

FOUR-AND-A-HALF STORYTELLERS

by

Thomas McCormack

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CAST

ELGA 48
BREN approaching 30
KURT early 60s
KIT going on 22

(Various voices from **Radio**, and from others Off.)

To the CASTING DIRECTOR:

ELGA The actor must convey warmth, alertness, keeled maturity, sexual attractiveness, and a believable quickness of mind that enabled Elga to "pick up languages the way other girls learned the latest pop songs." Elga, animated by a healthy energy, has the readiness and optimistic curiosity of someone who always gets up in the morning feeling well-rested.

BREN He has, initially, a loner's reserve and a guarded poise. We eventually learn that behind the unbookish carriage of a handyman lies an intellect that is ultra-rare. Projecting such intelligence convincingly is difficult; moreover, the actor needs a persona that allows him to do it without alienating us. He is not small; we have to believe he can take care of himself.

KURT Elga's husband. A hint of German accent. KURT has an unfeigned continental poise and courtesy. His smoothness, even temperament, and politesse must not indicate he is in any way a mere lightweight of inherited wealth. Beneath, he is solid, reliable, complex, and without self-delusion.

KIT Elga and Kurt's daughter. As described in the text, she is "edgy, quick, attractive", of computer-whiz intelligence, with an air of regal entitlement and a wide range of warring emotions.

SET AND SETTING

Time: from May to August, in a recent year.

One set: A studio-apartment built onto the beach-side of a large home on the shore of the Long Island Sound in Stamford, Connecticut, thirty-five miles from New York City.

The beach-entrance is stage right; a door up center goes into the house proper; a bathroom door, left. The furnishings include a queen-size bed left, a small breakfast-table up right, where Bren sits to work on his laptop. Four sittable chairs, plus the desk-chair. A coffee-table; a hassock; a small frig, cooking range, sink, and chest of drawers; fine bookcases, filled with books.

SCENES (To appear in the program if possible.)

ACT ONE

Scene:

1. May.
2. Early June.
3. Later, same day.
4. Late June.
5. Later, same day.
6. Two-and-a-half weeks later.
7. Four days later.
8. Six nights later.

ACT TWO

Scene:

1. Six days later. It is now August.
2. The next morning.
3. Early that afternoon.
4. That night.
5. Same as 4, no time break.

SCRIPT NOTE

Deciding a pre-production script-style for silent readers and the company simultaneously can be problematic. Many of the stage directions, word-stresses, three-dot pauses, and phoneticized accents in the script are primarily for lay-readers, designed to convey attitudinal postures and expressions, emphases, potential pacing, and other clues their inner eye and ear may not easily contribute. They are descriptions of what I saw and heard as I wrote, so perhaps they may be helpful in discerning authorial intent, but they are not an attempt to micro-manage the director or the actors. I write this preemptive note for those hands-on theater-professionals who much prefer not to be treated as other than exactly that – creative professionals who know their art.

MUSIC

I'm sure an imaginative director will use the sound of the Irish music and ram-tap dance in fruitful ways I cannot conjure. For that sound, see the DVD for *Riverdance* -- not *Lord of the Dance*, which flatly fails to deliver the ram-tap resonance needed.

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FOUR-AND-A-HALF STORYTELLERS

ACT ONE

1

[A late-afternoon in May.

*Dark stage, slowly getting lighter. **OVER** we begin to hear sounds of overlapping languages, unclear and fractured, as if transmitted by short wave from seemingly infinite distances. They gradually increase, then stop abruptly when lights go full and the beach-entrance door right opens.*

Enter ELGA and KURT. ELGA is attractive in a casual Saks or Bergdorf at-home outfit; KURT, fifteen years older than ELGA, is well-kempt, dressed in a business suit and tie. KURT has an unfeigned continental poise and courtesy. ELGA carries stapled sheets of paper.]

ELGA

See? New chairs. The studio will never be anyone's heaven, but it's presentable.

KURT

It looks fine, El. Excellent.

ELGA

And at last we may have found someone right for it. I've asked him to come by because, Kurt, this man we have to meet! He sounds... Well, you look.

[ELGA hands Kurt the resumé.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

I called Nick Penrose at Cambridge, and he was awed to learn we'd heard from Francis. No one at Cambridge knows what's happened with him, except he's quit teaching.

[KURT is scanning the resumé.]

KURT

Interesting...More than that: Astonishing. But there are gaps in this. Why is he back in America?

ELGA

That's it: nobody knows. He came home for a funeral, and ten days later sent a one-line note of resignation. According to Nick, when Francis disappeared he was writing an academic paper about "language and human communication". It was causing an uproar.

(MORE)

ELGA (CONT'D)

I don't know what that means, and philosophy's not Nick's field, so he couldn't explain it. But he said it's clear Francis is both feared and revered. Hated and celebrated. I caught a glimpse of him yesterday when he dropped that off. He also looks as though he can take care of himself -- which Nick confirmed after I told him why we want someone in the studio.

[KURT hands the resume back to ELGA.]

KURT

All right, El, you talk to him first. See if you can fill in some gaps. If you still want him, come get me.

[KURT and ELGA exit right. The stage goes dim. Seconds pass. Again the lights go full as the door right opens. ELGA enters, and stands aside to let BREN enter. His clothier is L.L. Bean. BREN is fit, even athletic. He eyes the room and the door up center.]

ELGA

As promised? Or, rather, as advertised?

BREN

It's attached to the house.

ELGA

Yes -- and so are we!

(steps front, gestures)

The view of the beach, and the water.

BREN

Somehow I pictured an abandoned bath-house down on the sand.

ELGA

This was originally a kind of bath-house, a changing-room added onto the main house.

(indicates door upstage:)

That's where that door leads.

(indicates their entrance door, right:)

Separate entrance.

BREN

Mrs. Shelley --

ELGA

(striding left)

-- Here's the bath. I'm sorry to say, there's no tub. We redid it into a studio years ago; still, all it has is a shower.

BREN

A shower's okay -- there are no tubs at the Y --

ELGA

-- I love a tub. Not a luxury maybe, but a great place to luxuriate. When my family arrived in America, they'd lost almost everything. Tiny apartment for my parents, my older brother and me, but it had a tub, and I remember thinking we'd reached the heights of hope.

BREN

How old were you?

ELGA

Six -- young enough to be free of higher aspirations. Try the bed.

[BREN sits on the bed.]

BREN

Fine bed. The heights of hope.

ELGA

You'll sleep sitting up?

[BREN reads ELGA's expression: she will wait for the small courtesy of compliance; he lies back, feet on floor.]

BREN

Splendrous. It's excellent, Mrs. Shelley -- and it's beyond me.

(rising)

I have money enough for four months, at YMCA-level rent. This is not the YMCA.

ELGA

Why leave the Y?

BREN

The Y's fine. I'm not right for the center of town.

ELGA

Too noisy?

BREN

...Too populated.

ELGA

...Is the money an advance for your book?

BREN

No. The book is only an academic monograph, about a hundred pages. Look, you're being very kind, but this can't work --

ELGA

-- The rent isn't what's important to us. You must be the tenth person to answer the ad -- there wasn't one who wouldn't want the studio --

BREN

-- "Buuut"?

ELGA

The 'buts' were all ours. For one thing, we want a man -- ideally one who's home during the day. There's been a vagrant on the beach this year, bothering residents. I work in my husband's company, but I'm in the office only two days a week. The rest of the time, it's the housekeepers and I alone. I think I'll sit.

[ELGA sits, regards the still-standing BREN.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

We're hoping the tenant will be someone agreeable. The first man I saw was a detective with the Stamford Police Department. Very chatty. He advised me about the best kung fu movies. I said we were more into books, and he told me he owned one of those: a manual on handguns. Wouldn't you like to sit? Please?

[...BREN sits.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

There was another man, whose repeated hearty expressions of tolerance for immigrant Jews like us struck me as not a good sign. Another had me babbling apologies for using a polysyllabic word. Your resume --
(raises paper)
-- seems more congenial.

BREN

Mrs. Shelley, the rent would be one problem --

ELGA

-- We aren't doing this for the rent! If rent is your only problem as a writer, you'll win the Nobel Prize.

BREN

...The bigger problem is -- congenial I'm not.
(indicates door up)

I'm unsuited to be a close neighbor. At the Y they had me down as either mute or on the lam.

ELGA

Are you on the lam?

BREN

Probably.

ELGA

.....What's your book about?

BREN

Talking about it is not a good idea.

ELGA

Because?

BREN

The standard line is: It lets the gas out of the balloon.

ELGA

Feh! to "standard lines". Why is that anyway? Kurt is a book-publisher and I'm an editor. We talk about books all day -- to pump them up.

BREN

Bad training. My training, I mean.

ELGA

Are you trained to have doubts?

BREN

(*"gravely"*)
Yes, Ma'm. And I have grave doubts about that training.

ELGA

Do you know what it's about?

BREN

...It's about -- one-third finished.

ELGA

Okay, forget I asked what it's about. I shouldn't have. Forgive me....But what's it about?!! Teasing! If we can't talk about that, can we talk about you?

[As ELGA scans the resume again; BREN rises.]

BREN

Mrs. Shelley --

ELGA

-- Thank you for dropping this off yesterday. I saw you -- in running shoes. You ran down here?

BREN

Jogged. Shuffled.

ELGA

What do you like to be called?

BREN

Bren is fine.

ELGA

You say you were brought up in Stamford.

BREN

Yes.

ELGA

So you have loads of friends in town.

BREN

No. I've been away for years in "higher education" -- nothing estranges from the old crowd like that.

ELGA

How long were you in England?

BREN

Well, England and a few other places: five years. And for five years before that, on American campuses.

ELGA

Please sit. I'd be grateful.

[Pause. They look at each other; BREN sits.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

Family?

BREN

No. My parents died last fall. No siblings.

ELGA

They died together?

BREN

Almost.

ELGA

.....What made you move back to Stamford?

BREN

I had to clean out the apartment, and I just stayed on. I like the local library -- stacks of fond memories.

ELGA

(back to resume)

You drove a truck for the last six months. Delivering...?

BREN

Building supplies.

ELGA

Any actual building of things?

BREN

No. Occasionally I'd carry bricks up ladders just to watch how things are done up there.

ELGA

You don't talk to anyone anymore?

BREN

I'm in my hermit phase. So --

[BREN stands. ELGA rises quickly.]

ELGA

No-no. I asked my husband to come home early. I'll go get him.

BREN

Mrs. Shelley --

ELGA

Do you think you'd enjoy it here?

BREN

That's a question I shouldn't even ask myself --

ELGA

-- Give me one minute.

[ELGA exits right; BREN gazes after her, then at the room; goes to frig, starts to open it, doesn't; drifts to a bookshelf, scans titles; peers out a window; sits on hassock; rises, sits on the bed, starts bouncing with pleasure; leaps to his feet as -- enter ELGA and KURT.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

Kurt, this is Brendan Francis.

KURT

It's good to meet you, Professor Francis.

BREN

Mr. Shelley.

[As they shake hands, ELGA sits.]

KURT

Elga says you're a writer.

BREN

That's...overly generous.

KURT

What's the book about?

ELGA

Sorry, Kurt, I should have said: Bren would rather not talk about it. It tends to let the bubbles out of the champagne.

KURT

Is that true?

BREN

Maybe not the champagne part.

ELGA

I did tell Kurt that you're smart, have a sense of humor, and you're very articulate.

BREN

Thank you, but apparently not articulate enough --

KURT

-- My wife has filled me in. You'd be doing us a great favor if you'd sit with us, just for a moment more?

[KURT indicates a chair to BREN; BREN pauses -- then sits. KURT sits.]

KURT (CONT'D)

You're not a Stamford native, I hear.

BREN

No, we moved here from Boston when I was eight.

KURT

Why would your parents ever leave Boston to come here?

BREN

My father was a printing pressman, and he heard there was a job at the Conde Nast plant. There wasn't. But he found other work.

ELGA

Bren's schooling seems almost adequate, Kurt.

(consulting resume)

He went to Princeton on scholarship, to Harvard on a fellowship in philosophy, and to Cambridge University as a Marshall Scholar. More philosophy. Became a lecturer there. But listen to this, Kurt: Bren also won the World Swan Quill Short-Story Prize for writers under twenty-five -- when he was nineteen. He had three stories in the Kenyon Review that year.

KURT

Lordy! Two prodigies in the house.

(anticipating the question)

Elga. Her parents told me when Elga was a girl she picked up languages the way other girls learned the latest pop songs. I believe it. Is your book philosophy or fiction?

BREN

...Philosophy.

[ELGA hands KURT the resume.]

KURT

What areas?

BREN

Philosophy of language. Philosophy of mind. Metaphysics. Really useful stuff.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

I plan to go to New York and get a job at one of the big philosophy-firms. Mr. Shelley, I don't want to waste your time, or be discourteous --

KURT

(reading the resume)

You certainly impressed them over there. A doctorate at Cambridge, then lectures at Galway University for a term. Then back to Cambridge -- where you taught faculty seminars! In your twenties. You appear to have given up a promising career. Or did you? If you're writing a philosophy paper.

BREN

It's my final project.

KURT

I did a little philosophy -- enough to know it's not my *metier*. I once met Heidegger.

BREN

Did you.

KURT

At university in Germany. Couldn't bring myself to like him.

BREN

I'm not surprised.

KURT

Elga tells me you like the studio, but you have a ticking clock in your wallet.

BREN

Yes. It'll tick only till the end of summer.

KURT

How are you at mowing grass?

BREN

"Mowing grass."

KURT

Think you can trim a hedge? Make it a little tidy?

ELGA

Kurt is asking if you think you could be our live-in "landscape architect".

KURT

P'raps glance at the sand on the beach occasionally, see what might be done. Do you drive a motorboat? It's easy to learn.

BREN

Is there a boat-house?

ELGA

It's not habitable.

BREN

Oh, I promise: I can live primitive --

ELGA

-- We'd like you here, in the studio, for no rent. Barter. The local who used to tend to the grounds was a terrible drunk, and undependable. Nothing was ever finished.

BREN

Sorry, I can't. My scholarship-days are long over.

ELGA

It's not a scholarship. It's a trade. We're in need!

(senses 'need' isn't a winning word)

I don't mean need. Unless sobbing despair means you need something.

KURT

You'd be doing us an immense kindness. Elga is less prone to gloom than anyone I know, but she was losing hope. I very much want a dependable man back here this summer.

BREN

A watchdog.

ELGA

Yes, a congenial, polysyllabic watchdog.

BREN

A Pomeranian should do it.

(winces)

Sorry. I told Mrs. Shelley, I wouldn't be polysyllabic: you'd have a mute recluse back here. Very vexing in a tenant.

ELGA

You fear our sleep would be disturbed by your excessive quiet.

BREN

Okay, you got me. I owe this paper to people who supported me over the years. I promised it. I don't have unlimited time so I need someplace remote. Because I'm susceptible to distractions. It's a character flaw.

KURT

You've found that place, I think. We've several times lent this studio to writers facing deadlines who wanted a hideaway.

BREN

I didn't picture it as even close to the house, never mind part of it. I just want to be alone for a while.

KURT

(contemplates BREN; rises)

Elga, we're discomfiting Professor Francis. I'm sorry, you seemed ideal -- among other things you'd be working at home. But you know yourself.

[BREN rises; ELGA rises.]

ELGA

You say you have no time to lose. Move here, and you can be working on your paper tomorrow. If your concern is we'll intrude, suppose I promise -- cross two hearts -- we won't do that. In fact, suppose I exact a promise from you that you won't intrude on our lives? Does that sound hermitic enough?...Do you have someplace more remote to go?

[BREN gazes at ELGA, KURT, the floor, ELGA.]

BREN

Is one of your languages ASL? American Sign Language?

ELGA

I know about ten signs.

[BREN hand signs in ASL.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

You're beyond me.

BREN

That was, "You do understand how mute I'd be?"

ELGA

Where'd you learn to sign?

BREN

When I was a kid one of our landladies was deaf. She lent me a book.

ELGA

...We don't have to understand it as long as we accept it, right? Like life!

BREN

What were you paying the local?

ELGA

Eighteen dollars an hour.

BREN

How often?

ELGA

Once a week, six hours.

BREN

What was the rent to be?

ELGA

We hadn't really fixed it. The money isn't an issue.

BREN

Suppose a polysyllabic, congenial rich-guy showed up? You'd have charged him what?

ELGA

I might have said anything -- a thousand a month.

BREN

(almost instantly)

...Here's a counter-offer: each month I pay two-hundred-ninety-eight dollars in rent, and work thirty-nine hours on the grounds. That's thirteen hours more than the local, making five-thirty-two in cash and additional labor. Plus the four-sixty-eight you save on the local, makes a thousand.

[ELGA and KURT, lost, gape; BREN grimaces.]

BREN (CONT'D)

Sorry. It does add. I mean, it computes, I don't know if it adds.

ELGA

It doesn't have to! We don't need any money.

BREN

I believe that, but I pay, or I don't stay.

ELGA

...We accept.

(to KURT:)

Don't we.

KURT

We do.

ELGA

So we have an arrangement?

[After a steady look, BREN nods.]

KURT

Splendid! Do you also change locks?

(indicates door up)

The studio's been empty for two years, and that door's been locked for I don't know how long. The other day I looked for the key and couldn't find it.

ELGA

I'll find it.

BREN

No, the door's okay.

KURT

There's a happy beginning: problems solved on both sides! I think you'll be comfortable here.

BREN

I'll feel I'm in the lap of luxury.

SCENE BREAK

2

[Daytime, eighteen days later.]

*The studio much as before, except for the incidentals of a man in residence, an old, inexpensive laptop open on the small breakfast-table, and a very old **RADIO** on shelf right.*

We hear garden tools being stored in a shed off-right. Enter BREN in cargo shorts and tank-top, looking post-labors. He goes to the computer, rapidly keyboards several lines; rises, takes a towel from a drawer. A knock on door right. BREN opens door -- finds ELGA.]

ELGA

I've been assigned to come and pay compliments.

("permission to enter?":)

May I?

BREN

...Please.

[ELGA enters; BREN fetches a shirt.]

ELGA

I know you've seen me observing out there. Do you mind?

BREN

No, you're entitled. It's your grass, your sand.

ELGA

I've been asked by all the happy green things out front to say they've never felt more cared for. They feel about to become a showplace -- which they'll pretend embarrasses them.

BREN

Tell them they're safe. I'm a second-rate gardener.

ELGA

No you're not. Kurt and I agree it's never looked this respectable. God it's hot and not even summer yet.

[ELGA points at the frig.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

Is there something...?

BREN

Of course! The drinks in here are yours --

ELGA

They're yours. A house-cooling gift.

[BREN extracts a can, shows ELGA; she nods. He pops can, finds a glass, hands both to ELGA.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

They really are yours. If you want.

BREN

...Thank you.

[BREN takes a can, does not open it. ELGA indicates a chair.]

ELGA

May I sit?

BREN

...Please.

[ELGA sits, puts purse on table, settling in.]

ELGA

The beach side is beyond respectable -- you've transformed it. In two-and-a-half weeks.

BREN

All I did was tidy it, fetch-up flotsam.

ELGA

Oh you did more than that. You built that little Japanese rock-garden.....Bren, please sit. With me. For a few minutes.

[BREN pauses, then perches on the hassock; ELGA glances at the bookshelves.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

I'm surprised: No books of your own.

BREN

No. I sent almost everything to my mother's sister.

ELGA

In Boston?

BREN

Ireland.

ELGA

....What's that?

[ELGA rises, goes to shelf right; BREN rises.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

Looks like an antique.

BREN

It's a 1930s short-wave radio. Tubes burned out years ago.

ELGA

I haven't seen anything like this since I was a girl in Europe.

BREN

It was my mother's...And her father's. When he was a boy he used to huddle over it, listening to faint transmissions, from what seemed like infinite distances, in languages he didn't understand. He'd pick up two stations on the same wave-length, and he'd guess: "Vienna? And Buenos Aires?"

ELGA

Is this the only thing you kept from home?

BREN

That. Some photos.

[ELGA sits again; BREN pauses, sits.]

ELGA

I noticed earlier you almost flinch at the word 'smart'.

BREN

Smart how? Always have to ask that. No one's smart as he'd like to be -- in the ways he'd like to be.

ELGA

Still, it's useful, no? When you're writing?

