gonna just turn into a nun or something. Or cry my eyes out waiting for you to come back.**

MATT:            **I didn't expect you to. You're an attractive lady. I'm sure there are lots of guys....**

JESSE:            **Not 'lots', just one. - It was pretty heavy too.**

MATT:            ***(not wanting the details)* Yeah, I'm sure...I'm sure....**

JESSE:            **But he turned into a creep and I gave him the air. - Y'know when?**

MATT:            **No , when?**

**JESSE:** Right after you called. As soon as I heard your voice, and you asked me over, I knew I could never be with that creep again. I told him so – straight out. I said: ‘It’s all over, so don’t bother calling any more!’ He was flabbergasted. You should’a seen his face.

All I ever needed from you was a nudge. I suppose I shouldn’t tell you that, but I don’t care; I’m not proud. I never had with anybody what we had together, and I don’t mind admitting it.

**MATT:** That’s,.... (*searching for words*) a nice thing to say.

**JESSE:** I was nuts for you, Matt. I think I’ll always be.  
- Did you mean it, about the Adirondacks.

**MATT:** Absolutely, we’re all booked. Everything’s in place. - If you’re still game.

**JESSE:** Oh, Matt.

*(She crosses over to him and places herself into his arms. Dutifully, he kisses her. It’s a long, warm kiss. She comes out of it refreshed and begins taking off her blouse and skirt.*

It’s gonna be just the way it used to be, isn’t it? - Maybe even better.

*(MATT can’t bring himself to manufacture any words. JESSE, now in her underwear, begins unbuckling MATT’s trousers. He is distant and tortured and, like someone trapped in a dream, just watching things take their course. JESSE, anticipating pleasure, is oblivious to*

*MATT's overpowering sense of anguish – as she has always been - but we are painfully aware of it.*

*As MATT is being stripped down, The MUSE in her pink aura, appears in a pool of light, visible only to MATT. She smiles slyly and gently blows him a farewell kiss as the*

**LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.**

**C U R T A I N**

**CHARLES MAROWITZ** is the author of **SHERLOCK'S LAST CASE** which won the Louis B. Mayer Playwriting Award at the L.A. Arts Festival and played on Broadway with Frank Langella in the lead. His most recent productions include **SILENT PARTNERS**, an adaptation of Eric Bentley's 'The Brecht Memoir' premiered at the Scena Theatre in Washington D.C. and **MURDERING MARLOWE** at the Malibu Stage Company - both original plays by Marowitz. As a director, he has staged many productions in the UK including the West End premiere of Joe Orton's **LOOT** (which won an Evening Standard Award), **LAUGHTER** by Peter Barnes at the Royal Court and **TOOTH OF CRIME** by Sam Shepard at The Open Space, a theatre which he founded and directed for twelve years. He has mounted over a dozen productions in England, Germany, Italy and France, as well as Norway, Sweden and Denmark. His last European production was Vaclav Havel's **TEMPTATION** at the National Theatre of Prague in the Czech Republic, the first American director invited to direct with that organization.

\*\*\*\*\*