BREN

Sure is. Yesterday I had to spell 'moccasin', and I'm almost certain I nailed it. ...Writing what? I'm not bad at exams and figuring things out. But you wouldn't like a novel that's only something "figured out".

ELGA

You said you're not writing a novel.

BREN

....We had an agreement, I thought.

ELGA

We were both lying. That cancels any commitments.

BREN

...You were lying.

ELGA

Yes. I knew I'd ask about your writing again.

BREN

And I was lying.

ELGA

Yes. You're not working on anything. I see how much time you spend on the sand, on the greenery, hunting for things to do. I'm not a logician like you, but I do know writers at work.

BREN

You're used to novelists. I have to spend half a day thinking about a line or two. I can't sit down and knock out a thousand words an hour like Trollope.

ELGA

You can't sit down at all, as far as I can see.

BREN

Look: I'm sitting. Just a few minutes ago I was sitting over there, and I wrote a whole sentence.

ELGA

What did it say? That sentence.

BREN

...Mrs. Shelley, what I'm writing isn't top secret or anything. It's just soporifically arcane, academic. I'm told in England some horny tutors are using it as a date-rape drug. How 'bout I describe the paper after this one? Title is "Mowing Grass". It's something I've lived day-in-day-out, and I read in those how-to-do-it books you should write about what you know. Many metaphors in grass... It's a global issue...

ELGA

Why would you decide I'm a fool before you get to know me?

BREN

...Sorry. Bad. Bad.

ELGA

Well, I intruded....What happens at the end of summer? Why do you have a deadline?

BREN

One, the money I set aside for this will be gone, and two, either I'll have completed the paper or not. If I haven't, it'll probably be because I've discovered I'm wrong.

ELGA

That doesn't sound very confident.

BREN

Good. I don't have much confidence in "confidence". What the world needs more of is some well-placed self-doubt.

ELGA

Why is it, with your record, there's a tone of self-deprecation in everything you say.

BREN

Believe it: I've had a non-self-deprecating phase.

ELGA

I'd like to hear some of that.

BREN

No. You wouldn't. I wouldn't. Mrs. Shelley, don't try to acquit me. I've shown I can have an unhappy effect on many a life.

ELGA

On purpose?

BREN

Sometimes, yes. So --

[BREN stands.]

ELGA

I don't believe you came here only to write philosophy.

BREN

How did I put myself in the position of having to answer to you about any of this?

ELGA

You don't have to, of course. But I know a few things about you, and if we could just talk, there's a chance I could help.

BREN

One of the many troubles with talking is, it gets people involved. Soon, one way or another, they're disappointed.

ELGA

Whom have you disappointed?

BREN

Don't you have other authors? -- Who need your help?

ELGA

I do, but I'm awake a hundred-twenty hours a week. I'm not as gallant as Kurt: Why'd you give up philosophy? Teaching it.

BREN

Long story.

ELGA

The Brits thought you were a star. The day you dropped off your resumé? I happened to be talking to an old chum in England that day. He teaches modern languages at Cambridge --

[BREN sees there's more coming; sits.]

BREN

-- You just happened to be talking to him.

ELGA

Yes. And again this morning. He talked with the head of your college at Cambridge. That man waxed extreme -- he claimed when you lectured, even the faculty felt unmoored, bereft. "Francis has the most imaginative and acute new philosophical mind in a long time," he said.

BREN

How would he know?

ELGA

...? Evidently everyone's waiting for something you were working on -- an "Incompleteness Theorem" for language.

BREN

Well, I'm consistent: I haven't completed it.

ELGA

That's what you're doing here.

BREN

Not at this moment!

ELGA

...And the stories. How come, Bren, after so promising a start, no stories since the Swan Quill winner?

BREN

That was a long time ago. A different guy. Why are you doing this? I've asked only to be left alone, why do this?

ELGA

(puts drink down, leans forward)

Because I'm an editor. An editor reading submitted manuscripts all day can feel like a coroner in a plague. I read your Prize Story, and the jolt, the spasm, when we realize this piercing first-person tale is being narrated by a nine-year-old autistic boy who doesn't talk -- it'd get my prize. It's dizzying to think you were only in your teens.

BREN

I don't do that anymore.

ELGA

But why? How do I persuade you I may be able to help?

BREN

....Mrs. Shelley, I don't do it, because I can't do it. In truth I was never able to do it. The Swan Quill story was a stunt. A cunning mechanical replica of the real thing. Which I didn't realize at the time. When I was eighteen I worked for a summer in a hospital for autistic children. I never forgot their mumbled dialog, their clamorous silence. I pieced that story together like something on an aptitude test.

ELGA

And the Kenyon stories?

BREN

Again -- self-deluding mimicry. I read James Joyce's stories, and wrote my versions of "Araby". Don't think any of this implies modesty. It's not modesty. It's cynicism. We're all semi-blind to our shortcomings.

ELGA

Relieving semi-blindness is what good editors do! Doing it -- helping someone truly talented, with great imagination -- is editor's ecstasy.

BREN

I appreciate your optimism, and your experience -- but it's wasted on me. Great fiction moves like a hunting feline -- it has an organic glide. From people like me it has a robotic lurch.

ELGA

You're wrong. I've read you. And my husband claims I'm the best reader he ever married. Just tell me you don't want to write a novel about philosophy.

BREN

Philosophy?! Box office magic! See the evil Predicator reify counterfeit ontological realms! Spielberg's begging for the script.

ELGA

Mr. Francis, are you rude again?

BREN

Mrs. Shelley, do you intrude again?

ELGA

What's the wording priests use when you go to confession and they command you to say Hail Marys?

BREN

I don't say Hail Marys anymore....The phrase is, "For your penance say..."

ELGA

Bren Francis, you were rude, more than once, and for your penance you have to tell me a story.

BREN

...Why?

ELGA

I'm not asking you to write one. Just tell me one. That's different.

BREN

Ah. If I can tell a story, I'll think I can write a story. Telling a story is to writing a story as sketching a building is to building a building.

ELGA

...Bren, I'm safe, really. We both are. We'll give it a working title: "The Hail Mary Story".

BREN

Not a hopeful title, that. In football there's a play they call the 'Hail Mary'. It's when you're desperate, time is running out, you've got one last chance. So you just heave the ball as far you can, toward the goal line -- and pray someone from your team catches it.

ELGA

So: Good title! You have a better one?

BREN

You do this often? -- walk up to a stranger and say, "Tell me a story"?

ELGA

You're not a stranger. To me. I recognize you.

BREN

So do I.Here's a can't-miss title: "The Ontologists"! You like? Smolders with mystery and heart-break, no?

ELGA

It does. Breaks my heart. Such a cliché. Half the manuscripts we get at work have that shop-worn title. Now I have to go look it up again. Bren: a story, please.... Penance, Bren!

BREN

.....I need to know: Am I allowed to usher the owner of this studio out of this studio?

ELGA

Yes. You are.

BREN

.....If I tell a story, you'll go sheepy-bye?

ELGA

Let's find out.

BREN

.....You want a story. You have to have a story.

ELGA

Yes. I have to.

[...BREN rises, strolls, tells a story.]

BREN

Picture a house on the Riviera, back between the wars. Sparkling beach, spooky house. Many rooms, many guests -- gathered for a conference about language. Trouble is, the philosophers there -- Bertrand Russell, Kurt Godel [GIR-dle], Carnap, Wittgenstein [VITT-gen-shtine] -- all started out in math or physics or engineering. So they think a little engineering can straighten language out, and perfect communication can take place.

Consequently, in the great house, all is confusion, because language works only to a degree, never completely. When Ludwig says a word -- 'love', or 'meaning', or even the word 'word' -- he thinks Russell gets what's on his mind, his notion. But Russell doesn't, not perfectly. No one can, ever -- because all brains differ in their receiving apparatus, and all notion -- Wait for it! Here's where I getcha! -- all notion is indeterminate, indefinite, multiplex, and transitory! Hah? You like that touch? Zat thicken the plot, or what!? Then a poet sneaks into the house. He has a plan to throw the whole conference into disarray! End of chapter one.

(mock hopefulness:)

Clever as cleavage, is it not? What reader couldn't love it?

ELGA

You do realize I don't know what you're talking about? No -- wrong. I know what you're talking about, but what you're saying...

[Elga points to her head and wags head negatively, ASL for 'I don't understand.']

BREN

My speciality: Misunderstanding. Huge market. Are you disappointed yet?

ELGA

No people in your story with emotions? Desires?

BREN

Agh: great cast -- besides the guys, I'm thinking Mae West, Dorothy Parker, maybe Tallulah and Gypsy Rose Lee. Imagine the syntax. Then Russell triple-jumping from bedroom to bedroom, the way philosophers do. Cole Porter stops by, loops with Wittgenstein, and together they write *Anything Goes*.

ELGA

That's what you came here to write.

BREN

No.

ELGA

You've already written it.

BREN

No. You asked for a story, I made up a story.

ELGA

Just now?!....A personal story -- can you make up one of those?

BREN

What's your idea of "personal"?

ELGA

Involving heart. The thing that hopes... Please: Tell a story. With heart.

BREN

....I could tell about Ellen Daltry and Hugh Taylor. Ellen was our high school prom queen, prettiest girl in the county. Hugh was Ellen's high school sweetheart -- quick, funny, good-looking, despite his 1920s-style hair-comb. They went on to college together, and after freshman year they shared a small apartment. Hugh may have been the only man in the school's history to have a double-major of chemistry and poetry.

At college Ellen developed systemic lupus -- an autoimmune disease. Her body enlarged, her photogenic face was incinerated by a disfiguring rash, she began to go bald. The wide-lens scope of the social girl narrowed to a focus on something only she could see. In October of her junior year, Ellen stopped talking, or going to class. Instead she sat entranced, staring at her laptop's screen-saver image, as though seized by a gruesome but compelling nature program. Hugh asked her what she was watching, and she wrote him a note: "My body attacking itself."

On November eighth, Ellen stopped eating. On the fifteenth, her parents came and took her away. Hugh used to keep a beaker of potassium cyanide on a shelf in his closet, display it with a smile to visitors. At four PM on November 20th of that year, Hugh took down the beaker and drank it dry. Open on his desk was an Emily Dickinson poem: "There's a certain slant of light/ on winter afternoons/ that oppresses/ like the weight/ of cathedral tunes." He'd written in the margin, "The organ of hope is also the organ of despair."

ELGA

...They were classmates of yours?

BREN

In a sense. All stories begin with an observation.

ELGA

You want me to believe all those lines, the words, the little details -- it all came to you just now.

BREN

Mrs. Shelley, I haven't asked you to believe a thing. Except that I'm not what you want me to be.

ELGA

What you just did -- telling those stories -- didn't that stir you, make something come awake in there?

BREN

So does singing in the shower.

ELGA

I never hear you singing in the shower.

BREN

'Cuz I'm a music-lover!

ELGA

...I want a personal story of your own.

BREN

Autobio? No. My personal story is: I taught philosophy; I stopped. The story-arc lacks a certain curvy charm.

ELGA

I don't believe that. I mean, I don't believe that's "your story". We've got the summer to find out.

BREN

"We"?

ELGA

You say your stories begin with an observation, so we'll have to review what you've observed in your life.

BREN

Oh, well -- you got five more minutes?

ELGA

I'm not alone in wondering why you just walked away. From both: from writing and from philosophy. With your gifts. Why?! So, yes -- I have five more minutes, even ten.

BREN

You should save the ten. Chances are, I'll rake your sand, pay some rent, and be gone in ninety days.

ELGA

To do what?...Who was Frank Ramsey?

BREN

Ah. "Frank Ramsey". Anything else your Cambridge chum mention?...Ramsey was a gifted young guy at Cambridge back in the nineteen-twenties. Mathematician, philosopher, economist. He was so smart he could make even Wittgenstein change his mind. And Bertrand Russell, and Maynard Keynes [Canes]. When he was nineteen, in ten days from scratch he learned German well enough to read their philosophers in the original. He was six-three and built like a pro-football linebacker. He died at twenty-six.

ELGA

To keep you there, Cambridge offered to create a philosophy Chair named after Ramsey. But you're here....

[...Silence. They consider each other. They seem agreed that part of the moment is over.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

...I suppose I should let you shower. Although, who was it said, "No man should wash off all the dirt"?

BREN

That was Mae West, to Bertrand Russell in chapter four, while teaching him about non-verbal communication.

[BREN shifts from the hassock to its chair, leans back, opens can, drinks. They continue to regard each other. ELGA indicates computer.]

ELGA

You never close this? You've lived alone too much.

BREN

Have to stay ready. Thoughts just drop in, like family.

ELGA

You couldn't have always wanted remoteness. At school -- from girls?

BREN

Not at first. But soon I learned how often girls could start out simply randy like me, then graduate to wanting something else -- that I couldn't supply. It made me feel very nasty.

ELGA

Some women are like that: the way to their heart is through their vagina. They tend to be young women, though. What you need to know is this: A writer can be too remote. Good storytelling without flesh and blood is not likely.

BREN

Now, that I agree with.

[They exchange a long, freighted look. ELGA rises, moves closer. Her posture is a message.]

ELGA

Do you really want me to leave you alone? If you do, I will.

BREN

...Comes a point when the lack of a certain distraction can be a distraction.

ELGA

I don't want to distract. I want to add.

BREN

You are adding. Right now, you're giving me...
(crosses his legs)
...a complication.

ELGA

Maybe I can simplify it.

[ELGA begins to unbutton her blouse.]

BREN

What about...Kurt?

ELGA

Kurt would not object....He wouldn't, take my word. You have a problem. We need to get to the heart of it.

[ELGA continues to unbutton.]

SCENE BREAK

3

[ELGA and BREN in bed, under a sheet.]

ELGA

I've never done anything quite like that before: pounced. Were you shocked?

BREN

(shakes head)
A part of me is an optimist.

ELGA

That's just courtesy talking. In case the question has crossed your mind, the last time I slept with a man was three years ago. At a book-fair in Germany. He was the leading Brazilian book publisher, and he has since died. Men still try me, but I don't --...I don't. What about you?

BREN

Not long ago. As usual there were things she wanted -- reasonable things, that she could see I'd never deliver. She finally met a less narrow guy who had a big sailboat, and liked to travel, and said he loved her.

ELGA

You're broad enough for me.

BREN

And you're "broad" enough for me.

ELGA

I was a bit nervous when I pounced. For no reason, given your natural instincts. What do you think of that, Philosopher? To be told you're a Nature Boy.

BREN

Nature Boy no want think.

ELGA

Don't think. Just let what comes, come. So to speak. You won't find the right story solely with your brain. Half of art is non-cerebral.

BREN

"I-am-not-writing-a-story. I-will-not-write-a-story. I-cannot-write-a-story."

ELGA

But you want to, don't you.....

[ELGA slips out of bed; if the director and actress choose, she is carelessly wrapped in a sheet; she sits, her back to RADIO. From her purse she takes a tiny cigar. She does not light it; eventually returns it to the purse.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

Bren, we're past this. We passed it when you had the chance to kick me out or talk to me. I think you quit philosophy so you could write stories, a novel.

BREN

That's what a fiction-editor would think, no?

ELGA

Admit writing a story is what you came here to do.

BREN

No. It's not. It is not. I came here to fulfill a promise, pay a debt. If you like, picture the theorem as a mystery. I want to see how it turns out. I can do that only by writing it.

ELGA

....You really don't want to write again. Stories.

BREN

What's "want" got to do with it? I "want" to sing like Pavarotti! But take heart: A pride of philosophers will roar my paper is fiction.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

...J'you know the smart guy who wrote the Incompleteness Theorems for mathematics would eat only food his wife prepared? He thought everyone else was trying to poison him. When she got too sick to cook anymore, he starved to death. In Princeton. A logician for the ages, Kurt Godel. Quite irrational.

ELGA

You mention Godel because...?

BREN

He told himself paranoid stories. Shows a gift for storytelling can have its downside.

ELGA

....Talk about your parents. Please.

BREN

To most kids, their parents' lives seem like epilogue.

ELGA

You said they died together: "almost"....Where were you?

BREN

Cambridge. I got a call reporting an accident.

ELGA

An "accident"?

[BREN just nods.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

....She was from Ireland, your mother? What did she do?

BREN

She was from Galway. On the Atlantic coast. Over here, she was a hospital worker. But primarily she was...a homemaker.

ELGA

Smart like you?

BREN

Essie was a prodigy in ways I couldn't approach. By age ten she could play flute, fiddle, Irish banjo, pipes.

(stops himself; Irish accent:)

Is it an editarial repart y'doin', Mrs. Shelley?

ELGA

Please, Mr. Francis! Emily Post is quite clear about this. She says if we're screwing, it's proper to use first names. Here's a basic rule of fiction: excite no appetites you're not prepared to satisfy.

BREN

(Irish:)

"Fiction" does not apploy. Most half what Oi say is troo!

ELGA

(after a chastising squint:)

Finish bragging about your mother. I liked the sound.

BREN

(no accent)

...All the instruments were in aid of her real talent, her passion: dance. It was a few years before the Irish *RIVERDANCE* exploded onto the world stage. Essie was ranked at eleven, and won an all-ages national tournament when she was fourteen -- already tall, with a dancer's strong legs. She was the "prima" heir-apparent.

ELGA

Who told you that -- Essie?

BREN

No. She never mentioned it. Her older sister told me -- aunt Josie -- and others in Galway.

ELGA

Are you musical? A dancer?

BREN

(Irish accent:)

Oah, am Oi a danca!

[BREN pulls on shorts, jumps out of bed, does five seconds of Irish dancing -- stiff spine, busy footwork, bobbing knees, high heel-kick. He's bad at it, and his face says he knows it. Sudden reverie mode: dim lights, spots on BREN and on RADIO which plays a brief burst of Irish music and ram-tap dance. BREN hears it; ELGA, her back still to the RADIO, obviously does not. Reverie mode stops.]

BREN (CONT'D)

(no accent)

Hah? Agile? Zippy-quick? Hopeless? I don't have what she had. And the only instrument I can play is the radio.

ELGA

But not that one.

BREN

(Irish:)

Oah that's no a radio anymore. It's a dahl house naow. Haunted, I think it is. By familial ghoasts.

ELGA

...I wish I could hear you as a boy. Finding words.

BREN

(no accent)

Here's another basic rule: Avoid premature flashback.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

Don't expect readers to care about a character's background before you've made them care about his foreground.

ELGA

I already care about your foreground.

(fights smile)

I mean, as a writer. Okay, then more about your mother.

BREN

...Essie could also seem unneighborly. It wasn't that. She was simply -- closed for the season...

(puts a period on it:)

So: That's it. That's me Ma.

ELGA

Wait: You said she was the heir-apparent. What happened? Why'd she come to America?

BREN

Long story.

[ELGA returns to the bed.]

ELGA

"Long story". Your way of closing a subject. Strange for a storyteller.

BREN

Elga -- I am not good project-material. Either as a writer or an analysand.

[BREN back to the bed.]

ELGA

Wrong again -- you may be as good as they come. Say you won't fight me.

BREN

I won't fight you, we're now too "friendly" for that. But I know I can't help you.

ELGA

We'll see, won't we?

[Beat; to move them on, BREN gleams, lightens:]

BREN

I read once, the secret to getting good grades is to go over the material again and again.

(looks under the sheet)

Howzabout we review the middle part of today's lesson?

SCENE BREAK

[Daytime, three weeks later. The sound of a sand-rake and bucket being put into the toolshed off right. Enter BREN, right, in trunks and top. Goes to the computer; types. A sharp knock, and door right opens immediately. Enter KIT, unsmiling. Dressed informally -- she has just driven a long way. She is edgy, quick, attractive, hostile; leaves door open.]

KIT

Hello. You're our new...new. I'm Kit. I saw you come in from the beach.

BREN

(rises)

I'm Bren. You're...?

KIT

I'm the next generation -- they didn't mention me?

BREN

...They probably did.

KIT

And you just forgot. I saw you raking sand.

BREN

I try to keep the beach decent.

KIT

"Decent"?

BREN

...Tidy.

KIT

You find it homey here?

BREN

No -- my home was never like this.

KIT

I mean, all the necessities are supplied, I presume.

[KIT goes to door center, tries it; it is unlocked.]

KIT (CONT'D)

All the conveniences.

BREN

Your mother told me I could use the washer and dryer.

[KIT flops into chair.]

KIT

Oh? They don't have Anitje or Sheila do your laundry? Make your bed? Wash the stain-éd sheets?

BREN

I do my own laundry. Make my own bed.

KIT

Then lay in it. It's so colorful having European parents.

[BREN just gazes, not answering.]

KIT (CONT'D)

I hear you're highly...schooled. And writing something.Why don't you respond? Feeling guilty?

BREN

Yes. I'm guilty: I'm writing something.

KIT

While doing research on it. What's your novel about?

BREN

...I don't talk about it.

KIT

I can imagine. No matter what you think, rest assured Kurt won't publish it. He's not that European.

[BREN, still standing, remains silent, maintains unwavering eye-contact; finally it's KIT who moves -- to her feet.]

KIT (CONT'D)

What's this? You're supposed to be a great wordsmith. But of course what can you say?

[KIT strides right; meets ELGA entering.]

ELGA

Ah! So you've met Bren.

KIT

I think it's more Bren has met me. I've been forthcoming. But he -- contrary to his reputation -- seems to be tongue-tied.

ELGA

You must have asked about his writing.

KIT

I am struck by how much he resembles Teddy.

(to BREN:)

You're aware you're not the first tenant of our Euro-studio? Teddy was also said to be writing a novel, but actually he was only trying to flee his own mediocrity. What are you running from?

(MORE)

KIT (CONT'D)

(back to ELGA:)

This is disgraceful, Elga! How can you live this way?

(moving past ELGA)

I'm going into town. Now. I'm talking to Kurt.

ELGA

Oh I wish you would. He'll be so glad you're home.

[Exit KIT right; ELGA and BREN regard each other silently; we hear a car start up and go tearing out the drive. ELGA sits.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

Don't you love the energy of the young?

BREN

You have a daughter. Who lives here.

ELGA

Yes. But no. She graduated a week ago, but she's only now getting home. She won't be here much. She'll be off visiting.

BREN

She's gone to talk to your husband.

ELGA

She won't get satisfaction.

BREN

(sits)

What did you tell her?

ELGA

We have a new tenant in the studio. Writing.

BREN

Who's Teddy?

ELGA

Previous tenant. Two years ago.

BREN

I resemble Teddy?

ELGA

Not-at-all. ...Kit isn't a happy child. Whose fault it is -- or whether fault is even involved? But it can't be your fault so it shouldn't interrupt our "quest".

BREN

Your quest.

ELGA

Our quest.

SCENE BREAK

[Late afternoon, same day. BREN is prowling the room; at last he goes to RADIO, confronts it.]

BREN

All right -- what?

[Young male voice, Irish:]

RADIO

"A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Chapter One. Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a dancer coming down along the road, and this dancer --"

[Female Irish voice, young:]

-- "Mikey is coming!"

[Male Irish voice again:]

"His mother had a nicer smell than his father. She played on the piano for him to dance. He danced."

[Irish music and ram-tap dance from the RADIO. BREN turns it off. To RADIO:]

BREN

I never danced. I can't. I'm also not Dedalus. I'm Finnegan the hod-carrier.

[Off right we hear a car arrive; car door closes. Knock on door. BREN opens to KURT.]

KURT

Brendan.

BREN

Mr. Shelley.

KURT

Please -- "Kurt". Because, if you'll permit me, I'd like to use 'Brendan'.

(indicates chair)

May I?

BREN

Always.

[They both sit.]

KURT

I had an interesting talk today.

BREN

Oh?

KURT

With someone in England. Your name came up. He said, "Do you know whom you have there?"

(gives up the pretense)

...That's not what I came here to talk about. My daughter tells me she's been to see you.

BREN

Yes -- she has.

KURT

I'm sorry about all this, Brendan.

BREN

You're sorry?

KURT

Kit has a febrile imagination. If you'll forgive my talking familiarly about my own daughter...?

BREN

Whatever you want, Kurt.

KURT

I love Kit, and I admire her sharp mind. By the time she was ten she could beat me at chess. She's a computer whiz, my daughter. Everyone at college was in awe of her. But perhaps she's been too sharp. In high school she scorned the loutish boys -- they were far too dim for her. It was no better in college. She's now going on twenty-two, and I'm positive she's never...been with a man. I know: that sounds simplistic. But a new grace and tolerance sometimes does emerge when a woman...finds fulfilment. I had a cousin in Germany whose transformation was family lore.

BREN

I suppose it depends on the circumstance.

KURT

May be. Elga's sure Kit isn't gay or sexually cold. Her attitude has to do with me -- or perhaps Elga and me. Normal abnormal. Whatever the cause, Kit is fired by classic fantasies of sexual repression. When she spoke to me today, I flatly denied it. She said, "Well you would, wouldn't you?" Which is why I don't ask you to tell her it's not so -- she'd say the same thing to you. Did she accuse us of being "European"?

BREN

Yes, she did.

KURT

She has an outlandish notion of "European" -- drawn, I have to think, from early continental films. And perhaps George Grosz. Kit can be harsh, hard, but not always.

(MORE)

KURT (CONT'D)

This year, she gave her car to a classmate at Brown. The girl's car was stolen, and her family has to worry about money.

BREN

Kit went without?

KURT

For a while. She finally bought a new one. She could have had anything, she chose that Ford. Another scholarship-girl had a bad accident and it was Kit who got her to hospital, logged her into a private room, and covered her hospital bill. Harsh or not, she's still our Kit, and when I see how discontented she is, I grasp at remedies....Do you think she's attractive?

BREN

Under all the anger?

KURT

I admit she can get upset. Once when she was fifteen, Elga was driving her to tennis practice when they were forced off the road by a man red with road-rage. He was shouting and trying to pull open Elga's door. Kit jumped out her side, ran around and crowned the man with her tennis racquet. She kept bashing him until Elga got out and pulled her away. Turned out she'd actually cracked the man's skull.

(smiling at the memory)

Lucky for him they weren't going to baseball practice!...I'm asking: Could you imagine ever...spending time with her?

BREN

Kurt, I have to stop you right there. I have an assignment. That I work at every day, all day. Even when I'm raking sand it's on my mind.

KURT

Understood. Ah, well. I'm sure Kit would call the idea outrageous in a father. But I can't help feeling her... loneliness is a major factor in her unhappiness.

BREN

You realize your daughter hates the sight of me?

KURT

No -- she hates the thought of you. I don't say a good... affair is all Kit needs to become content and civil. No one's quite that simple, and she is anything but simple. What I do know is Kit, the way she is, is painful -- for her to be, and us to see.

(rises; different subject:)

Elga's told me what she's doing with you.

BREN

Yes?

KURT

I've never seen a more reliable instinct for what's there. If she says you should be writing a story, I'd listen to her.

BREN

I listen. She does ask pointed questions.

KURT

She puts questions so you can hear your answers. She'd have been an excellent analyst. Brendan, I apologize for hinting that you pursue. But you can know this: if anything happens because Kit pursues, there will be no parental outrage.

[Exit KURT up. RADIO emits brief, mournful Irish-pipe-weep.]

SCENE BREAK

6

[Two-and-a-half weeks later; early afternoon; BREN and ELGA enter at doorway right. ELGA glances out the "window" front-right.]

ELGA

There's Kit on the beach. She just came back from a beach on Martha's Vineyard. Since she got home, she's also been to beaches in Maine and Cuba -- no more than three days anywhere, and I doubt more than an hour on any beach. Restive woman.

[ELGA sits. Unasked, BREN brings her a drink from the frig. He sits.]

BREN

Now she's out of college, what?

ELGA

Some travel. She's mentioned Iceland.

BREN

Why Iceland?

ELGA

Bobby Fischer is buried there. First she'll bow -- out of respect for the great chess-player. Then she'll pee on the anti-American anti-Semite's grave. Kit's brilliant at internet research -- plans itineraries, becomes a walking guidebook.

BREN

Itineraries for whom?

ELGA

For all three of us, when she was younger. We used to take trips together. Now she goes alone. Kit has loads of "friends", no confidante. At Brown, officially she shared a double-room in a dorm, but she never went there.

(MORE)

ELGA (CONT'D)

Once, two undergrads were sitting on the grass when Kit walked past. One of the women said to the other, "See her? That's your roommate." Kit had found a small off-campus condo on the internet, and she bought it without even seeing it. She gave it to Brown when she left...Kit'll never have to earn a living if she doesn't want to. But her generator runs too strong for her to do nothing, something will ignite her.....So where are you? Are you making progress?

BREN

On the paper, you mean.

ELGA

Well of course -- where else?

BREN

Yes, I'm making progress. Not today, though, because I remembered a story-idea that came to me a few months ago.

ELGA

I want to hear it.

BREN

...We had a mate on our high school track team named Evidence Wade. 'Evidence' was his official birth certificate name -- what do you s'pose it meant? Ev came out for track because he thought he was the fastest kid in the world. That was everything to him: flat-out speed, and the only thing worth being: a sprinter. Two try-out sprints in which he finished last, and that was that. So he got dressed -- army fatigues with half a dozen pockets filled with junk, and heavy army boots -- and he went slumping off the field. On the way, he passed the high-jump pit. Saw these guys in shorts throwing themselves up towards the bar and always knocking it off. In a casual bye-bye gesture to track, he charged the bar, leaped, and went soaring over, junk, boots, and all. Before the season was out, jumping had become for him the only worthy event in our arena, the heights of hope.

ELGA

...You thought of it. But you didn't write it.

BREN

Correct. That sketch was only the beginning, and maybe the middle. If I were writing -- which I am not -- I'd have to see its ending.

[From off right we hear KIT's voice.]

KIT (OFF)

-- Oh! Hey! OW! Hey stop!
(screams)

ELGA

Kit!

[BREN is instantly out the door; we hear him snatch something from the tool shed. ELGA runs after him. The following sub-scene OFF is perhaps heard from speakers right.]

STRANGE MALE (OFF)

Cut this shit! Don't gimme trouble --

BREN (OFF)

-- OFF, Bo! --

STRANGE MALE (OFF)

Fuck are you? --

BREN (OFF)

-- NOW!

STRANGE MALE (OFF)

AAGH! What the fuck!!??
(voice unsteady)

-- Looka this! I'm bleedin'!

BREN (OFF)

Stand up!

ELGA (OFF)

What's happening? Kit!

STRANGE MALE (OFF)

Are you nuts?! I oughta cut you!

BREN (OFF)

Oh try that! And all your troubles will be over!

STRANGE MALE (OFF)

Hey!

ELGA (OFF)

Bren, don't! Let him go! They'll get him! Kit --

STRANGE MALE (OFF)

(from a distance)

-- You're a menace to society! I'm callin' a cop!

ELGA (OFF)

Can you walk?

KIT

(unsteady voice approaching, right)

Yes I can walk! I'm okay! I'm okay! God damn!

ELGA

Here! In here.

[ELGA enters with KIT in swimsuit looking rocky, then BREN carrying a long-arm scythe which he places in a corner.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

Sit down. Let me look.

[KIT sits; ELGA examines her lower leg.]

KIT

He was drunk. I could smell him.

ELGA

I see blood. He tore your skin.

BREN

Maybe a toe-nail. They were long.

ELGA

We should have this looked at.

KIT

I just want to lie down.

ELGA

I'll drive you in.

KIT

I'll drive myself in.

ELGA

Naturally.

KIT

God that was rank! Where'd he come from? Did he just walk up the beach?

BREN

I've seen him before. Roaming the shore.

ELGA

I'll phone the police. You have your cell?

KIT

It's on the beach. I don't think the drunk'll return. Not after our tenant carved his ass up.

ELGA

I'll be back.

[ELGA exits up; BREN sits on hassock.]

BREN

Z'it hurt?

KIT

I don't even know, everything feels rattled. Yes, a little. I guess I owe you thanks. So, "Thanks"... That's never happened to me before. I'm ashamed to say I was frightened.

BREN

Who wouldn't be frightened. Too bad you didn't have your tennis racquet with you.

KIT

Oh, she told you about that, did she? You didn't look frightened -- charging up with a scythe.

BREN

I didn't have time to think. If I had, it's likely I'd have been quaking. Thinking often does that to me.

KIT

Maybe because you don't think often enough?

(makes a gesture of concession)

A bit much. I admit I was glad to see you. Which I can't say I was when Elga brought you in last night. Have you had dinner with them before?

BREN

A few times.

KIT

They always have dinner together, except when they travel. In two weeks you'll have the solitude you claim to want -- they'll be at sales-conference...This is better, I think. Almost stopped. Shit! -- my own beach. This never happens anywhere else I go.

BREN

Are they always places with beaches?

KIT

In the summer. The week of their conference I'll go to Cape Cod. Elga's my father's "senior editor", he defers to her, says she's the best reader he's ever known. Can't think what the world's readers must be like.

BREN

I found three books here translated by your mother.

KIT

She's highly verbal. So last night was meant as a treat.

BREN

No treat for you, I could see.

[KIT peers at BREN. Enter ELGA up; BREN rises.]

KIT

Ah -- Madame Schellenburg.

ELGA

I called nine-one-one and told them he was headed north along the shore -- bleeding. They'll catch him. Then I talked to Lew Gaines. He says you should come in. Go. He'll get you in and out.

KIT

God. What a pain in the ass.
(rises)

BREN

Can you drive? You said you were rattled.

KIT

Yes I can drive! I was born to drive -- I have dozens of speeding tickets to prove it!

BREN

They only prove you were born to crash.

KIT

....I thanked our tenant.

[Exit KIT up. ELGA and BREN sit.]

ELGA

That was jarring. I'm still shaking.

BREN

She's fine. She'll be sitting on her beach tomorrow.

ELGA

The thug won't sit anywhere for a while! Kurt was right to want a man around. You were wild out there.

BREN

Less than I seemed. I was acting the part. I've had practice.

ELGA

So I've heard. I'm told you had another kind of fame at Cambridge -- something to do with a viscount's broken arm.

BREN

Now, wait. That man was trying to make off with a friend's camera...But I did get...intemperate. In those days I was a big irritable-colon. Luckily, a giant the viscount wasn't.

ELGA

Why?

BREN

Because his father the earl wasn't?

ELGA

Why were you a big irritable colon?

BREN

..."Long story"...Have you stopped shaking?

ELGA

Yes...I myself have a whole other life you don't see -- two charities I put time into, I'm on the Zoning Board of the City of Stamford, I'm in a lofty online linguist forum, and a base e-mail klatsch with a dozen old friends swapping political rants and dirty jokes. In March I gave a talk to four-hundred people on what it's like to read submissions in eight languages for Shelley Books.

Meantime hardly an hour goes by without thoughts about you. Each time I go way from here I immediately start looking forward to the next time. Tell me you do too.

(touches his hand reassuringly)

I'm not asking for expressions of love -- let's hope that doesn't come into it. I'm just looking for some signs the writer doesn't constantly let his brain stifle his heart.

BREN

I think about you. And others. I look at the doll house and I think of my grandfather. He was a would-be storyteller in his early teens. He'd listen to his radio, then go try to write a story set in Rumania, or Tibet, or Brazil. Later, he went to sea for three years, came home with a long sailor's diary -- which eventually he decided was no good. So he burned it, and became a builder. He built the family home, on the Atlantic shore west of Galway-town. He was very strong.

KIT

"Was"? He's dead?

BREN

Oh, years ago. I visited his grave. Small, country cemetery, but a big family plot. Essie belongs there, next to him and my grandmother....J'you know there's no name on John Keats's gravestone? All he wanted was the line, "Here lies one whose name was writ on water."

ELGA

...When'd you first want to write?

BREN

When I was eight.

ELGA

Eight!? You began writing at eight?

BREN

No. Yes and no. I began drawing comic strips. Story-boards. An artist I wasn't, but I knew all the nerdy things -- perspective, anatomy, proportions.

[BREN traces features on ELGA's face...]

BREN (CONT'D)

Your ears run from your eyebrows to the bottom of your irresistible nose. Your perfect mouth is a third of the way from your nose to the bottom of your kissable chin.

ELGA

You seducer. You've used this technique before.

BREN

Once or twice. When I succeeded, I felt like a burglar.

[BREN pulls back; sits.]

ELGA

(immigrant "German":)

...Und, ven you your writing began, vat prompted you? Tale doktor: Vas dare a moment, ja?

BREN

Dare vas!

(to his feet, a raconteur at large)

It was a light and cloud-free night! A Friday -- which meant my father was gone for the next thirty hours: He worked nights, and Saturday was his drinking day. My mother and I were watching an old black-and-white movie on tv, about a nineteenth-century guy who wants to be a storyteller. Comes a moment when we're looking down at a blank sheet of paper. Then we see his hand, with a pen. The hand starts to move --

(mimes writing)

"The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, by... Mark...Twain". He's writing a story! Ecstatic shiver! Next morning I ran all the way to the library to take out my first novel --

ELGA

-- Lemme guess -- *The Great Brain!*

BREN

(grimaces, shakes head)

Tom Sawyer. And *Alice in Wonderland*. When I read them -- black-and-white went sudden technicolor! This was what to do with my life!: Write stories! The key to complete happiness!

ELGA

Why won't you give the key one last try? Write one of those stories that come to you so easily.

BREN

Elga, I did. Try. All this past winter, trying again after almost ten years. Then, a while ago, as a gesture to your efforts -- your doubts about my doubts -- I gave myself a homework assignment --

ELGA

-- "Homework"?!

(London East End:)

(MORE)

ELGA (CONT'D)

Blimey! I though' I was curin' yuh cerebrals! Yew mean all this screwin' was for nuffink?

BREN

My assignment was to take some scenes from real life and recreate them, see if I could deliver the feeling of those original moments. The moments I chose were things you and I have said and done in this studio...I gave my homework an F. I flunked, Elga. I'm missing an essential storyteller-ingredient.

ELGA

What ingredient is that?

BREN

...Alchemy. A transmuting blend of memory, imagination and sensibility.

ELGA

You think you lack that.

BREN

No. I'm just saying it to tease.

ELGA

...You think you're right about your theorem, though.

BREN

Oh yeah. But every philosopher who ever wrote about language and reality thought he'd nailed it. Frege, [FRAY-ga] Russell, Wittgenstein, Quine, Putnam, Kripke -- and a hundred others. They had a knack for correcting, but then their corrections needed correcting. In time all their roads petered out in unpaved wilderness.

ELGA

But you're not petering out.

BREN

Not yet. But I will. At best I'll pave only the next section. I won't complete the road. About storytelling I agree, Elga: it'd be lovely, a great thing. "Art" may be the one place we can make incompleteness back off. A little. Sometimes.

(lightens)

I got trouble, Mrs. Shelley: My Incompleteness Theorem is three-quarters complete! Maybe I can delay it: I could work on this idea I have for a somber tale of passion and epistemology. What think?

ELGA

Too crassly commercial.

BREN

(Irish:)

Oi shouldn't wroite that? Oah, dahrn! Just what Sister Mary Margaret told me. About another matter.

[ELGA rises.]

ELGA

I need to call Kurt, tell him the vagrant has been vanquished.

BREN

Wait -- the day Kit got home and rushed off to see Kurt, he talked to me about it. I've been waiting for you to mention it, but you never have.

ELGA

What was there to mention?

BREN

He denied everything she said about us.

ELGA

He doesn't know about us yet. I haven't got round to telling him.

BREN

Kit went to his office to tell him. To rip both of us.

ELGA

Kit doesn't know about us either. She wasn't going there to rip me. You maybe, but not me. Except as a passive European wife...You really don't know what Kit was raging about. Kit was ripping Kurt for keeping another pretty boy in the studio. Another playmate. Teddy was Kurt's lover back here for five months.

[Exit ELGA. From RADIO, dancers rap out a punctuation: tap-tap-BAM!]

SCENE BREAK

7

[Nighttime, four days later; reverie lighting, Irish ram-tap dance on RADIO. BREN sits alone, holding a cognac snifter and a cigar. On the table is an empty snifter and bottle, an ashtray with a second cigar, and a small bowl of fruit. Enter KURT, opening fresh bottle; reverie stops.]

KURT

It's good to relax completely like this from time to time. It's a rarity for you, I think?

BREN

I was this "relaxed" once in college. I remember I was convinced everything I said was hilarious. It was a grim night for my companions.

KURT

Elga says you go for a jog three or four times a week. Do you think about philosophy when you run?

BREN

Kurt, that'd be a good jog spoiled.

[Enter KIT up, plainly irritable.]

KIT

Here as commanded.

KURT

Ah! Kit. Elga's off with the mayor and his gang to rezone our unfair city, and I told Kit she had to join me for a while with our learned tenant.

KIT

Oh lovely -- cigars.

KURT

I've been angling to get Brendan to tell us why he's given up academic philosophy.

KIT

Why do you care? Philosophy's not your thing.

KURT

I have reasons. You try. Maybe you have a better angle.

KIT

Angling's not my style. Direct question: --

BREN

(weary, broad Irish:)

-- Oah here we goah.

KIT

...Direct question: Why'd you give up philosophy?

BREN

Causes tinnitus. Philosophical ringing in the ears. Also, affects the blood, creates hot-air-bubbles -- which, it's well-known, can stop the heart.

KIT

You may need dialysis.

BREN

Ah -- a figurative thought. I like it.

KIT

Who said I was being figurative? Why'd you quit philosophy?

BREN

Because I am a serious man. Not for me the anything-for-a-laugh attitude of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Immanuel Kant. Which one would you want to be?

KIT

I'd never waste time wanting to be something I can't be.

BREN

How do you know if you don't try things, Kit? Finding out what you can't do -- and can: Could be as revolutionary as puberty. ...Myself, I'd rather be yearning for something I can never do, than doing something I can never yearn for.

KURT

A fair cognac, this. Evocative, I hope.

[KURT adds to Bren's snifter.]

BREN

(Irish:)

Oah that's too much thank God.

KIT

Is he drunk?

BREN

No. It's the philosophy. Makes you sound strange, say weird things. I should admit, philosophy-talk can be soothing. Do it long enough, puts people to sleep.

KIT

So you never talk it anymore.

BREN

I've done it. In fact, I'm sought-after for it. By battlefield-medics for example. "You, Francis! Talk philosophy to this poor lad! We have to operate and we've run out of morphine!"

[KURT laughs; KIT stays reserved.]

KIT

He's not going to give you a straight answer. To your question.

KURT

Seriously, Brendan, I'd like to understand. All right, I'll come clean. Now Cambridge knows where you are, they're telling your pursuers. A man from Princeton called, a man from Brown. And a Professor Rado at Harvard, who says they've offered you an endowed chair in philosophy, and you won't even discuss it.

BREN

(serious:)

...I did that for ten years. Studied it, then taught it. And that taught me it's over -- when I finish this paper.

KURT

They'll be disappointed.

BREN

I tend to do that.

KURT

Rado said you have a remarkable philosophical mind. "Unfettered", he called it. About to shake towers ivory and Ivy.

BREN

Rado is a tolerant man. What he calls "unfettered", people in England called "unhinged".

KURT

Not many of them. Brendan, I make a dozen calls abroad every day. By now Elga and I have a fair picture of your reputation.

BREN

(Irish:)

-- Which Oi denoi. Oi wasn't unhinged. Oi'd only changed hinges.

KIT

What's this come-and-go brogue? You seem to have gained an accent.

BREN

Doan'tcha mean Oi've lahst an accent?

KIT

If you wanted to be a writer why'd you go into philosophy?

BREN

(no accent)

Because it was the philosophers who gave me a scholarship! That alone should've told me these people think funny.

KIT

I obviously meant, why not a scholarship in English?

BREN

I felt the way they taught "understanding literature" back then was asinine, and I said so.

KIT

"Asinine"?

BREN

Damaging. "Read stories for their themes, kids -- what the story means!" In their method, "themes" weren't topics, they were lessons: 'War is hell, jealousy is bad, man needs his illusions. You can't recover the past, you can't escape the past.' A million awful stories can be said to have exactly those august platitudes as themes.

KIT

It's a teaching technique, Professor. Any lowly assistant could tell you they believe reading for themes helps students pay attention to what the author wrote.

BREN

So would reading it for misspelled words. It's harmful to steer kids toward hackneyed sermons and away from the real rewards. More important: Never teach a kid that stories have a "the meaning of". They don't.

(pauses, breathes)

My attitude convinced my high school teachers I was unsuited for a college English curriculum.

(Irish:)

And for diplomacy!

KIT

How does any of that get a scholarship in philosophy?

BREN

(no accent)

That, and Lewis Carroll, and a hundred logic and language books I found in the local library where I hung out. In my steam about the high-school teaching, I wrote an essay: "'Meaning', and the Myth of 'Understanding'". It was so naively untamed it got me into Princeton.

KURT

You enjoyed it there?

BREN

I did my duty -- studied philosophy all day. At night I slipped women into my room: Lizzie, Catherine, Daisy, Esme, Molly Bloom, all whispering, "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy!" They could've said there are fewer things -- either charge will stick.

KURT

Is Kit right, Brendan? That I'm not going to get an answer?

BREN

Kurt, you're a publisher, of narratives, so you'll understand when I say that question would call for a "show-don't-tell" answer.

KIT

What? No. Give us the "tell" answer. Tell us.

BREN

...I left because philosophy should be a controlled substance. For those at risk -- like me -- it can be as mind-distorting as LSD.

KIT

There it is, Kurt. He's in recovery. From thinking.

KURT

I was just impressed by how much Rado was impressed. He's heard bits of Brendan's -- "Incompleteness Theorem for Language" is it? Rado and the Cambridge people are all convinced Brendan as a philosopher is a sure thing.

KIT

Really. I never met a "sure thing" before. Are you a "sure thing"?

BREN

At what? Seeing the world as we stipulate it, or as it is?

KIT

Uh-oh. Careful, Kurt -- you'll have a philosopher full of cognac explaining "the world as it is". At which point even I'll want to be smoking something.

BREN

(brightly Irish)

Oi recognize that toan! You too have the makings of a pheelahsapher Oi think! Oah! Nasty thing to say. Sorry!

KIT

Is the drunken brogue your idea of being creative??!!

BREN

(no accent, no drunkenness)

...No. I don't know what its function is.

KIT

...So let's hear some philosophy-talk. From the "sure thing".

BREN

While you poise like a lizard with a long, long tongue to flash out and bag the bug.

KIT

Well, now, if that bugs the philosopher...

[KIT flicks her tongue out and back.]

BREN

No, I'm used to it. Been there often....Let's see -- what can I teach you?

KIT

Judging from what I've heard so far, the question may be: What can I teach you? Why don't you tell us your Theorem?

BREN

That'd be too... No.

KIT

You think it'd be too hard for us. For our handicapped heads.

BREN

It's just not interesting to...normal people.

KIT

You wanted to say "average" people, didn't you! Kurt, I sense something suspiciously evasive in our professor.

BREN

...I think, for you, I'll talk a few bits and pieces: Words, names, meanings. I'll try to keep it seemingly simple.

KIT

You won't have to do that, Professor. I have some familiarity with languages.

BREN

And maybe I can teach you about sound. In both senses.

KIT

What "both senses"?

BREN

Text and tone.

KIT

What's that mean?

BREN

Is the heckler ready for the "show" answer?

KIT

Yeah. Show us. Distort my mind.

[BREN sizes-up KIT; his gaze sharpens. KURT smiles, a match-maker succeeding. BREN will rise, prowl, display the command of certain intimidating and theatrical academic stars. No Irish, no hint of drink:]

BREN

Back in the eighteen-nineties, over a good claret at the high table, one philosopher said to another,

(a touch of high Brit:)

"I see there's a German chap has his leather knickers in a twist over the way words work. Granted, he's only a muddled Hun. However, the Queen's English is a bit untidy. Full of rubbish like vagueness, irony, double-meanings. Buggers up understanding one another. I suppose it's up to us to put it right -- "

KIT

-- Hold on. We're all college graduates here. Is this going to be your canned performance for freshmen? Verbatim?

BREN

Not much. I keep trying it in different ways, still groping for the most effective.

KIT

Can't find the best words, Professor? After years of trying?

BREN

Can't find the best sounds.... During the next century of "putting it right", they assumed they were Merlins -- Wizards who could create new realms of abstractions that would eliminate ambiguities and bridge the gaps in understanding. But their abstractions were non-entities, their bridges were mirages, and they made other errors -- like assuming words, and names, and *Hamlet* "have meanings". Problem: Such things neither "mean" nor "have".

KIT

Did I just hear you say words don't have meanings? We must lend you a nice little book we have. It's called a 'dictionary'.

BREN

I've seen those. As a kid I even read a nice little one, all the way through. Didn't find a single meaning. All I found were dictionary definitions --

KIT

-- Only definitions! Scandalous! Kurt, would you help the Professor write this down?: A definition is a meaning.

BREN

No. A dictionary-definition is only this: The result of a lexicographer's attempt to write something such that reading it will cause certain notion to rise in the reader's mind -- notion that's commonly, roughly, like what's in minds of people familiar with the word.

KIT

...And how could that possibly happen if words don't have meanings?

BREN

How? When you hear any sound, this pullulating lump of links retrieves its unruly associations with the sound. Let's learn some Swedish.

[BREN picks up an apple, displays it.]

BREN (CONT'D)

Apelsin! [AH-pell-see-in] Apelsin! Apelsin! An hour from now, if I say "apelsin", you'll connect the sound with the apple-image you just stored in your head. You'd say you've learned "the meaning of" a Swedish word. Language-learning is always like that.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

Say "Milk!" to a girl every time you give her a glass of the white stuff, and she'll recall the white stuff whenever she hears "Milk".

KIT

That's your profound Theorem? That made the Brits go weak in the knees? That is embarrassingly obvious!

BREN

Good. You agree. What's less obvious is this: You've just explained the "learning of a word" entirely in terms of a sound and an associated memory. No alleged mind-independent "real meanings" are required -- to account for what goes on when we learn to talk -- and then talk.

KIT

...This is ludicrous. You're supposed to be this big guru of "communication", and you say words are meaningless?

BREN

I'm saying words don't have intrinsic meanings. I'm not the first guy to say that -- but those others --
(*shakes his head in mock disdain*)
-- they were crackpots. Now a confession. I tricked you: When you say "Apelsin!" to most Swedes, the image that comes to their minds is not of an apple --
(*holds up an orange*)
-- it's the image of an orange! I misled -- not about imaginary entities called "meanings", only about the conditioned workings of most Swedish minds.

KIT

Our Professor?! Misled us?!

BREN

Damn. I'm just like those other guys after all. You've been misled about this all your life. You've been told you learn "meanings". You don't. You've been told a definition is a "statement of a meaning". It isn't. Wittgenstein said the meaning of a word is "its use" by the people in a given language-community. But this implies they all associate the same notions with a given word. They can't. Their notions are as dissimilar as their varying brains and experiences.

KIT

You believe this stuff.

BREN

I believe this stuff.

KIT

But it's so blinkered! You've never noticed how much we understand one another when we talk?

BREN

Oh, our talk-sounds often work well enough -- in the kitchen, on a ball field or a battlefield. Because we all link simple sounds like Milk! Run! Shoot! with similar raw sensations. But philosophy, politics, religion -- when we hear their verbal psychedelics -- 'meaning', 'understanding', 'freedom', 'art', 'salvation' -- we conjure notions that are abstract, various, and fuzzy.

J'you know before Rorschach used ink-blots for his test, he tried sounds? "Vhat comes to mynt vhen I say 'Art'!" Some said Garfunkel, some said Picasso, some said a Hail Mary. In fact, Kit, contrary to what you no doubt think, not only are there no meanings, there are no words out there.

KIT

Excuse me?! Now you're saying words don't exist? I do believe I saw words printed on paper this very day!

BREN

No. You saw ink on paper; you've never seen a "word" in your life. Or heard one. "Foopgoom!" Did you just hear a word? How would you tell? Run to your little dictionary? The latest ones have lots of "new words". But they're only sounds they've at last decided to call "words". What was their "is-ness" before?

KIT

Their "is-ness"?

BREN

You know -- that fictitious "essence" thing that you believe makes an object not just what you call it, but what it "really IS"! All "nesses" -- including "wordness" -- are mental inventions, like unicorns. And "souls".

KIT

Not fictitious; some sounds are words, and some just aren't --

BREN

-- I'll bet you never thought about how some lucky sounds get to become "words", while others have to remain "sounds-second-class" until somewhere a bell rings. I'll tell you how.

One winter in Switzerland, I found a thing in my room that I called a 'foopgoom'. I thought it was so apt a label, I put my case to Plato and his word-and-thing certification-committee way up there. In their meeting last Thursday, they officially declared "foopgoom" to be a real word! And they made it official by ringing a big bell they call the verbell! That Swiss object now really is a foopgoom!...Get the point, Kit?

KIT

That's a bad joke.

BREN

Isn't it!...Should I stop there?

KIT

No! You're nowhere! You think you're going to persuade anyone there are no words or meanings?

BREN

Okay. I'll noise on.

KIT

Stop a minute. Here's a sound problem. I know it's old, but let's see you tackle it. "If a tree falls in the forest and there's no one around to hear it, is there a sound?"

BREN

Oh wow! The "sound waves" puzzle, right? With no warning you want me to untangle a deep conundrum like that?

(BREN indicates KURT and KIT, not the audience.)

In front of all these people?

KIT

Just do it.

BREN

You're citing two separate events. One is a physical event in the world outside your skull -- vibrations in the physical air. The other is a mental event - the aural sensations, the hearing that occurs inside the skull. Can you see that distinction, Kit?

KIT

Yes, I can see that distinction, thank you. You might speed things up a bit, Professor.

BREN

Call the vibrating air "noise", and only the aural sensation "sound". There's certainly "noise" when the tree falls, but no "sound" -- if there aren't any ears around to hear. When you call air waves "sound waves", you're calling two different things the same, and puzzlement is sure to follow. Or, worse, no puzzlement: just oblivious confidence. Did I untie your naughty test, Kit?

KIT

...I said it was an old one. You were going to persuade me there are no words or meanings.

BREN

You -- and some philosophers -- are like children who believe in tree-spirits. In effect, you think inside every "word" dwells an abstract imp. On yonder shelves, you assume there are a million inkyimps carrying out abstract actions twenty-four-seven: "naming", "referring", "signifying" "standing for",..."meaning". Wonder the shelf don't collapse under all that truckin'.

KIT

Now you're trying too hard.

BREN

That's a weakness of mine.

KIT

I mean, you can't blind me with your special terms.

BREN

I'm not trying to. All those terms for what words are allegedly doing? I want you to see them for what they are: Facade words. As familiar -- and as empty -- as the storefronts on the set of a Hollywood western.

I'll rephrase it, because this is crucial -- and hard to reel in. I can only offer it. It's up to you to grasp it. If you find it too hard, just let it go. I wouldn't want you to hurt yourself.

KIT

Do you hear how disdainful you sound? How superior?

BREN

I do, yes. That's deliberate tonight. Kind of you to notice.

KIT

...All right, try me, with your "crucial" hard-to-grasp offering.

BREN

Those imps are as mythical as angels. What you call "words": audible or inky, they can't DO anything. The ink on paper -- that you'd point at and say "That's a word" -- is as inert as stone. When you read, you're inclined to say it's the "word" that's acting, but all the action is by your brain.

(lightly taps KIT's head)

It's recalling memories connected with those sounds and inky shapes. And piecing together new notions you've never had before. Treat a "word" the way you would a footprint. "That footprint is suspicious!" No. It's not suspicious; you are.

KIT

Wait --

BREN

-- Suppose I say "hypostatize" to you. What notion rises?

KIT

..."Hypostatize"? Everyone knows that. It's a kinky sex position from the Kama Sutra...You made the word up. To me, it's meaningless.

BREN

Right. 'It's "meaningless" to you.' Which you say because the sound "hypostatize" connects with nothing in your memory.

KIT

...But 'hot' and 'milk' do connect! So do 'justice', 'beauty', 'art'. You trying to tell me they're meaningless?

BREN

You wouldn't call them meaningless! Because if anything comes to your mind when you hear my talk-noise, you'd say: There! That's obviously "the meaning for me"! Let's call that notion a "me-meaning". A me-meaning can be okay -- as long as it isn't thought to be "the" "real" mind-independent "meaning of the word". Those notions -- your "me-meanings" -- where do the pieces come from, and how do they get assembled?

KIT

..."How do they get assembled"? I'm not sure what you're --

BREN

-- When I say "apelsin", or "milk", "democracy", "designate" -- or even "Cleopatra!" -- what comes into your head are solely bits of memory retrieved and mosaicked by your racy brain as it frisks the familiar sound, and creates new me-meaning.

KIT

-- Wait. Slow down --

BREN

-- You think your notion of Cleopatra comes from a bolt shafted down by Plato or Zeus?

KIT

Slow down!

KURT

But don't stop. I know Kit is fascinated. Which fascinates me.

BREN

Don't ask how "words" work. Ask how the mind works. How the great indoctrineers worked: Hitler, Lenin, Churchill, Freud, Plato, Mohammed, hellfire preachers and other politicians, each with his ink-filled "Good Book". All of them skillful, infectious, metastatic, molders of memory -- and therefore of thought.

KIT

Ooh! Did you just get agitated?

BREN

Not just. If I say "Truth", "Belief", "Existence", "Plato!!" -- I'm sure you'd insist you have me-meanings for all those sounds. You'd insist it because when you hear them, notions readily come to mind, yes?Yes?

KIT

...Yes. Of course. So?

BREN

I'll bet they're not the notions that come to my mind!... And there's no "Big Book of Real Meanings" on a shelf up in Plato's heaven to decide who's right.

KIT

Screw Plato's Big Book! Just look it up in a dictionary! Webster's Third! If it's there, it's a word, and there's its meaning!"

BREN

That's a nice arbitrary rule to settle disputes. "I stipulate if it's in Webster's Third it's a word." But suppose it isn't in The American Heritage Dictionary? Stipulated definitions and rules are wholly mental concoctions. They can't create "real" heavens, angels, words, or mind-independent meanings.

As for meanings, have some fun: Look up 'run' in Webster's Third some time. Or 'set'. Ess-ee-tee. You'll find over a hundred sub-entries for each. Wow! So many meanings for such short words! No. Those aren't inherent meanings; they're only attempts to describe various notions people might have in mind as they make the noise or hear the sound.

KIT

Who gives a shit about all this!?

BREN

Hey -- I predicted you wouldn't. But ideally you would. Because the fact is you need it. Sound-memories are psychoactive, hallucinatory. You need to develop allergic reactions to faulty sounds. Like that deluding figment 'IS'. "What IS a miracle? What IS a sin? What IS art?" The very form of the question gulls the mind into accepting the thing exists in the first place.

KIT

-- Not, not --... Well... Never mind, go on. Go on.

BREN

So-called "words" are like bacteria. Some helpful, some harmful. If you don't have -- up here -- an immune system to attack bad sounds, you're in for trouble. "Who ARE you?" Poisonously bad form, that. Spit it out. J'you know that 'to gull' and 'to swallow' were once synonyms?

KIT

....You're saying....Okay...okay, maybe I see where you're going...

(new energy:)

One meaning I don't believe exists is "the meaning of life". The witless "Why are we here?" question.

BREN

...That's a different use of the utterance, "meaning". When people use it that way, they usually have in mind some ragged notion they'd call "purpose".

KIT

-- Well that's what I don't believe -- that there's a purpose, or a purposer, behind any of us.

BREN

...That's a subject, but it's not this subject.

KIT

I just wanted you to know that.

BREN

Why do I believe I already did know that -- about you? On the other hand, if you want to call whatever comes to your mind a "me-meaning", you can argue your life has a headful of me-meanings. But they're your head's meanings, not the words'.

KIT

You know what I'm saying.

BREN

Back to the "meanings" you do believe in --

KIT

I haven't taken any position on that. I'm just listening.

BREN

This is you "just listening"? ...Then listen to these: "This drawing is honest realism, but that drawing by Klimt is obscene!" "This Norman Rockwell painting is "pretty"; but the one by Rembrandt is art!" "All Muslims want to kill you if you can't believe their Koran!" "He's just a greedy Jew, a greasy spic, a bog-Irish mick who's the dumbest white man I've ever known." Say such things in front of a child enough, and she'll conjure fuzzy notions roughly like what's on your mind. And in a blurry way, she'll think those "meanings for her" are the "real" thing.

KIT

I never exactly said I think "meanings" are what you call "mind-independent" things.

KURT

Brendan does have a nimble mind, don't you think, Kit?

KIT

...Very nimble. Very adroit.

BREN

Is that good or bad? Every teacher has to be nimble. I used lots of kitchen-sounds in the classroom. I used 'is', I used 'word'. I even used 'mean', as a verb.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

Because I wanted to put the class in at least the same vicinity as this new stuff they'd hear. In class, I made other noises, to occasion different notion-burps. Like this: "Real", non-notional "meanings" are an anxious fiction, like non-corporeal "souls". We invented them to impute authority to our talk, and durability to our lives.

KIT

And we invented a "Creator" to give "meaning" to our existence.

BREN

Ah, lucky Kit: You escaped your calling.

KIT

Meaning? I mean, what are you saying?

BREN

That you may have a flair for philosophizing...I wrote an article about a facade verb, "The Amazing Act of 'Having'". Said "having" isn't just an invisible event, it's imaginary, a verbal dodge, "having" never happens. I sent it to the Reader's Digest, but they claim they don't have it.

KIT

Do you lecture like this? Say these things to students?

BREN

I did if the students were bright. And nimble. And adroit. ...The bigamy of "language" is what makes possible its inexhaustible company. A bad philosopher would pave over the poet's garden with ontofactive stipulations. "What?! Is 'ontofactive' a word?" Ah-ah: Careful: Philosopher General's Warning: All questions of the form "Is X a Y?" are hazardous to your thinking. Nothing is anything. Nothing has "is-ness". Nothing has "has-ness". In fact there are no "nesses" out there. J'ever notice when Hamlet wanted to sound insane he talked like a philosopher?

(to KURT:)

You met Heidegger. His head defied a law of physics: It produced sonorities in a vacuum. As did his girlfriend Hannah Arendt [HAHN-ah AHR-rendt]. "All thinking is in words," she said. "Speechless thought cannot exist." Imagine how impoverished her thinking was. It takes a mind that destitute to embrace Heidegger. At judging the utility of talk-sounds, I'd rank Shakespeare over any philosopher going.

For your homework tonight, I want you to think for twenty minutes on the belief that the term 'New York City' "has" a "referent" -- a "real world" fixed entity that it "picks out", "names". Spend the full twenty minutes. Don't, in the first three minutes, defend that belief by coming up with a stipulative definition, either of 'That Wonderful Town', or of 'refer', and assume you've settled the matter. Spend the next seventeen minutes trying to think what my response would be.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

That's enough lizard-tongue for this session. Three suggestions: One, don't work solely to find something wrong in what you just heard. Two, as you conjure rebuttals, be slow to assume I don't have rebuttals to your rebuttals. Three: to paraphrase André Gide: "Please don't understand me too quickly."

KIT

You think I haven't been following all this.

BREN

Kit, I know you haven't -- in the sense of seeing what it's addressing, where it's going. I skipped the hard stuff, because I wanted you to feel you're following this "embarrassingly obvious" material. If you like, in tomorrow's class we can go beyond the simple....Yes! Let's do that!

It'll be more fun than Webster's! I can show you the existential howlers in set theory and mathematical logic! And the rib-tickling irrelevance of modal logic. You probably never heard of philosophy's famous "rigid designators". That's okay, because they're imaginary -- there never were any rigid designators. Weeeel, except maybe some grandes dames in Victorian high society. "Yes, dear, I know you're fond of him, but who is he?"

Then I have a catchy routine for explaining that no one can possibly "learn a language" because there is no such entity. And then... No. Better to just sum it up. If there are no meanings except me-meanings -- your own personal notions -- and if, as my mantra says, all notions are indeterminate, indefinite, multiplex and transitory, morphing like a writhing cloud, then communication that's perfect mutual understanding is forever beyond our reach. Like so much, it's improvable, but it will always be incomplete. They might seem to come close, but even if, against trillions-to-one odds, two people ever did entertain totally identical notions, they could never know it. Devious little suckers our notions. Making fun of us constantly... But, wait. Come to think of it, with your mind I'm not sure you'd see the humor. No. With your mind, I don't think you'd get the point.

(modulates; the "lecture" is over:)

See? You were on pitch, Kit: Putting aside the text, did the tone I just inflicted on you sound familiar? The callously unveiled contempt, arrogance. The weary assumption this is all far too recondite for you to grasp. The unshakable surety I have it all right, and isn't it too bad no more than a hundred others on this globe are capable of seeing why -- and how profoundly -- "language" and human "communication" fall short. That tone, that odious, self-important, deranged tone, is what philosophy can do to a susceptible mind. For those at risk -- like me, like you -- the distortion is less of beliefs than of attitude, of tone, toward others. Last November, in my ear I heard the tone I've been reeking since I was nineteen, and I decided I never, ever, want to hear it again.

[BREN drops heavily into his chair.]

BREN (CONT'D)

Thus spake Sara's rooster.

[Stunned silence. KURT finally stirs.]

KURT

Do you feel "shown", Kit?

KIT

You mean "shown up"... Maybe a little.

KURT

That's our Kit: Sometimes touchy, but always honest.

KIT

What an odd mind. You purposely make your every-other line sound lunatic. At first.

KURT

"Last November"? You heard yourself lecturing?

BREN

No, I was at a funeral, speechless.

KIT

(non-committal but not tart)

...Why write stories anyway? If words have no fixed meaning, how can you control what the story's designed to say?

BREN

I'd never write a story to "say" something. Guaranteed: Except for a few passing rants, Shakespeare didn't write *Hamlet* to say something. He wanted to do something. Which he could -- to those who listened, and saw, and felt.

KURT

Brendan, you have reconfirmed that philosophy's not my *metier*.

BREN

I'm sorry, Kurt. I'm still working on not rising to every challenge.

KURT

(standing)

No, I enjoyed it, seeing how refreshing it was for Kit! I'm feeling quite light-headed. Turned out to be an excellent cognac!

BREN

(stands)

Now you know why I left philosophy. Robert E. Lee once said -- almost: "It is well that philosophy is so terrible, else we should grow too fond of it."

SCENE BREAK

8

[Nighttime, six days later; BREN at computer but not typing. RADIO and reverie-mode snap on: Irish music/dance. BREN goes to RADIO, turns it off. BREN back to computer -- still no typing. RADIO snaps on again. BREN frowns, rises, turns it off again. As he turns back, RADIO and mode snap on yet again. BREN turns it off again.]

BREN

Shitness, said Plato.

[Knock on door up.]

BREN (CONT'D)

Yes.

[BREN opens the door; from OFF we hear ELGA.]

ELGA (OFF)

I need only five minutes, Kurt. I'll drive.

[Enter KURT, dressed for an evening out. Indicates a chair. They both will sit.]

KURT

A minute?

BREN

Hours!

KURT

So how is our storyteller doing? Is there anything I might read?

BREN

I'd be embarrassed.

KURT

How's Kit?

BREN

Surely you see more of Kit than I do.

KURT

In what sense more? I'm asking, have you seen more of Kit than I have since she was ten?

BREN

Kurt, I rejected that assignment.

KURT

Yes, but something's changed. Ever since your beach rescue, and then the astonishing philosophic evening --

BREN

Agh! I've had waves of remorse about that night.

(Irish:)

J'like the brogue as much as Kit did?

(no accent)

Works better when I have bushy eyebrows.

KURT

Not to worry, Brendan. I confess I was "setting you up" that night. Or setting Kit up. She seldom meets someone who can outrun her quick mind. I can only say, she's been mentioning you often in the last week. Many non-casual casual inquiries.

BREN

Does Mrs. Shelley know your idea?

KURT

I know Elga. She loves projects. If I told her, she'd want to head the thing up.

[Comically paused by the double-meaning, with mirror-simultaneity each covers his mouth, shifts in his seat, recrosses his legs.]

BREN

You think she'd approve?

KURT

She well might. As Kit would say, Elga is European. The post-war European. Decades after the war was over, her family finally recovered their property, and they sent her back over there to school in Switzerland and Paris and London.

BREN

There is no project, Kurt.

KURT

Not for you, I concede. It's not your responsibility.

(rises)

Elga and I are having dinner up in Bedford Hills. Painful. Our last free night before the sales-conference marathon, and we'll be in a house that bans an after-dinner Havana -- and the hosts are vegetarians. Good night, Brendan.

BREN

Good night.

[Exit KURT up. RADIO snaps on. BREN stares at RADIO as we hear the male, Irish voice:]

RADIO

"Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from her what the heart wants. Gazing up into the darkness I see myself as a creature driven and derided by guilt; and my eyes burn with anguish and anger."

[*RADIO ceases.*]

BREN

Still trying to rewrite Jim Joyce, are we?

[*Soft knock on door right.*]

BREN (CONT'D)

You know it's open.

[*Enter KIT, in skirt and blouse.*]

KIT

Yes, I suppose it would be. A man with a big scythe is ready for all comers, I presume.

BREN

...Hello.

KIT

(*wandering with nonchalant
possessiveness, touching things*)

Hello. I saw Kurt leave through the window. That is, I saw through the window.

BREN

I thought you were going to Cape Cod.

KIT

Tomorrow.

[*KIT indicates computer.*]

KIT (CONT'D)

A writer, are you?

BREN

I write.

KIT

In between your Philosophers-Anonymous meetings?...I did research on you -- looked you up. S'that make you angry? It's highly -- aggressive of me. You were summa at Princeton. Then a fellowship to Harvard. Then the Marshall Scholarship. The net still has you as a Lecturer in philosophy at Cambridge.

BREN

Your mother told you those things.

KIT

No, I really did look you up. I know many things she doesn't.

BREN

What things?

KIT

Nothing important -- blood type, social security number, no criminal record. You have a trucker's license, and you have dual passports: American and Irish -- your mother was never sworn in here....I saw your S.A.T.'s., and your four-oh at Princeton. They were no surprise, because I also saw you were part of a Princeton forty-year study of people with ultra-high IQs. How's it feel to have an I.Q. that high? ...No, really, tell me, I'm fascinated.

BREN

I don't have an I.Q., as though it's some measurable body-part. I was given an I.Q. score, an extrapolated fiction.

KIT

You don't look like you have an IQ that high. When you're sober. I mean, I always expected...
(*palms up, a moue*)

BREN

Sorry -- this is all there is. No aura, no sparks. No grave and stately demeanor. A high score entails only that you're pretty good at a range of different things. It doesn't imply you're world-class at anything.

KIT

Are you good at a range of different things?

BREN

Can I get you something, Kit? Or do you just want to stroll about and be scornful?

KIT

I haven't been scornful. I've been celebrating your achievements, your high IQ score. We already know what a macho man you are.

BREN

Not so macho. There were fights I avoided to save my bones.

KIT

So you're also good at surviving. Is there anything you're not good at?

BREN

Pleasing you, for one.

KIT

Do I give that impression?

BREN

If this is you when you're pleased, I'd hate to be on your bad side.

[KIT sprawls in a chair.]

KIT

I resent you... Did you offer me something because you have something? What do you have?

BREN

I have some not-very-expensive port.

KIT

Any old port in a storm.

BREN

You mean you want it.

KIT

Please.

[BREN finds bottle, glass, pours, serves.]

KIT (CONT'D)

You haven't asked why I resent you.

BREN

I'm sure you'll tell me why you resent me.

KIT

Well now maybe I won't.

BREN

Yes you will.

KIT

Aren't you drinking? You're in the house of a gentleman, so you should conduct yourself accordingly. A gentleman does not let a lady drink by herself.

BREN

You flatter us both.

[BREN goes to bottle again, pours.]

KIT

Now you're supposed to sit.

[BREN smiles, gazes at KIT, does NOT sit.]

KIT (CONT'D)

...I resent you, let's see, "how do I resent thee, let me count the ways"...I've decided you're not-bad. Which, according to you, is all a high IQ-score proves.

BREN

Right. Doesn't tell you you're much good, says only you're "not bad" -- in the limited disciplines they can test.

KIT

The hell with IQ tests. Let's drink, to hell with IQ tests!
(holds glass up)

BREN

The hell with IQ tests.

[BREN sips, KIT bolts it down.]

KIT

I have an IQ of a hundred-fifty-seven. An IQ score! Which, it comes to me, is another reason I could resent you, but I don't, I think your braininess is kinda neat not cute I think but kinda neat like good hygiene sort-of the thing is I understand wanting to be a hermit almost no one has anything worth hearing so your braininess I don't resent it it's not I mean I don't it's only will you have sex with me?

BREN

What?!

KIT

Oh don't say "what"! God!

[KIT flushes, puts her face in her hands; abruptly stops that, straightens, takes glass, crosses legs, looks the soul of poise.]

KIT (CONT'D)

You were saying.

BREN

I, I was saying the hell with IQ tests.

KIT

Yeah, well you would, wouldn't you. Well, will you?

BREN

Have sex with you?

KIT

I was unfair to you. Which, of course, I also resent you for. Do you have any idea what I believed?

BREN

What did you believe?

KIT

I'm not telling you. Why should I tell you that? That's history. What did you believe about me?

BREN

Believe about you how?

KIT

C'mon -- I don't know! What did you think of me? God! -- if I thought I was rattled ten days ago with the creep on the beach! Look at me -- I'm nervous as hell. If I were neon, I'd light up. Say something.

BREN

Would you like more port?

KIT

That's not something. Should I go?

[They pause at the sound of car-doors closing, ignition, pulling out of the driveway.]

BREN

Excuse me, Miss, have we met?

KIT

I should go.
(but she doesn't move)

BREN

Are you, have you ever?...

KIT

No. I haven't.
(stands abruptly)
God. Now, if that frightens you -- though I've read it's a great turn-on for -- maybe for old men, I don't know. What do I know? I know nothing. Listen, if there's any chance you'd like to do this, can you help me out here? I need help.

BREN

That'd be help? I'd feel like a burglar --

KIT

What burglary?!! I'm saying, "Here! Take my jewels!" Ow, God, what am I saying?!
(sits again abruptly)
This is wretched.

BREN

I'm sorry.

KIT

I'm wretched. I'm fucking textbook.

BREN

(startled to feel sympathy)
I'm, uh...

KIT

I've never felt this way before. I mean, I've always felt this way, but never like this. It's time, I know it's time, it's way past time. You just -- you looked -- I don't know. I should go.

(doesn't move)

BREN

(not assenting: apologizing)

I wish I could help.

KIT

Then help! I think what I really resent you for is making me feel this way. Screw your neat brain, I think you're cute. In fact I think you're hot. There! Christ! If you think I ever said that to anyone...

BREN

I don't.

KIT

Once or twice I maybe came close, but I didn't have the nerve. I'm pathetic.

BREN

You're not pathetic --

KIT

No, I'm on top of the world. Shit. Damn. I should go.

[BREN contemplates KIT with the subdued, inescapable commitment of a parent accepting he must bail his child out of jail.]

BREN

.....Stand up.

[KIT stands. BREN puts his hands behind his back, leans forward and kisses KIT softly on the lips. KIT, at first tentative, merely accepts, but when she realizes she's not being forcibly seized she pushes her lips on BREN's, then puts her arms loosely around his neck. BREN begins to unbutton her blouse.]

KIT

Oh wow. Oh fucking wow. I mean, it's only sex, but the awful thing is it feels like more than sex. Which I suppose -- I mean, it's nothing, I know, not that I'd know, of course, but....Look! He's taking my clothes off! Goddam! Look at you -- aren't you nervous at all?

BREN

Nothing calms me down like another person's nervousness.

[BREN has her blouse off; now he unzips her skirt and pulls it neatly down; KIT steps out of it; her arms are now at her side as she stands in bra and panties.]

KIT

I'm having an out-of-body experience. Only, the other way around. I'm out of my mind. No, I want to do this.

[KIT puts her arms back around his neck loosely; BREN has his hands around her waist; he is looking at her with a calm smile.]

KIT (CONT'D)

Body and mind -- they both want to do this. It's time. So what part of me is nervous? None -- all my nervousness is floating away. The bad spirit departs. The good spirit --

BREN

Your composure is incredible.

KIT

You mean I'm chattering hysterically. I know. I don't know. One thing -- it's not a bad nervous. Am I supposed to be this self-conscious?

[BREN reaches behind and unhooks her bra, but she hugs the straps with her arms.]

KIT (CONT'D)

Hey, when do I get to see something?

BREN

(taking off his top, loosens belt)

You've seen most of it.

KIT

Yeah, but not the intriguing part.

[BREN offs trousers; he's wearing shorts.]

KIT (CONT'D)

Is this one of those "disciplines" you're good at, yes?

BREN

Disciplines don't apply.

KIT

No, I mean, you do know where everything is, and everything.

BREN

I'm not bad at anatomy -- and related subjects.

[BREN reaches for her bra, and KIT lets him pull it forward, as --]

SCENE BREAK

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

1

[Six nights later. Enter from up KIT with tray of glasses, coffee-china, BREN with bottles. Tray and bottles to coffee-table. KIT produces several sheets of notes.]

KIT

Once I started to look, you're all over the net. Cambridge has all your lectures on their site. Today I found one titled ..."nah-HEW-atl, nah-HOO -- How do you pronounce it?

BREN

"NAH-watl."

KIT

"Nahuatl and the Zero Copula". That's Aztec? What was it, you had a free weekend so you learned to speak Aztec?

BREN

All that is done with, Kit.

KIT

What's a "zero copula"?

BREN

The lack of 'is', 'are' or 'am' in the vocabulary.

KIT

Sounds illiterate.

BREN

Then Russian, Chinese, Arabic and Irish illiterate. American Sign Language no 'is', no 'am'.

KIT

Sounds illiterate.

BREN

No. There's no getting rid of 'is', but one can argue that it's the number-one curse of philosophy.

KIT

And of life! I used to think.

(turns back to the papers)

Here's you being title-cute: "Unfinished Notes on Incompleteness". And one of your lectures is called "The Myth of 'Aboutness'".

("goofy")

"I wonder what that one's about?"...All right, don't smile.

(back to papers)

Your asshole critics are a type I hate: say something they didn't think of, they panic and scramble to attack any way they can.

BREN

Not all of them.

KIT

You could be fierce! Here's you to that anti-American dick in Paris: "People say either you plagiarize your thinking from an utter fool, or you're stone-stupid all on your own. In your defense, I tell everyone it's wrong and unkind to say you plagiarize." Love it!...Why the frown? The dick deserved it.

BREN

Granted, he was one of the multitude who have no idea when they have no idea. But Kit, I've been a bird of prey in my day, loving my bloody beak and claws. I tried to convey that I don't prize the memory.

KIT

No -- fire can be cool! I wouldn't want a raging bull around the house, but the potential for anger is kind of... desirable in a man.

(back to the paper)

...This chick had a crush on you: "Notes taken while Mr. Francis spoke masterfully for fifty minutes without notes on indeterminacy." 'Masterfully'? "By Ann Mansfield." Who was that?

BREN

Don't know.

KIT

"With their current faulty idea of the nature of notion, scientists will never match up consciousness to neural activity." Who's saying that -- you or your sex-slave?...Or this: "Imagine an ocean-wave. How many notional drops in that notional wave? It's indeterminate. How long is it? It's indefinite. Don't ask how many parts it has, because "parts" are arbitrary stipulates: How many "parts" does your face have?"

[KIT comically counts face-parts: nose, a nostril, many spots on cheek and chin...]

KIT (CONT'D)

I am a woman of many parts. ...Okay, I'll get serious. What do you hope for from your paper? That it will do?

BREN

Boost immune systems. Slow down unsound sounds...from infecting us with false assumptions, and unjustified actions.

KIT

....Here's this guy from Oxford: "I read Francis as saying that every notion occasioned by 'words' can be shown to be idiosyncratic, inconstant, and non-referential. If Francis could show this, it would undermine most of the philosophic palaver from Plato on." Is he for you or against you?

BREN

Takes a durable mind to be for someone who's saying, "Listen while I tell you you don't know how to listen -- to me or to any of the other philosophy geeks who came before me."

KIT

But you're for you, yes? I mean, don't you want to write this stuff?

BREN

I do because I promised it. Besides, I didn't want to leave the field entirely to these other guys.

KIT

...You're the only one I can stand listening to.

BREN

Look hard, Kit. All my topics are abstract. I'd be no good in molecular biology, astrophysics, architecture. I don't have a visualizing mind -- not that kind of vision. I'd be a bad chess player. Don't overestimate me, Kit. I'll only disappoint you.

KIT

Agh -- I'm tougher than you think.

(lowers papers)

My father's part-owner of forty hotels, and my mother's grandparents had a houseful of art in Vienna before the war -- Klimts, Schieles, Matisses. We still have nine of them -- kept upstairs because it's "unseemly" to display such pricey possessions. Besides, some are very dirty! Kurt and Elga are relaxed about it all: an alarm system that's never turned on, guns no one's ever touched: they'd rather just keep a ton of insurance. Thing is, I'm going to inherit, like, two-or-three hundred-million dollars. That's rank to mention, but think: I could make a lot happen in academia with that. You could be big. President of wherever... Okay, doesn't have to be that. Can be anything you want. You want to be a storyteller, right?

BREN

Yeah. Tell fairy tales. It's a tradition where I come from.

KIT

"What do you want to say with your fairy tales, Professor? What will they mean?"

[KIT gleams with deviltry, and indeed BREN is satisfyingly cold and silent.]

KIT (CONT'D)

Now there's my angry man! Listen, I'm sure anything you try you'd be good at. I got an idea: Why don't you write about us? With different names. No -- it's too personal. I don't know, though. I'll think about it. I'll let you know.

[We hear ELGA and KURT approaching up.]

ELGA (OFF)

Anitje, turn off the espresso machine, please?

KIT

(conspiratorial whisper)

I love dinners where some people have secrets the others would die to know!

[Enter KURT with humidor; ELGA with coffee. KIT merrily indicates front.]

KIT (CONT'D)

There! Do I understand these things? There's a much cooler view of the water from here. Hotter view.

KURT

It is. I always enjoyed the scene from here.

ELGA

I took an aggrieved call from Julie today. She said you cancelled your Cape Cod visit this week. What happened?

KIT

Changed my mind!

[KURT opens the humidor.]

KIT (CONT'D)

Are you going to smoke one of those things?

KURT

I am. So will Brendan.

KIT

Then I will too.

KURT

You want a cigar.

KIT

I'm my parents' daughter.

KURT

Your mother smokes soigne little panatellas.

ELGA

Maybe I'll try a big one.

KURT

They make you dizzy.

ELGA

Every life should have a little dizzy in it.

[KIT assumes coffee-pouring duties, which ELGA observes with pleased bemusement;

KIT and ELGA take coffee; KURT and BREN, cognac; KURT offers the humidor to ELGA but she produces her own little tin of cigars; KURT offers to KIT.]

KIT

No, I'll have one of Mumsie's.

ELGA

"Mumsie"? You haven't called me that in years.

KIT

I'm Mumsie's little girl.

[ALL now have cigars. KURT and BREN wield a cigar clipper. KIT displays papers.]

KIT (CONT'D)

I printed this out for our after-dinner entertainment. You should hear how dangerous Bren can be --

BREN

Kit: No.

[With broad theatricality, KIT folds the sheets and puts them away.]

KURT

Are we closer to reading something of yours, Brendan?

KIT

Bren won't talk about his writing. His disdain for words shocks me!

[ELGA, distracted brushing ashes, misses the flirtatious mockery KIT aims toward BREN; KURT has not missed it.]

BREN

I don't disdain words, I'm wary of them. They're seductive but fickle.

KIT

Mumsie, did you know we don't think in words?

ELGA

Yes, and isn't it awful?: I have oodles of words.

[KIT rises, enjoys playing lecturer:]

KIT

Writers struggle to put their thoughts into words -- how could that be if their thoughts are in words? How could you ever mis-speak yourself? Rock-climbers, chefs, chess-players, even tennis-players -- we'd say they're thinking all the time, just not with words.

(MORE)

KIT (CONT'D)

Also: Beware of the articulate: muddled thinkers' most cunning disguise. Do I have all this right, Professor?

BREN

Adroitly said. Cunningly phrased.

KURT

My God.

ELGA

Kurt?

KURT

I ask again, Brendan: How goes the storytelling?

BREN

Which story?

KIT

"Which story"?

[A distant ringing.]

KURT

Uch, is that the phone?

[Exit KURT up.]

ELGA

I guess I've been out of touch, but sales conference is over. Now I'll be able to keep my eye on you again. Can't have you just philosophizing, Bren, neglecting your talent.

KIT

I wouldn't worry -- he's always ready to take me water-skiing, but I tell him his talent has to come first. No -- I exaggerate. We did get out there. I taught Doctor Francis how to water-ski this week!

[KURT comes to the doorway up.]

KURT

Kit.

KIT

Me? It's for me?

KURT

Take it in the den. I have to visit the loo.

[KIT and KURT leave.]

ELGA

You seem glum.

BREN

I'm molting. Metamorphosis. Into what creature now?

ELGA

You wanted change. Here -- I'll cheer you up. Last night, as a reward for six days of selling, I snacked for two hours on great nineteenth-century novels I love. They are great, but it's obscene the way they avoid sex. ...Sex is one of the three crucial factors in life. I'd talk about the other two, except they're too intimate to mention... Sex may be shallow, but so is skin, and try living without your skin.... What's bothering you? Is it us? Are you by any chance getting moral pangs?

BREN

Pangs of some kind.

ELGA

Let's hope they're growing pangs, not moral. Moral pangs are for when you hurt someone -- but we're not doing that. We give only aid and pleasure to each other, and hurt no one. The perfect friendship.What do you think people like me look forward to? People who don't have your intellect or your art or your youth? I'm not going to achieve great things -- I know that, and I can live with it --

BREN

-- You and Kurt have published two Nobel Prize winners, and you've translated over a dozen respected books.

ELGA

Yes! And there are satisfactions there. Lasting ones. But "lasting" and "acute" aren't the same. Right now the most acute moments for me are with you, here. I'm not talking about only skin. I've never had hours...quite like ours.... Bren, what is on your mind?! ...Maybe I haven't helped at all, maybe you're still a genius of abstractions, shocked to see this --
(*indicates pelvis, then head*)
-- can sometimes push this aside.

BREN

That's no shock. That I knew. It's a "susceptibility" I should be quarantined for.

ELGA

Now that's childish! You want a speech about horny writers I have known? Writers can be callous sex-bandits, bigots, liars, social phonies -- and still be great writers. But all the greats -- the shits and the good guys -- would agree: keep your brain in its place; there are times when you have to grab a wave and ride it before you've got it all figured out. All right, I'll ask: Is your problem that you're screwing someone old enough to be your mother?

BREN

No, it's not that....It's that I'm also screwing her daughter.

[ELGA's mouth opens, she stares, backs up a step, continues to stare.]

BREN (CONT'D)

Maybe I should have figured that one out better, Elga?

KIT (OFF)

-- Mom won't mind. She's great that way.

[Enter KIT and KURT.]

KIT (CONT'D)

Mumsie, could we put someone up for a few days if we had to?

ELGA

*(turns to look at KIT, mouth open;
takes a breath, regains poise)*

Of course. Who?

KIT

Julie. I didn't go to the Cape, so now she threatens to come here. She won't come, but just in case.

ELGA

We could put her in the first guest room.

KIT

We can't, it still smells of paint. Is the north one ready?

KURT

Why don't you two go look?

KIT

Now?

KURT

It'll give Brendan and me a moment to philosophize.

[ELGA looks at KURT, senses a cue. To KIT:]

ELGA

C'mon. It'll take two minutes.

KIT

Now?

ELGA

Yes, then we won't have to think about it.

KIT

God. Don't say anything interesting while I'm gone!

[ELGA and KIT leave.]

KURT

So, mission accomplished. Please. I have eyes....What's this? You feeling guilt?

BREN

"Me?? Guilt??"

KURT

I will not inquire into the details. Just one question.
(picks up humidor)
May I assume you will now ease off fucking her mother?

[Exit KURT.]

SCENE BREAK

2

[The next morning; BREN awry on his bed, in a tormented doze. RADIO emits a rattle of Irish tap, BREN stirs, tap pauses. BREN goes still. Tapping recurs, music joining in. BREN wakes, sits up, drops his head, stares at the floor. Music stops as: Enter ELGA right.]

ELGA

Sleep well? Sleep at all? I didn't. Know something?: I don't own a pill. Of any kind. I've never had occasion for one. I'm disoriented. I think I'm feeling panic, but I'm too stunned to tell. "Occasion." The Latin root is 'occidere' [aw-KID-er-eh]: 'to fall'. For the first time, I see my life has been without occasion, or even a threat of it -- spent on a safe plateau, far below a dangerous height. Till now. When did it begin?....Bren, look: I come unarmed. When did it begin? With Kit...

(bends over BREN, peers; loud:)

Sir! If you can hear me, blink twice!

BREN

...Six days ago. The night you drove to Bedford Hills.

ELGA

I should have known something happened. Her snarl was gone. Instead: smugness. How did it start?

BREN

It just started.

ELGA

No. Who initiated? She did, didn't she? I'm not trying to exonerate you. After all my speeches, I can't claim exoneration applies, can I?...Well, now we have a situation.

BREN

"Situation"? Whatever can you mean?

ELGA

Please don't get arch with me, not right now. This is a situation.

BREN

I've been wondering -- when does Kurt come on to me?

ELGA

Kurt can't come on to anyone anymore. Sex and deception go together like music and dance, but Kurt and I believe each other. When he says a chemical erection is not for him, I believe him.

[ELGA contemplates BREN's slump and silence.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

Bren, don't leave me out here like this. I'm doing everything I can to get a grip on this, hold things together --

[BREN quickly stands, starts moving.]

BREN

-- Sorry! Sorry. I'm pissed at myself, and I shouldn't let it spill on you.

ELGA

Why are you pissed at yourself? I want to hear that.

BREN

I'm still framing it. You know what you need to do right now? Tell a story.

ELGA

What?!

[BREN will start the coffee, find trousers, don a T-shirt, search out socks and footwear, pick up strewn clothing, enter bathroom -- door open -- for a quick hair-comb, and briskly pursue other start-of-day household tasks.]

BREN

Tell me a story. It's how the Irish cope when they're at their wit's end. They order a pint and tell a story. Make it personal. Your story -- tell me that.

ELGA

My story? Why?!

BREN

Therapy! You always want me to tell a story, and now I'm saying you should tell one. For yourself. J'you know there are almost no shrinks in Ireland? Only storytellers.

ELGA

That's not -- That can't --

BREN

-- It's true. In small towns, you need a shrink you go to a pub, find a storyteller. He tells you a story, you tell him one. The trouble with too many people is, they tell their story but they don't listen to what they say.

[ELGA, immobile, stares at BREN.]

BREN (CONT'D)

Just begin! Wait'll you hear what you say.

[ELGA, indeed at wit's end and planless herself, will take the medicine though she has no idea what's in it. As ELGA talks, she watches BREN bustling about, and soon will join him in energetic tidying; perhaps some comical dodging of each other in their routes.]

ELGA

...I love my daughter, I do. And I know she's had some teenage frenzies. But she's grown into a cliché, rejecting the parents and all their values. She adored Kurt. To impress her father who was so impressed by her mother, she immersed herself in languages. When she found she hadn't inherited...the knack, her face became a *j'accuse* scowl: I'd done it, I'd mouse-trapped her again.

BREN

"Again"?

ELGA

It'd happened earlier with piano. I used to play, so she wanted to play. Three years of lessons and what she learned is her fingers are fast, but she's not musical. The whole episode made her grumpy, so I don't play anymore when she's home. I also no longer play table-tennis -- same reason. She was far better at math and sciences, but that didn't serve. After taking a *noir* crayon to me, she then found out her adored father has been a life-long bi-sexual. This derailed her nice healthy Electra complex -- and her attitude toward men in general. I think she took up computers because neither Kurt nor I had one. When I decided to get one in my office, I thought it would please her. Soon as it was set up, I knew: this won't please her, it'll irk her. And it did.

[ELGA pauses doubtfully. BREN stops, gestures approval. "Go on." They resume moving. ELGA is getting into this "therapy".]

ELGA (CONT'D)

You know when I found out Kurt was bisexual? When I was pregnant. Married four years and I never knew! It didn't seem exactly the right time to walk out. The truth is I was more amazed than anything else. Not repelled: My brother is gay, and I love my brother. At school in Switzerland, I was approached by other girls, nice girls.

(MORE)

ELGA (CONT'D)

Two brief experiments and I knew it wouldn't suit me. I'd be the vegetarian who gets up from every meal feeling cheated.

[ELGA peers into the frig.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

What's this? There's nothing in here to cook.

BREN

I don't cook. I heat.

ELGA

(straightens, moves on)

Besides, Kurt was thoughtful and kind always -- as husband to his pregnant wife, Daddy to his new baby. As boss. He was my first boss. I met Kurt in New York, not Europe, when he started a publishing house specializing in translations. I was twenty-two, he was years older, and he wowed me -- sophisticated, handsome, alert to people's feelings. With a first-rate reader's sensibility. Behind his courtly exterior there's even mischievous humor. He chose books over the family business -- the Schellenburg hotel chain that runs from Stockholm to Cairo. Kurt gave me the freedom and authority to use what talents I have, and I'm welcome in literary enclaves throughout Europe -- as Kurt's wife, and also as a translator and an editor. I'm babbling.

BREN

You're not babbling. Sounds like a marriage of great convenience.

ELGA

I'm not sure what that tone is, but yes -- very great.

BREN

No: I meant it.

ELGA

It's been good for both of us. I've met scores of eminent men -- men of power, culture, achievement, intellectual heavyweights. There's none I'd switch for Kurt on a permanent basis. It's surprising how ultimately second-rate almost all of them are.

BREN

That surprises you.

ELGA

You once hinted -- and now I may believe it: You're even more cynical than I am.

BREN

You're not cynical. If anything, you're naively optimistic.

ELGA

Thank you. To be so at my age -- marvelous. Why are you pissed at yourself?

BREN

You ready to get back to Kit now?

ELGA

I don't know. Yes. I have to face this.

BREN

(pauses his bustle)

I'm pissed because I had the hugely stupid thought I could give her two aspirins, and she wouldn't call me in the morning. She'd be off to Cape Cod, a changed girl, ready to jump a lifeguard. Wow.

ELGA

That wasn't going to happen. Kit couldn't screw only with her body -- her ego would have veto power. Why do you think she waited for you?

BREN

She did look needy, forlorn. Loathing herself.

ELGA

Did she. That's a look I haven't seen.

BREN

Finish your story. What do you now see Elga doing, Elga?

[BREN puts a bagel in the toaster.]

ELGA

What should I do? Do you have sage counsel from your mature years?

BREN

Not my turn yet. Finish.

ELGA

Either I feel hurt, or I don't. I don't. I was startled, maybe dizzied, but I knew I wasn't the only woman alive who could give you an erection. But it's my daughter, so shouldn't I be furious with you? Well have you hurt my daughter? I don't think so! Judging from our merry new Kit you've done her a world of good. She's changed.

BREN

No. Kit changes only on the surface. Inside is an unwavering sense of royal entitlement. "The Queen would play, therefore you would play!" You're never jealous?

[BREN eventually starts to make the bed; ELGA joins him; they make it together.]

ELGA

Should I be? Parents who are jealous of their own children are vile! My family's jealousy-gene was never strong. When I was small, my brother was more interesting, so he got more attention. Seemed reasonable to me, I thought he was interesting too. Later, when I began to show talent for languages, I got the attention, and he was content to play alone with those little building sets engineers love when they're kids. Kit gets jealous. It's her nature. If she found you and me having fun at tennis, she'd want to put a stop to it....This isn't making me feel better.

BREN

Yes it is. Me too.

ELGA

Isn't it your turn now?

BREN

Not yet.

[BREN drops into a chair; so ELGA sits.]

BREN (CONT'D)

Kurt knows about you and me.

ELGA

Of course he knows. I told him. No details, no rhapsody -- only the fact, same as he did with Teddy. Oh! Oh my: It was the same night you and Kit began. I told him as we drove back from Bedford Hills....I'm rethinking it: Maybe this isn't a "situation". Maybe if one were in love it would be. Or if you were married to Kit. Certainly if you and Kit were married, we could no longer do it.

(reacting to BREN's stare)

We just couldn't, Bren.

BREN

But Kit and I are not married. Implying...?

ELGA

Nothing! I'm just fantasizing. You're the one got me started! Here's a thought: If Kurt died and you and I got married and Kit never knew we'd been doing it before, I have a strong intuition Kit would find added satisfaction in continuing to screw you.

BREN

What a mind! And you think it was your gift for languages that fascinated your parents.

ELGA

You think I'm a depraved Transylvanian. Do you remember mentioning the Auden poem? With Icarus flying too close to the sun? You probably forget.

BREN

I lack the knack of forgetting.

[BREN to his feet again, begins opening shades/blinds right; ELGA rises, matches his work -- opening blinds left; they work down and across, meeting stage front.]

ELGA

I looked it up. See -- you make me look things up. You said it's great, and despite my "depravity" I have the sensibility needed to see that. To feel the brilliance of his drab line: While Icarus is dying, someone else is..."just walking dully along". I hate the line -- and I love it.

(stops with a gasp of insight.)

Agh! Have you been hearing this? I keep drifting back to myself! You try your *farshtinkener* Irish therapy!

BREN

I tried to try, remember?

ELGA

...How is it I feel guilty, without feeling I did anything wrong? You thought you were doing something for Kit. I thought I was doing something for you.

BREN

I know why I feel guilty. It's because I've begun something that has to come to a bad end: Someone will be disappointed.

ELGA

Then you should never attempt anything! You're right: You should be a hermit: who can a hermit disappoint?

BREN

That's muh thinkin'! There came a point where I just wanted to recede for a while.

ELGA

Avoid all people. Because you know you'll disappoint all of them.

BREN

Don't parody me, Elga. Disappointment requires expectation. The great majority would never expect anything of me. Which I'm thankful for; it allows me to feel a frac less shitty about how little I expect from them. But I have a history, and I'm obliged to learn from it. It should have been obvious to me Kit isn't someone who's going to say, "Thanks for your time, been fun," and just stroll off.

ELGA

...! You think she's in love with you!?

BREN

No: I think the royal feels I'm the royal's chattel. When she discovers I don't feel that way, she won't go away hurt, she'll go away mad, very mad -- and I'll have caused it. I don't want that. Which doesn't mean I'm a fountain of compassion. You ever run low on disdain, apply here. It used to yellow up in me like combustible sulphur whenever I met self-confident fools -- and I felt they came on in battalions. Lot of remoteness justified right there.

ELGA

But you seem to think you never come through. The self-deprecation thing again --

BREN

Elga, don't do that. I'm only saying something true of all of us: Most other people want things -- need things -- that we can't supply. Or they're damaged by things we do supply. Above all, don't try to cast me as a super-modest guy mewing, "Poor me, I disappoint because I'm just not good enough --" That's not me.

ELGA

You're sure?

BREN

I'm sure. At Princeton, there were classes graded on a curve. I saw guys come to the door on day one, see I was in the class and say "Oh boy," and go register for something else where they figured their chances were better. Somehow, it did not make me giggle.

But those guys I don't bleed for. The awful thing is disappointing kind people, good people, and I do that: Women, benefactors, philosophers. At Cambridge an older, decent man on the faculty accepted me as an equal right away, became a comrade. We used to have dinner together, smoke cigars together. He wrote an important scholarly paper about "truth-conditions", everyone was high on it, it was about to be published. One night, over a glass of port, I made a mistake: I showed him a mistake in his theory, a basic flaw. His most ambitious paper...was wrong. I didn't mention it to anyone else, but he withdrew the paper, and it was never the same after that, with him. Disappointment hung in the air like the smell of urine. Our dinners soon stopped.

ELGA

Okay: Not a good feeling. Still, you don't regret leaving philosophy? Something you were so good at? No more head-ducking: Admit you were good at philosophy.

BREN

I was wickedly good. A famous man wrote that vanity is a necessity in a philosopher. I had it -- and I grew to hate it. But hating your bad traits doesn't kill them -- they seem to thrive on the attention.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

Whenever I published a paper, an angry rout of wolves would start circling, hoping to have me for breakfast. And I'd love it. Just come within range, puppies... No, I don't regret leaving philosophy. I left it for the same reason some people quit Wall Street, or defending criminals they know are guilty, or even selling insurance. I quit because I despised myself doing it! Seeing myself be gorgeously, hideously, clever. In other subjects you triumph by adding something new. In philosophy, too often triumph entails slaying someone old, proving them wrong. At times I felt a gladiator's glee. There are many sweet-tempered philosophers. I wasn't one.

ELGA

Why, do you think?

BREN

Because I'm monumentally screwed up?

ELGA

Yes, you are. But so were two-thirds of the geniuses I've ever heard about. The question is: Why? I'm full of 'why's' about you. For example, why did you accept my "delicate overture" that day? Why'd you take me on? Don't say it was for me.

BREN

Elga, I was scanning you in minute one. I scan every new woman. I can't not. The way animals scan -- first for danger, then for edibility.

ELGA

Were you. Well, being a well-brought-up child, I was probably showing you equal courtesy. I'll answer for you: You allowed yourself to start with me only because you figured I wasn't a little girl who'd get all emotionally wrought and make you feel nasty. With me, that wouldn't come into it. There'd always be a safe distance between us, even when you were inside me. I doubt you've disappointed as much as you think.

BREN

Don't doubt it, Elga. It's the first thing I ever did, and I've never stopped.

ELGA

That's the story I want to hear! Your turn.

BREN

Later.

ELGA

"Later"?!

[BREN pops his bagel, pours a coffee.]

BREN

I never had a bagel in my life till you. Something is coming, I can almost hear it. I now need to be still and listen.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

Then I'll go rake sand. My clan has made big decisions on sand, on the shore. I promise: Before this day is out, we'll...commune.

[BREN first, they each put a hand on the other's cheek. They drop their hands.]

ELGA

...For no excusable reason, I think I can sleep now.

[Exit ELGA up. BREN, standing, sips coffee, nibbles bagel. Abruptly and loud, we hear a voice from the RADIO, an older Irish male:]

RADIO

Oi wanted to be a wroiter.

[BREN starts, stares.]

RADIO (CONT'D)

A storyteller. Oah, how I wanted that. I tried, I did, but it wasn't...given to me to do. Years later, when Essie began to dance, that felt...that was so...I'll never forget the day she won the national tournament, and a daft woman -- a cousin who'd known me in my scribbling days -- said to me, "Are you jealous?!" It took me three, four seconds to take her question on board. "You don't understand anything!" I said. "It fulfills me!" She'd never had children or nieces or nephews, that woman. That's why she couldn't understand... D'ye see what I'm saying, Brenny?

BREN

Granda, you weren't a great artist, and your child was. It's the other way around with Ma and me. In any case, that's not why I'm doing this. Maybe once. Maybe. But not anymore.

RADIO

Why then?

BREN

You burned your sailor's diary: Why?

RADIO

That's not you. You're different. You know what you are.

BREN

Granda, best not talk of what things are; it's what we think they are.

SCENE BREAK

3

[Early afternoon same day. We hear a sand-rake being dropped against the outside wall right.]

BREN enters in his beach gear, goes into bathroom; KIT enters from up, in swimsuit.]

KIT

You there! Sandman! We're going down to the beach!

[BREN comes back out; no big smile.]

KIT (CONT'D)

Can you believe -- Mumsie was still sleeping! But I got her up, and she's changing. Get ready.

BREN

I don't think so, Kit.

KIT

Well I think so. The old girl says she hasn't water-skied once this summer.

BREN

You can run the motorboat.

KIT

No, we both want to show off for you. She'll admire how you handle the boat, and I'll be thinking about how you handle other things. I'll secretly feel smug.

BREN

You're good at being secretly smug?

KIT

Yes. Because I'm good at keeping secrets -- until I want to use them! I've thought it over: Don't you write about us. Years from now, when I'm Mumsie's age, maybe I'll brag about you. Maybe I'll write a novel! "Miss Chatterley's Lover"! You don't think so. You're probably right, but who knows?

(bouncing vivaciously)

I can't believe this! You've heard how people who try crack are supposed to go from clean to total addicts in forty-eight hours? I now understand that.

[KIT makes a giggling gesture to grab BREN's crotch; he evades her.]

BREN

Don't, Kit.

KIT

Now that's mean of you. To Mumsie. She loves seeing people having a good time, so think of her joy if she walked in on us at it. When do I get to read your novel?

BREN

This is finished, Kit.

KIT

Then let me see it.

[KIT frolics to the computer, hits keys.]

BREN

Don't do that, please.

KIT

If Julie or anyone else ever made a move on you, I'd take your big scythe and slash their boobs off.

BREN

Kit, you possess only in your mind.

KIT

That's my forté. Everyone says I'm very strong-minded.

[BREN moves between KIT and the computer.]

BREN

Kit: Whoa. You and I have to stop. I did what you asked, because I hoped it would help, but we're stopping there. Are you understanding me?

KIT

...Maybe not. What are you saying?

BREN

No more sex. Going on is not good -- for either of us. We have to stop.

KIT

...What are you saying?

BREN

I'm saying...You seem happier now, and I hope it stays with you. But I too can be selfish, and I have to stop with you.

KIT

Why?

BREN

Because there's something else I have to do.

[ELGA enters up, in a robe over a swimsuit.]

ELGA

"Anyone for water-skiing?" I had a friend who wanted to be an actor until he was in a play in college. His first line had him trotting on-stage with a racquet, squeaking, "I say, what about this tennis?" He felt like such an ass, he became a politician instead. You, you're smart, what play was that?

BREN

The Circle. Somerset Maugham.

ELGA

"The Circle". How apt.

KIT

How can you know it's "apt" if you don't know the play??!!

ELGA

Darling, that title is apt for everything.

BREN

All right, I'll take you water-skiing. Gimme a minute.

[BREN goes into bathroom, closes the door. ELGA sits right, peering front, turned away from the computer up right. KIT, after glaring at the bathroom door, moves to the computer; sits, scrolls, intently reads, reacts silently.]

ELGA

...Last time I went water-skiing was when Julie was here. She was good at it. ...When was that, last August? No -- September. I remember because I was on the Hans Herlin all that month, and Julie knew his books...That fall there was one of those late, wonderful warm weeks.

[ELGA rises, moves down, peers out a window.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

Hot sun. Do you have something to protect your skin?

[KIT is scrolling down, page after page. ELGA finally turns up, sees KIT reading.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

Bren lets you read that?

KIT

(reading on)

All the time.

ELGA

Kit, stop! He doesn't let anyone read what he writes!

[BREN enters, quickly grasps the scene; moves to KIT, closes the laptop. KIT stands, stares open-mouthed at BREN. Finally she gives her head a clarifying wet-dog-shake.]

KIT

You know what? This is grotesque! I'm out!

[Exit KIT up, almost running. BREN screens the pages KIT was reading; ELGA goes to door up.]

ELGA

Remember -- dinner at eight, Kit --

[We hear a bedroom door slam shut.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

(a dying fall:)

-- the four of us...

[BREN straightens; grim regret on his face.]

BREN

Elga, I'm sorry: She was reading...my homework.

[ELGA absorbs this sturdily; points at computer.]

ELGA

I told you you've lived alone too much.

BREN

I ended it with Kit. It's late, but it's done.

[ELGA drifts to a chair, sinks into it.]

ELGA

Goodbye and good luck her "Mumsie" phase. She'll be there tonight. She hates to leave things...unfinished. You've seen only hints of it. Kit can be rage personified.

BREN

She woke you up?

ELGA

She did. We stood at the window and watched you. Raking sand...

(rallies, sits up, points to door)

There's nothing we can do about that right this moment. It isn't over, I know. But this moment is yours. And mine: Your turn...to tell me...your personal story.

*[A beat as they regard each other steadily.
BREN will now tell a story. He will sit, rise,
roam as the actor and director intuit.]*

BREN

In my own personal story, I'm a minor player. I'll begin at the end: How did my parents "almost" die together? Evidently after a twenty-hour drinking pilgrimage, Ned drove home drunk, and found Essie on the floor. He carried her to the car, went rocketing to the hospital -- and crashed. He was killed. My mother'd had a heart episode -- and she was badly hurt in the crash. She still lived, in a coma, till I got here. I camped out at her bedside in the hospital. On the second day, I was dozing when I felt her grab my hand.

(one hand seizes the other)

She could hardly rise off the pillow, but she had a strong grip.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

(makes seizing fist tremble)

"Good!" she said. "You're here. Mikey is coming!"

ELGA

Mikey was your father? She didn't know he was dead?

[BREN exhales, releases his hands. He shakes his head.]

BREN

My father was Ned. Essie thought she was back in Ireland. I never knew a Mikey.

(beat; makes himself move)

.....To feel what was almost hers, you need to know what it's like over there. We hear the words "Irish dance", and what comes to mind may seem small, provincial. But that's misleading -- the same way decibels usually is: What counts isn't just how big a sound is, it's how close we are to it. In the world of dance over there, the best Irish dancers were revered like prima ballerinas.

By the time Essie was fifteen, older dancers were already looking to her -- for coaching, advice, encouragement, consolation. She composed, she choreographed, and she danced with a talent documented as the most promising in the land. Her rhetorical father, in an ecstasy of Irish exaltation, said Essie had such presence the crown itself would be coronated when this next-in-line assumed it.

[A quick half-reverie-mode: lights dim; faint music, perhaps from offstage; a spectral shadow of a dancer appears up. With a tearing sound, the mode stops abruptly.]

BREN (CONT'D)

It all ended for Essie when she got pregnant and gave birth on her own birthday -- her sixteenth.

.....She had to give the baby up. "Authorities" decreed her banishment -- abroad. The nuns arranged a menial job for her in a Boston hospital.

ELGA

So you have a half-sibling somewhere you've never met?

BREN

It wouldn't be unusual -- can you be sure you don't? She met Ned the year she came here -- when he had a hernia operation at the hospital where she worked. She told him nothing about the child she left behind -- and married him. Essie and I both knew she was much smarter than Ned, even though he was seven years older and had finished high school. Poor Ned lived his life with a puzzled look, as if he sensed there was something important he wasn't grasping. For instance he must have wondered how he ever landed this supernal girl, easily the most beautiful living thing he'd ever touched.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

Ned had his own secret: He'd had the mumps in his teens, developed orchitis, and ended up infertile. He knew it, but didn't tell Essie. After four months of Essie's asking why she wasn't pregnant, he fessed up. I'm told she took it extraordinarily well. Immediately said, "Let's adopt!"

ELGA

You're told? By whom?

BREN

By Josie. Essie's older sister?.....I was with my aunt Josie, in Galway, for the first twenty-two months of my life.

[ELGA gapes!]

ELGA

...And??!! You can't stop there!

[BREN goes to a drawer, retrieves a photo, gives it to ELGA, points.]

BREN

Josie. A good woman. Good enough to be stunned when Essie admitted she knew all along Ned was infertile -- she'd read his hospital records! So Essie sent for me, made all the arrangements herself, falsified her age and anything else needed. Ned never knew who I was. That's how I came to be adopted -- by my own mother.

[ELGA, open-mouthed, gazes at the photo.]

ELGA

The pretty one must be...?

[BREN nods wordlessly.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

She's taller than I pictured. But you said she was tall....I can see her in you. Or you in her....When did you know? That Essie was your mother, and Ned...

BREN

When I was six. Josie was over here on her yearly visit, and they talked quite openly about it -- with me right there. They were confident I understood and got that I should never let Ned know I'm aware he's not my real father. No need hurt Dad's feelings. Okay. I could see that. I'd always felt a connection with her I didn't with Ned, and at that age none of it seemed out of the ordinary to me.

(retrieves photo, puts it away)

Josie knew Michael Kemple. Mikey. My bio-father. Said to be the best male Irish-dancer in the west of Ireland. He's long dead, our Mikey -- killed, at twenty-seven, in a fight on the beach one night. I was three weeks old, asleep just two hundred yards from him, in the house my grandfather built.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

I was living there with Granda and Josie and Essie. The man who killed Mikey...was my grandfather. Who was never arrested. But Essie was exiled to America....She never wholly arrived.

ELGA

...! With real families like yours, why'd the Irish ever need to invent fairy tales?

BREN

This is a fairy tale. A fable. It's the story of a special girl who's given many gifts in shiny wrapping. She's told there's one she mustn't open till last. But she can't wait, she unwraps it early on, and because of that she never gets to unwrap the rest.

(squinting intensely into the past...)

.....In America, Ned's thing became drinking, and Essie's was moving: seven times in Boston, seven times within Stamford. There wasn't much to ship across to Josie, because our homes were always rented furnished.

.....During those last seconds, when Essie announced "Mikey is coming!", she never let go of my hand. She looked at me...then calmly turned to the door and said to the figure she saw....

[BREN silently syncs the words we now hear from RADIO in a woman's voice tinged with Irish.]

RADIO

"You can come in now. There's someone I want you to meet."

BREN

.....She lay back on the pillow, closed her eyes, and some time in that next minute...her heart stopped. She was so young, they asked if they could look at the heart, and I said yes. They found no hemorrhage, no occlusion. But its stimulating nerve was evidently damaged, because it'd simply ceased sending impulses. Other than that, the doctors said, it was...a perfect heart!

[The anguished phrase compresses BREN into harrowed stillness; ELGA puts her arms around him, holds him, strokes his head.]

ELGA

Bren...Bren.....

[BREN frees himself.]

BREN

.....So don't doubt I disappoint, Elga. I began the day I was born, the day I was conceived. She'd never say so, but I knew what Essie lost because of me.

ELGA

That's not...that's not reasonable, Bren.

BREN

Ah! Now you want the cerebrals. Cerebral versus cardiac, cardiac wins every time. I'm aware Essie's appetite said yes to Mikey's appetite. But it was also Essie who chose to carry her child, and abort her career. I've often wondered what crossed her mind over the years when she looked at me. Essie said to me once: "The child and the mother, birth each other." She was an artist, Elga, and at her art...she would have been...the best in the world.

*[....BREN moves left, sits, regains composure;
ELGA relaxes in her chair; they are consciously
letting the emotional moment recede.]*

ELGA

....When did you learn all this?

BREN

The summer I was nineteen, from Josie. In an instant I saw how words are like smoke from a fire we can never see directly. And how seldom I'd had a hint of the flames in Essie's mind. I spent all August that year watching my "homemaker" move: "How sweetly flows/That liquefaction of her clothes."

ELGA

(carefully:)

When were you told you won the Swan Quill Prize? That summer?

[BREN nods.]

ELGA CONT'D)

Did you ever tell your mother?...You didn't, did you?

BREN

Elga, please: I feel a simplifying, psychologistic alleged explanation coming on.

ELGA

Years of concealing and self-denial, of penance -- until she died. And you call Godel an irrational logician. No wonder you became an irritable colon -- picking fights, shredding people in debates. Oh, Bren!

BREN

No. Not right. No. When you quit the piano, did you feel you were abandoning an artist in you? You're O'Neill's Iceman in reverse, Elga: You would give me a pipe dream.

ELGA

I had a competence, a skill. You had a gift. I know it. You're a storyteller. It wasn't just the Swan Quill; I read the Kenyon stories. But you won't even admit it showed a gift when you won a worldwide competition!

BREN

It did show a gift, but not the gift the prize was supposed to be for! The world is wriggling with people like me --

ELGA

-- No, not like you.

BREN

Not precisely like me -- but like me. College profs, lawyers, brokers who once thought they could be writers. Spellbound, high on dreams of alchemy, we launch ourselves over the chasm toward art. The spell abruptly when we realize -- we're not going to make it to the far side!... Nature is a teasing prankster. She bestows little "knacks" on us wannabes. Like my being able to mimic, or get high scores and do smart-ass philosophy. Then we find out our "knacks" guarantee us nothing at art, nothing. And I'm not Evidence Wade: I can't grow to love the thing I do best.

ELGA

No, you're the girl who stopped talking and eating. ...What ever happened to Josie?

BREN

Josie married, and her husband died within a year. She never remarried. I think she had a romantic involvement with a married man for years after that, but then he died. She's a nurse, living in her father's house, on the shore west of Galway.

ELGA

...Have you ever been in love, Bren?

BREN

...? You mean...? No.

ELGA

Why not?

BREN

Don't ask unanswerable questions, Elga.

[...ELGA rises, looks steadily at BREN.]

ELGA

....I have to go -- just for a while. Forgive me? There's so much I have to...process. Besides, we have another eventful dinner for four to look forward to.

[ELGA kisses BREN on the cheek, exits.]

SCENE BREAK

[That night; KURT, ELGA, BREN seated, with cognacs.]

KURT

A month before Kristall Nacht in nineteen-thirty-eight, my grandmother rushed all the Schellenburgs out of Germany -- to Palestine. I was born in Tel Aviv. After the war, we returned to Frankfurt. In my twenties, I was sent back to Palestine -- by then Israel -- to help set up two of our hotels. I stayed four years, long enough to decide I didn't really care to be an *hotelier*. Back to Germany again, where I joined *Fischer Verlag*, the publishers of Thomas Mann, Kafka --

[KIT, with belligerent silence and not a glance at the OTHERS, enters up and strides briskly to door right, exits; beat, as OTHERS stare wordlessly; KIT reenters with scythe, strides toward ELGA. BREN is up in an instant, blocks her way, grips the scythe. KIT struggles to pull it free. BREN wrenches it from her hands with cold severity; KIT steps back shakily. KURT has stood; ELGA has only straightened a bit. Beat. BREN exits right.]

KIT

(regaining a contemptuous cool)

Oo! Did I scare someone? Couldn't make dinner, so sorry: Wasn't hungry. But I thought I'd join this congenial group, and sit with a memento at my side.

[We hear the scythe being put in the shed. BREN returns, closes door, walks left. KIT moves in front of him, unleashes a fierce slap -- which BREN easily parries.]

KURT

Kit!

KIT

Instinct! I saw a bug on his face and I knew he'd want me to kill it.

(peers closely at BREN's face)

Oh -- it's not a bug. It's a birthmark.

[KIT drops sullenly into chair, right. BREN returns to his chair, retrieves cognac, sits relaxedly. ELGA leans back. Her expression becomes quite composed. KURT joins the response to this tantrum: ignore it entirely. He sits.]

ELGA

(to KIT:)

I can see why you love the view from here. The moon on the bouncing water, and so forth.

KIT

Yes, Elga. Bouncing, bouncing. Then a big wave breaks, and soon the bouncing starts again.

ELGA

(to BREN)

This month marks twenty-five years we've lived here. Kit was born here -- in the master bedroom upstairs. The studio didn't even exist then.

KURT

It was a marvelous add-on. After Bren publishes his novel, we can put a cultural plaque outside -- "In this studio Brendan Francis wrote --" what? "*The Ontologists*", Elga says?

BREN

No, I wrote a chunk of that one as a test, but I couldn't go on with it. I'm into a different story now.

KURT

What's the new one?

BREN

One set in a house on the shore.

KIT

One of those fairy tales?...You should call it "Separate Entrance". Ah: forgot that one.

(indicates door up center)

Also the windows. "Many Entrances". No -- "Many Exits". But you'll say that sounds too much like Sartre, above whom you no doubt place yourself....I have sent a jibe your way. Have you no response?

[BREN shakes his head, gazes at her pensively.]

KIT (CONT'D)

Were you aware your writer has already made the *New Yorker*? Trawl the net -- you'll find him talked-about in a long *New Yorker* science-piece about psychometrics, and people with ultra-high IQ's. He was so "ultra" they used him to test new tests. But then he's quoted describing the ultra's typical fate: being only "not bad" at everything. He's also quoted as saying high intelligence guarantees nothing about sensibility or imagination.

(to BREN:)

You probably provided this datum: There's no correlation between a super IQ and worthwhile creative writing -- or worthwhile any art. For example, ultras tend to be really good at drawing -- and never at visual art.

KURT

Katrina, let's not --

KIT

-- So you must feel like a fool, or even guilty, disappointing all your philosophy benefactors by coming back home to bet everything on an art -- the one area where your great brain is useless. You know why he doesn't want to be with people? Because he has contempt for them. Admit it: As an "ultra", you feel contempt for the hoi polloi, don't you?

BREN

Something much worse than contempt: No interest at all.
(casually, to KURT:)
Do people ever water-ski at night?

KURT

Not we. It's done, though. The Boyles next door talk about it. They say it's harder to keep your balance in the dark.

ELGA

I think it's more fun in the daytime. You can see what you're doing, but still be bouncing like the moon.

[KIT rises abruptly.]

KIT

This fucking house!

[Silence; after a moment KIT sits abruptly.]

KURT

That's all? "This fucking house"?

KIT

There's your title! "This Fucking House" -- as in "this haunted house", "this charnel house". No!:"Carnal House"! A *double entendre!*

[KIT goes to the open laptop.]

KIT (CONT'D)

Let's have some fun. Show us your "fiction", Brendan.

BREN

Please close it, Kit.

KIT

Good idea. Let's close it.

[KIT sits, hits keys.]

KIT (CONT'D)

Here's the scenes set in our Euro-studio. He calls it "Homework". How deftly ironic! 'Select all'.

[KIT hits keys; ELGA leans sharply forward. BREN remains motionless throughout, an apparently relaxed, unconcerned spectator.]

ELGA

Kit!

[KIT hammers a key triumphantly.]

KIT

Delete!

[KURT jumps to his feet.]

KURT

What --!?! Kit!

KIT

(hitting keys)

Now, save the blank pages.

[KURT, computer-ignorant, stands bewildered, alarmed; he turns to ELGA, but she, staring at KIT, hasn't left her chair.]

KURT

Elga??

KIT

Ah! "The Ontologists"! Sucky title. Select all. Delete! Save!
(hammers a key)

KURT

You're "saving"? What did you just do?

KIT

Here -- final safeguard.

(keyboarding)

Write "Bye-bye". Copy, delete, save, paste, delete, save, close! There, Daddy. I saved them both -- in a way that makes them totally unsalvageable on this antique machine. Look! No CD's, no external hard drive -- so no back up. It's all gone! Forever incomplete! How sad.

[ELGA has relaxed back into her chair.]

ELGA

You are...everything I feared.

KIT

Why? I'm just acting on his philosophy. I only deleted words! Readers never get exactly what's on your mind, so all words are failures anyway, right, Professor?

BREN

No. They're often serviceable. Just don't overload them.

KIT

Right. And by you perfect communication is too much to ask. By you, it's hopeless for anyone to write at all.

BREN

Not hopeless. A storyteller is like someone who gives you money in the hope you'll buy with it roughly what he'd want you to.

KIT

Why bring up "storyteller"? You're not a storyteller -- where are your stories? Elga told me your bit about the prom queen who gets systemic lupus. That might have been a good one -- if you were a writer. Oh -- your Theorem! I should have done that one too!

[KIT rises, moves toward the computer, but KURT steps in front of her. KIT stops, turns back.]

KIT (CONT'D)

But there's no need -- you'll never complete it.
(she sits)

KURT

Kit, this is despicable! How could you do it?!

KIT

How could I? How could she?
(stands, seething; to BREN:)
And you! You're just a big cock! -- scything through everything in sight!

ELGA

Come dear, I'll make you a nice cup of cocoa and you'll feel better.

KURT

Brendan, I can't think what to tell you.
(turns to KIT)
Do you have any glimpse of what you've done to him?

KIT

What about what he's doing to you? Don't you realize he has been screwing Mommy!

KURT

You say so. A few weeks ago you were in the throes of another fantasy, I think?

[KIT points at the laptop.]

KIT

It was right there!

KURT

What was there was a novel, Kit. Fiction. Brendan wouldn't be the first man to fantasize about my Elga.

KIT

It is true! He's a fucking monster!

ELGA

He is? You delete months of work, and he's the monster? You think he's slept with someone else, so you burn his scripts because you want him all for yourself.

KIT

I want no part of him!

ELGA

Oh, you do, there are many parts of him you want; now you'll never have them.

KIT

I'm not the competitive one in this family -- you take delight in being first at everything!

ELGA

I know: I played the piano as a child. If I'd had any feelings, I'd have waited till you grew up -- in case you'd be interested.

(sincere:)

I would never go after anything I knew you wanted for yourself.

KIT

Bullshit! I get into computers and right away you have to have one!

ELGA

It wasn't right away. Kit, I'm an editor! It's not sinister that an editor....You're not satisfied with knowing I'll never be a tenth as good as you on a computer.

KIT

Because you are totally hopeless!

ELGA

I'll always seem hopeless until you grow up.

KIT

May I never grow up to be you!

ELGA

Don't worry: You won't.

KIT

I am off to Cape Cod. I have a standing invitation.

[KIT starts moving up.]

ELGA

Will you be as cruel there as you are here?

KIT

You mean telling Daddy this man has been fucking his oh-so-grown-up wife?

KURT

No, Kit, you've shown worse cruelty tonight. You've shown...
(shakes his head, goes silent)

KIT

Don't cry about his novels, Dad! I've read only a few telling pages of the studio one, but I read a lump of the "Ontologists" dreck -- sneaked a read one day when he jogged into town.

(to BREN)

How'd you ever win that short-story prize? Because your ontology thing is bloodless geek-shit --

BREN

-- I think of it as escapist fiction.

KIT

...It is shit! It's pathetic.

ELGA

So says the computer expert.

KIT

I can read, Elga. That's one good thing you and Kurt taught me.

ELGA

Ah, but we never could teach you to be kind.

KIT

You mean not YOUR kind.

[Exit KIT up. Beat. KURT sits; ruefully:]

KURT

There go the land-values on Cape Cod...I don't know where she gets it -- the savagery. Certainly not from Elga.

ELGA

Not from you either, darling -- truly. Her exit-line was very good, I thought.

KURT

Behold -- a tolerant woman? I can't imagine anyone but Elga putting up with me all these years. Ah! I know where she gets it: Kit is my Schellenburg grandmother as a girl. The monarch of the family. And the reason I moved to New York. That anger: had you just dumped her?

BREN

Yes. Earlier today.

ELGA

What are you asking?

KURT

(looks bewildered, chagrined)
...I'm sorry, El! I thought you knew. Ah, God.

BREN

Elga does know.

ELGA

About Bren and Kit? I know, but I only found out last night.

KURT

So you didn't know.

ELGA

Of course I didn't know! You knew?

KURT

Like you: last night.

[KURT and ELGA stare at each other -- with sympathy. KURT rocks back and forth, painfully grasping what has happened.]

KURT (CONT'D)

What a fiasco I promoted! What a cock-up!

BREN

It's not your fiasco, I'm to blame for this.

KURT

No. You're not. There's no blame to assign, except to bad timing -- and my stupidity. I should have told Elga what I prompted you to do.

ELGA

What.

BREN

It wasn't your prompting that did it.

KURT

It was, in part, you can't convince me otherwise.

ELGA

What?!...Oh, my. You too?

KURT

I had this notion that Kit...

ELGA

That Kit just needed to get laid.

KURT

Yes. Brilliant, wasn't it? Shows a depth of "understanding".

ELGA

It astounds me what smart men can believe about women. Did you really think Kit was that two-dimensional?

KURT

No! I even said she isn't!

BREN

We hoped, Elga. You know we don't "hope" with our brains.

ELGA

You didn't tell Bren to lay off after our drive back from Bedford Hills?

BREN

That've been too late anyway, wouldn't it.

KURT

It didn't seem like an issue. Brendan rejected the idea right at the outset.

ELGA

Ah, but you convinced him she depended on him -- and that you did too....Darling, don't look so desolate: you don't deserve it.

(lightening:)

Actually, I have known a good conjugal life to change a woman. 'Conjugal': from the Old Yiddish root 'conyug', meaning 'to shtup'.

[KURT understands what Elga's doing; he puts a loving, grateful hand to her face; they join hands, KURT sings a low moan or two; their pained gaze holds until a sense of absurdity grips both; they share a moment of pangful mirth, then back to somber quiet. To BREN:]

KURT

Oy, gott....I try to conceive what must go through your mind about...Elga and me.

(ponders how to convey this)

Elga is an excellent tennis player. I could never give her a game. When I saw her on the court with younger men who could, I felt something, but it wasn't anger or jealousy. The right word is a healthy, moderate 'envy': I wished I could do that. For Elga.

All of which may sound foreign to you, and far too moderate. Well, so be I. I know if I were more... fiery, I'd be more exciting. But in me, it would be faking it.

ELGA

Kurt, you can't be other than you are, and there's never been an other I would prefer.

KURT

Ah? *'Sich mit etwas abfinden?'*

ELGA

No. I'd translate that as "settle for". Which is not at all how I feel, and you know it.

KURT

Maybe not in the beginning. For whatever reason, Elga has been, among other things, my best friend. As for Kit, I promise not to shirk my duty to feel guilt. I do feel it. But parents often over-estimate their influence. If Kit makes a success in life, the credit shouldn't go to me -- or her mother. So p'raps not all the blame either...And you: As I say, I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry.

BREN

It's not a problem, Kurt. I'm a fast typist.

KURT

I'm a book publisher, Brendan. I know it takes a little more than fast typing. Were you really writing a novel set in this studio?

BREN

No. What Kit read were only exercises, tests. The new story I'm starting involves another house, on another shore.

[KURT rises, BREN rises.]

KURT

This has not been a good month for my judgment, and I deserve every bit of this remorse I'm harboring so nicely. So moderately. In one of those C.P. Snow novels set at Cambridge there's a line I admire: "I like self-torment rather than conceit." I forget which novel.

BREN

The Masters.

KURT

Yes. God, what a mind you have.

BREN

No -- I just happen to remember that line.

ELGA

Kurt --

KURT

-- El, we see each other. Never perfectly, but often -- Bren's word -- 'serviceably'. I think I see what you're seeing right now. But I'm unafraid. Because I've been blessed in you from day one, and I think I still am. ...Time for me to retire, upstairs. Go read a good book. You two...enjoy yourselves.

[KURT and BREN wave to each other.]

BREN

Good night, Kurt.

ELGA

Wait -- I'll come.

(to BREN)

I'll be back.

[KURT and ELGA exit up.]

5

[No scene break, time is continuous. Reverie-mode; from RADIO: Irish music. BREN's two hands seize each other.]

BREN

Don't worry, I'll always be close. Soon I'll be even closer.

[RADIO ceases as: Enter ELGA.]

ELGA

Kurt is grieving about Kit. So am I. I know how horrid she can be, but we both agree --

(points to her head, then her heart)

-- this doesn't rule this.

[They sit -- BREN in chair left with hassock.]

BREN

Kit is a good reader.

ELGA

She is, yes. Though I liked "The Ontologists" more than she did. I know when to read here --

(taps her bosom)

-- which means I don't always have to understand a sentence to feel its effect. But I prefer the studio scenes. They're looser, less "well-made", less bent on obeying the rules of some "Strictly Ballroom" contest.

BREN

Elga...?

ELGA

Oh, Bren, of course I read them. You think my daughter is a cleverer snooper than I? You were off on some errand.

BREN

You found and read them both in half an hour? I don't think so.

ELGA

Quite right. I had to content myself with copying them onto a CD. Which I couldn't have, if my loving daughter hadn't led me into computers.

BREN

You have it all on disc.

[With manifest triumph, ELGA produces the disc, places it on the table. BREN smiles politely, nods dignified approval of her resourcefulness, does not reach for the disc. ELGA eyes him.]

ELGA

See him jump for joy. Here, behind your back I sneak into your room, rifle your personal computer, copy your private scripts, read them uninvited -- and what thanks do I get?

BREN

(nods courteously)

Thank you.

ELGA

The studio novel would be a huge advance over "The Proctologists".

BREN

(smiles)

What wouldn't?

ELGA

I still say you're wrong about yourself. In my judgment there's a talent behind that disc, longing to break out.

BREN

In my judgment, you're thinking with your pelvis. My task right now is the paper -- which keeps getting longer as I think of more "yeah-buts". What fun -- pick a project that can be completed only by showing it can't be completed.

ELGA

You'll just have to keep at it till no one can deny it.

BREN

Elga, your optimism is a pretty trait -- but a precarious one.

ELGA

May take time! So we'll find you the time. We'll adjust the rent, make the Labor Day deadline go way.

[...ELGA hears something in his silence, rises abruptly, peers out a window.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

Indian summer is coming up. It's lovely here then. The water's at its best. Then there'll be leaves to rake, and after that snow to shovel...

[ELGA turns back, looks into BREN's eyes.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

Don't say it.

BREN

I have to move on, Elga.

ELGA

No!...No!

[BREN regards ELGA steadily, says nothing.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

We made a deal! We let you live here so you could -- finish something.

BREN

Everything Kit deleted is finished.

ELGA

No it's not! We're not! We --...

[ELGA seems breathless. BREN rises, takes her into his arms, holds her.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

Don't leave. Don't leave.

[ELGA sags onto the hassock. BREN kneels at her side. ELGA, with blasted, awed realization:]

ELGA (CONT'D)

...Oh my. This wasn't supposed to come into it...

(fighting to get it together)

I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Bren. Wait...

(breathes deep, gets on top of it)

....You realize if you leave I'll have to sue. For inciting intrusions. For disturbing my sleep. And my waking hours...My plan was, if you get cold in the winter, we'd move you up to the room next to Kit's. In December you two could exchange Chanukah fluids....You're supposed to chuckle. If you stay, you might even Europeanize Kit.

BREN

Yeah -- about the time I write The Great American Novel. Something traditional: "Moby Gatsby". No -- something different: "Huckleberry Hitler"!

ELGA

An uncouth person would say you have it backwards: It shouldn't be "Moby Gatsby", it should be "The Great ...". But would I say that? Not often, anyway. Though, inventive profanity is an accepted sign of linguistic talent. I can say indelicate words in twenty languages. 'Course, in six or eight of them, they're all I can say.

[ELGA puts her hand to his face.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

I'm old enough to be your Ma, but you can make me feel I'm your age. Younger. I love that you can teach me things, make me look things up. I've been learning some sign. And I did research in an old philosophy-book of Kurt's.

[ELGA raises BREN's right hand, places her left hand palm to palm, raises both -- "stars".]

ELGA (CONT'D)

Found out philosophy-of-language had a romantic beginning, in Germany, when a baffled logician said, "The morning star and the evening star are the same thing! How can this be?..."

[ELGA lowers her hand, her eyes, has another brief bout of deep breathing. Looks up.]

ELGA (CONT'D)

Indian Summer isn't coming up, it arrived in May this year. I love Kurt, I have since I was twenty-two. We shared everything we could...on our plateau. But recently I reached an altitude closer to the sun. How unexpected!: It wasn't till Indian Summer that I learned how the brightest, most inflaming summer sun can feel...I know what I can sue you for: theft of innocence. Me -- innocent!You have someplace, yes?

BREN

(rises)

Those jogs of mine into town? To a post office box. I too have a standing invitation -- from Josie.

ELGA

In Ireland?!

BREN

I'll be living in the house where Josie, Essie and I were born. I'll arrive with two assignments. The first is fix the lightning-scarred roof. After last winter's internship in hod-carrying, I think I know how to do that. The second is, Josie tells me my mother accepted she'd be forgotten as a dancer back home. Wistfully accepted. That disappointment I can prevent. I'm taking Essie back to Ireland, where she won't have to lie in tears amid the alien accent. On her gravestone I'll put, "Here Lies One Who Could Dance on Water". And then her name.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

And then her own line: "The child and the mother, birth each other." It's not much of a rebirthing compared to the dancer she aborted, but I think she'd want it.

ELGA

...If you want to rebirth Essie, you should tell her story. Write her story.

BREN

Ah, Elga --

ELGA

Bren, don't leave without promising you'll try. One last time. In her house. In your Granda's house. On the family shore.

BREN

Don't ask that, Elga. I'm not a modest man, but I'll say to you again: that is beyond me. I can't do that thing.

ELGA

Why do you say you can't?

BREN

I know.

KIT

You can't know!

BREN

I know.

KIT

...Just promise me you'll try. Honestly try.

BREN

Elga...

ELGA

I depend on you! She depends on you. Promise!

BREN

...I promise... Whatever happens, with my wondrous aptitudes I figure I can still make it as a school teacher in some rural village on the Irish coast. Teaching kids how to read.

ELGA

.....You know, despite what your super-smart philosophy says, I think we did have one or two moments of...perfect communication....

[ELGA kisses Bren's cheek, moves to door up, stops, looks back, comes down again, picks up the disc; she displays the disc to BREN, and she signs.]

BREN

(gazing at her hands; aloud:)

"If...I...have...this...I'll...always...have...you."

[BREN signs back.]

ELGA

(aloud)

"You...don't need...the disc for that, Elga."

[KIT appears in the doorway up. She is holding a handgun. Raises it toward BREN.]

KIT

Fuck this. Let's delete everything.

ELGA

Kit!

[ELGA rushes up, freezes when KIT points the gun at her.]

KIT

Uh-uh!

[KIT moves her aim back to BREN.]

KIT (CONT'D)

You're right, Professor, I don't have your sense of humor. But I have my own: "Here loies Dahktor Braindan Francis, Maytaphysician -- whose pheelahsaphy cured noa one."

[ELGA screams toward the open door.]

ELGA

KURT! SHE HAS A GUN! KURT!

KIT

Oh, stop: "Kurt". Daddy's too mild-mannered for this.

[BREN starts walking slowly toward KIT.]

BREN

Kit --

KIT

Don't!

[KIT points the gun more firmly at BREN. He stops.]

BREN

Don't you, Kit. Think what happens after.

KIT

Nothing happens after! That's the point! What happens is, you're not around any more! Or me! Or even Mumsie. And I don't give a fuck, I really don't. This life is such --

BREN

-- Then don't quit it -- change it, you're only twenty-two! I won't be around anymore anyway. I'm leaving.

KIT

Yes, you are. --
(squints through the gun sight)

ELGA

-- Kit! --

KIT

I figured two things out. Two insights. One: Your thinking is your autoimmune disease. Your mind is attacking itself.

BREN

I wouldn't be alone at that, Kit.

KIT

Oh, well played, Professor! Obliqueness becomes you. The second thing's a paradox! Your theorem is right!: Brendan Francis is about to be finished, but he'll always be what?

ELGA

Kit! Look at me! This is you attacking!

KIT

He'll always be what, Professor?

ELGA

Kit, stop this!

KIT

Professor! Brendan Francis will always be what?!

[BREN looks at KIT steadily, without evident anger or anxiety.]

BREN

...Incomplete. It runs in the family.

KIT

All our families!

[KIT shoots BREN, killing him instantly.]

ELGA

OW! OW!

[ELGA drops to her knees, bends over BREN. KIT's expression changes to something sorrowful, tearful. She moves down. She also sinks to a kneel-sit position, six or eight feet from ELGA and BREN.]

KIT

I'm sorry, Mumsie. This hasn't worked. This whole life hasn't worked.

[KIT raises the gun, points it at ELGA. KIT has begun to sob. KURT appears up -- with gun.]

KURT

What's -- ? KIT!

[KIT, startled, lowers the gun.]

ELGA

(crouching over BREN)

He's gone! He's gone!

KIT

-- Sorry, Daddy. I feel so...I'm missing things, Daddy. You can't help me --

[KIT raises the gun again toward ELGA.]

KURT

KATRINA!

[KIT glances at KURT; he steps toward her but she quickly turns again to ELGA, points, is about to squeeze the trigger. KURT shoots KIT, killing her. ELGA screams again, crawls to KIT, howling, palpating KIT's face. KURT breathes hard, but holds it together. ELGA slumps defeatedly on her rump between the two bodies.]

ELGA

They're gone. Both! He'll never...--

[KURT moves to KIT, kneels to check her neck for a pulse, her mouth for a breath; gets to his feet, gazes at her in a moment of tearless agony; then on to check BREN. KURT kneels next to ELGA. He is profoundly shaken, but still not losing control.]

KURT

El --

ELGA

Finished.

KURT

El, I have to call people. Do you want to stay here, or...

[ELGA gives no sign of hearing him. KURT exits up. Beat. ELGA stirs abruptly, scrambles anxiously to crouch over BREN.]

ELGA

Bren. Bren. You don't disappoint me. You haven't, you don't, and you won't. Ever. You can't possibly. And I won't disappoint: I promise we'll bring you and Essie back to Galway. You'll be together -- with Josie and...What was your Granda's name?...You'll be there, while...while I....

[ELGA turns to KIT, crawls to her, gathers KIT into her arms, holds her. RADIO softly crackles into life. Lights begin to dim. Gradually from RADIO we hear the rising sound of overlapping languages, transmitted from seemingly infinite distances. Originating where? Vienna? Buenos Aires? Galway? Lights slowly dim to black.]

END OF PLAY